

Chapter One

This was their fifth Christmas together.

All the details were complete. All the gifts purchased and sent. Sarah made sure of it. Details were her specialty.

The holidays at the Barrett Estate had always rivaled anything seen in a Currier and Ives drawing. A fifteen-foot blue spruce greeted visitors to the Great Hall. The tree was covered with colored glass balls and a delicate garland of antique lace. A computer chip made a thousand lights blink in perfect harmony. Live garland and red velvet bows wound around the railing of the spiral staircase.

Sarah stared at the results of her efforts with a wistful smile. She convinced Adam the decorations were for the company party, but she really did it for him.

The party had gone well. Everyone admired the decorations and praised Adam. The gifts were dispensed and appreciated, each chosen with the employee's personality in mind. Adam was thanked profusely, as if Adam Barrett had taken time away from negotiating his latest multinational deal to select an antique doll for Lois from Accounting. Lois welled with tears just the same. As she gifted Adam with an eggnog inspired hug, Adam looked over her shoulder and smiled at Sarah. That was all the thanks she needed.

Chapter Two

Adam Barrett studied his assistant tapping away on her laptop. Sarah Walker had come to work for Barrett Enterprises six years ago, recruited from Vassar. Her double major in business and French originally had her assigned to assist the international division where she quickly made a name for herself as a skilled professional with a gift for dealing with people. Within the year she worked directly for him.

Sarah had the appearance of a personal assistant but the authority and salary of an executive vice president. Adam had tried to give her a title but Sarah had refused, saying that she could accomplish more with a lower profile. As always, she was right. Executives who would have held their tongue with a VP were open with someone they thought was nothing more than a glorified secretary.

Adam enjoyed the opportunity to watch her work. At the corporate headquarters Sarah had her own office with her own secretary. When they worked at the estate, they shared his large paneled office. The corporate offices closed on Christmas Eve for the company party and didn't reopen until after the New Year. During the holiday shutdown most employees took vacation. Adam and Sarah worked. They always worked.

Sarah was a constant source of amazement to him. She could analyze the most complex contract, arrange a first-rate Christmas party, or argue with an obstinate foreign supplier in perfect French. Adam admired her thorough knowledge of French obscenities, dropping them only when appropriate, rendering the recipient speechless. He'd had to

squelch down more than one laugh at a colleague's expense. His French was almost as good as hers.

She dressed in earthy shades; he thought her tailored suits a little too severe. Her long chestnut hair was always pulled back, either in a sleek ponytail or bun. Her deep brown eyes hid behind her small tortoise shell glasses. He stared at her wondering, not for the first time, what she would look like with her hair loose and without the glasses. He was sure his curiosity was just a throwback to that old *'hot for teacher'* fantasy from his private school days.

Today, in deference to the Christmas party, Sarah was wearing a red satin blouse with her black wool suit. Her jacket was off giving him a perfect view of the satin that caressed breasts.

Adam hated his friends who chased after their twenty-something secretaries, and he turned his attention back to his messages. Nathan Matthews was continually trying to fix him up with a succession of buxom blondes. Since Adam's divorce, Nate had redoubled his efforts. Skirt chasing had been great fun when they were prep school roommates. Now that they were both forty-eight, it was just sad. There was nothing worse than an aging playboy.

Lacey and Adam married far too young. At eighteen you think you know everything. They set up a small but tasteful apartment paid for by Adam's parents while he studied at Harvard.

Adam got his degree and took his wife back home to Philadelphia and the family estate. He had the family business to run and Lacey had her clubs and charities. Ten years

into their marriage Lacey became pregnant and their daughter, Kathy, was born. It was the last thing they ever did together.

They were the perfect Main Line family. That was until Lacey left him for the club's tennis pro. He understood how she could have felt neglected, and unloved. Truth be told he'd known his marriage had been over for a long time. Okay, so he hadn't been the most attentive of husbands, but the tennis pro? It was so damn trite. After the divorce he'd been on the receiving end of a great deal of unwanted sympathy from friends. He heard a lot of "Poor Adam," and "How could he not have known?"

As painful as the whole experience had been he'd been determined not to make it worse by squiring a parade of young girls around town, and that included his twenty-nine-year-old assistant, no matter how appealing the concept. Images of a red satin blouse falling to the floor invaded his thoughts. A pink phone memo snapped him back to reality.

"Sarah."

She looked up from her desk. "Yes?"

"Why is Martin Black inviting me to lunch?"

"Probably to thank you for your contribution to the Simon Animal Shelter." Sarah handed him the gift card from the shelter.

"Ten thousand dollars, I'm very generous." Adam smiled.

"Yes, you are." A sly smile creased her lips.

Adam knew she was up to something. "Why am I so particularly generous to this shelter?"

"Because this is Elaine Black's favorite charity."

“I’ve been trying to get Martin Black to talk about selling me his property in Kulpsville for months. So, the contribution is....”

“Enough to be noticed but not enough to appear as if...

“As if I am trying to buy him off, which he would hate.”

“He looks like the good guy to his wife for bringing in a new contributor, the animals get heat in the kennel and you get to broach Kulpsville.”

“Everyone wins.”

“Including the dogs.”

Adam laughed. He knew a great deal of his success in the last few years had been in no small part to Sarah’s efforts. “Inspired, as usual. What would I do without you, Sarah?”

Sarah put her hands on her hips and smiled. “You would founder helplessly until your empire collapsed in a heap.”

He stared at her for a long moment, as if he had never seen her before. “I believe I would.”

Adam and Sarah had developed a symbiotic relationship during their years together. She anticipated his needs, oftentimes before he realized what he wanted himself. Their rapport was that of equals, respecting each other’s strengths and opinions. Adam was the idea man, turning seemingly disparate ingredients into profitable ventures. Sarah was as brilliant with contract negotiations as she was with handling employees. Their relationship was professional but relaxed enough to laugh together. They were so in tune to each other they had fallen into the habit of finishing each other’s sentences.

“Along those lines...” He reached into his desk and pulled out a large envelope. “Here’s a little something to show my appreciation.”

“I don’t understand. You already gave me my Christmas bonus.” Sarah had received her customary stock bonus, which this year was in excess of \$50,000.

“That’s done on a formula, based on salary and year end profit. Pretty standard stuff.” He didn’t tell her he automatically doubled her bonus, much to the consternation and curiosity of his CFO. “After all the great work you’ve done for me this year, you deserve it.”

Sarah slid a large brochure from the envelope. A beautiful woman in a microscopic bikini stretched across a perfect white sand beach.

“A week at Sandal’s in the Caribbean. The travel agent assured me it’s a great romantic getaway.”

Her heart leapt to her throat. “Romantic?”

“I assumed you would take someone. Jack Bell?”

“I’m not dating Jack Bell.”

“Oh, I thought...Jack said you two were an item.”

Sarah’s cheeks flushed red. “He misspoke.” Jack wanted to be an item, pursuing her until she’s agreed to a few dinners. But she could never see herself with him. He was nice enough, but he had one fatal flaw, he wasn’t Adam.

“Someone else then.”

Sarah cut off his inquisition. “This is very kind. Thank you.”

“Are you seeing your family tonight?”

God this just gets worse and worse. “My brother moved to the West Coast a few months ago.” She retreated to her desk to gather her things. She had to get out while she still had some shred of dignity. She would not have Adam Barrett feel sorry for her.

“You could stay and help me break into some of the gift baskets? How do you feel about Champagne and cashews?”

Startled, she looked at him and laughed. “Champagne and cashews?”

“I would offer you a proper dinner, but I gave the staff the night off.”

“I know Kathy’s spending the holiday with her mother, but I assumed you would have plans.”

“God no. One more evening as a third wheel, or more likely set up with some fading debutante by well meaning friends. I had a bottle of wine and a good book set aside for tonight.”

Sarah laughed. “So did I.”

“Lord, we’re a sad lot.”

“Yes, we are. I don’t suppose I should leave you to your own devices. You’ll probably burn the place down. I’m sure the cook left something in the fridge. Let’s see what we can find.”

“You cook?”

“I do a lot of things.” Sarah turned toward the door to hide the flush in her cheeks.

One too many egg-nogs. God, I’m turning into Lois.

Sarah pulled open the sub-zero fridge. “NY strips, mushrooms and steak fries. Perfect.”

“I can’t just stand here and let you wait on me,” said Adam.

Sarah set the steaks on the counter. “I do it for a living,” she replied softly.

“I insist.”

She tossed a head of lettuce at him. “Okay, make yourself useful and take care of the salad.”

They bumped into each other at the butcher block and smiled. Sarah stole a glance at him as he hacked up the lettuce. Adam Barrett was the singularly most handsome man she had ever met. She’d decided that the moment they were introduced, and nothing in the succeeding years had changed her mind. At six feet one, with a body kept well muscled from twice weekly handball games, Adam could have been easily mistaken for a much younger man, if not for his shock of salt and pepper hair. Decidedly whiter than when Sarah first met him, it was still thick and wavy. There were times she’d had to fight the impulse to tousle it. That was when she wasn’t fighting the urge to run her fingers over his chiseled chin.

And then there were his eyes. Adam’s eyes were the deepest blue she’d ever seen, almost like they had never changed from the deep blue babies are born with.

Sarah had long ago accepted the fact that she was in love with Adam. She tried to date, but no man ever made her feel the way she felt when she was with Adam. She had also accepted the fact that they would never have a romantic relationship. She understood his distaste for such relationships because it put everyone in an awkward position.

Chapter Three

Dinner was relaxed and pleasant. The food wasn't fussed with, just as Adam preferred. He sipped his wine and truly looked at her. Her soft brown hair was pulled with a large gold clip at the nape of her neck. And it was a lovely neck.

Damn, where is this coming from?

Sarah was only twenty-nine. Granted, she was much more than a secretary. She was his executive assistant and his friend, but still. Pursuing Sarah just never occurred to him. Okay, it occurred to him, more often than he wanted to admit, but this was Sarah.

Now here he was having dinner with her, in his kitchen. The formal dining room had seemed wrong. This was better, more like them.

"Why don't we finish this wine in the den?"

"I should be getting home."

"I think one of those baskets had chocolate truffles?"

"Truffles?" she smiled.

"I'll grab the bottle."

The den was just as lovely as the rest of the house, thanks to Sarah. She saw to it there was a seven-foot spruce in the corner by the fireplace. The room had cried out for a traditional tree. This was more like the tree of her childhood. A mishmash of color, glass

By Kate Simon

and paper ornaments, some made by Adam's daughter. Adam and Kathy would exchange gifts under this tree when she returned from her ski trip with her mother.

Adam sat down cross-legged in front of the large tree and began routing through the gifts.

"It looks like Santa has been good to Kathy this year," offered Sarah.

"He always is." He was roughly pushing boxes aside. "Is it... yes, here." A large box wrapped in red foil with a large gold bow had been buried under the other gifts."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. For the last few years a gift from Santa mysteriously appears for me. I don't know how it gets in here."

"Maybe it's from Kathy."

"She says no. Last year's gift was a first edition of "A Christmas Carol" which is definitely not her style. She'd be more likely to give me a snowboard."

Sarah sat in the overstuffed wing chair as Adam tore open his gift. His eyes got as big as saucers. He nodded his head and whispered, "Cool."

Sarah laughed to herself. *Cool? Adam Barrett, corporate tycoon, just said cool. Amazing.* "What is it?" she asked.

"An antique railroad set. I wanted one just like it when I was a kid, but I never did get it," Adam laughed. His voice got a little higher as he ran his fingers over the cars. "It's a Lionel GG1, Tuscan red car. That's really rare. They made so few of them they disappear over the years. That's why it's so valuable." Adam looked up at Sarah smiling and sipping her wine as he rambled on about his toy like a twelve year old.

It hit him like a thunderclap. "It's you."

Sarah's took another sip of her wine and tilted her face, trying to hide behind the bowl of the large glass. "Excuse me?"

"It's you. You're my Santa."

Sarah sat her glass down and looked nervously towards the door.

"I'm sure it must be Kathy."

"Kathy wouldn't know about a GG1 Tuscan red railroad car from 1956."

"55." Sarah cringed as soon as the words escaped her lips. She should never drink.

"It *is* you." Adam smiled and knelt in front of her. "Why?"

Sarah sighed deeply. Confession was supposed to be good for the soul. She was about to find out. She looked him square in the eye. "You've always been so good to me. I just wanted to give you a little something at Christmas."

Adam glanced back down at his toy. "That is not a little something. It cost a fortune."

Sarah smiled warmly as she whispered, "You've been very good."

"All these years, all the gifts, you never let me thank you."

She shook her head. "I don't need to be thanked."

He brushed her cheek with his hand. "I need to say it. Thank you, Sarah. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Adam."

Adam stared into the deep brown eyes that he had looked at for five years, intelligent, comical, a little irreverent, and oh so lovely. He needed to kiss her, as much as

he needed his next breath. He leaned close and touched her lips lightly. He pulled back and saw her smile, beautiful and warm. “Sarah, we’ve had some wine, and I don’t want to take advantage.”

A small laugh escaped her. “Adam, it wasn’t *that* much wine.” She ran her hand through his salt and pepper waves. Her fingers played with the thick silk, pushing a stray curl with her fingertip. Five years of wanting distilled down to this moment. “Not that much wine at all,” she whispered. She placed her lips on his lightly tasting again and again what she had hungered for all these years.

He pulled her off the chair until she was kneeling in front of him. They faced each other, and for a brief moment he wondered what the hell he was doing. This was Sarah, his colleague, his employee, and his friend.

Oh Christ.

Her perfume invaded his senses. It wasn’t a delicate floral but a rich spicy scent. He had never been close enough to notice what she wore. Why did it surprise him? It seemed she was full of surprises tonight. Either that or he had spent the last five years completely blind to her.

Adam slipped off her glasses and then reached back and released her hair from the large gold barrette. He ran his fingers through her thick chestnut waves.

She leaned in and kissed him. Her hands slid around his neck as he slipped his arms around her waist. The kiss deepened, tongues met. His hands slid to her bottom and pulled her close against him, and a satisfied growl escaped her. Adam pulled her to the floor as he continued his exploration of her body. Curves he spent years ignoring now screamed for his attention. Something inside told him it was about time he listened.

Sarah lay next to him, the light of the Christmas tree reflecting in her eyes. Her lips were wet and puffy from their kisses. It suddenly occurred to him he did not want to have her on the floor, like a cheap quickie. He wanted her in his bed.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he whispered.

She nodded and he helped her to her feet. He said a silent prayer as they traveled the long corridor towards his bedroom that she wouldn’t change her mind. He wanted to be with her, needed to be with her. At that moment it was the only thing of which he was absolutely certain. He stopped in front of his bedroom door and took her hands in his.

“Sarah, are you sure about this?”

Sarah reached her hand around his neck and pulled him to her. Her kiss reached down and touched his sleeping heart.

Adam pulled back and looked into her smiling eyes. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Sarah laughed. “Invite me in soon, or I’ll go see if the caretaker is home.”

He kissed her as he opened the door to his bedroom. “Well we can’t have that, can we?”

Adam flipped off his shoes with his toes and flung them in the vicinity of the closet. He was yanking at his tie when he turned to Sarah. He froze. Her black skirt had already found the floor. She held his gaze as the red satin blouse slid off her shoulders and joined the skirt. If his heart hadn’t been in excellent condition he would have dropped right then and there. Standing before him was a vision in black lace. Her body was perfect, absolutely perfect. Her breasts were full and peeking out from the curve of her bra. Her waist tapered to a soft round belly. The delicate lace of her thong accented her round hips. Completing the vision were her exquisitely proportioned legs. He was still holding on to his tie.

By Kate Simon

“Adam? Adam, say something.”

“Holy shit,” he whispered. *Yep, I’m blind, completely, totally blind. Stevie Wonder sees better than I do.*

Sarah laughed nervously. “I’ll take that as a compliment, I think.”

He walked to her and took her by the shoulders. “Sarah, I always knew you were lovely, but I...I never realized.”

Sarah smiled as she fingered the lace of her bra. “Well, this is not exactly office wear.”

Despite his aching arousal, Adam realized the implication of her statement. “You do that on purpose, the dark suits, the old-fashion hairstyles, the glasses.”

“I prefer to think of my hairstyles as classics, and the glasses aren’t props. I really am blind as a bat.”

“You hide.”

“Call it a low profile. How many men in this business would take me seriously if they saw me like this?” she asked.

Adam’s voice turned to a growl. “None of them will ever see you like this.” He stripped off his clothes and took great pleasure in relieving her of her beautiful black lace. He laid her on the bed and slid in next to her. He kissed her deeply while his hand cupped her breast, her nipple responding to his touch. He flicked it gently and then moved to the other, treating it to the same. He slid down her body and took the soft flesh in his mouth. Her groan nearly made him lose control. As Sarah’s hands pressed his head tight to her, his hands traveled down. Her legs parted and he touched her lightly. She was warm and wet and waiting for him.

Adam wanted to take his time, but his body was not going to cooperate. He had to have her, have her now, or his head was going to blow off his shoulders. Stopping only long enough to fish protection out of the nightstand he slid inside her. Her legs wrapped tight around his waist as her muscles pulsed tightly around his throbbing arousal. He pushed the brown curls from her cheek and looked into Sarah's eyes. A thought came to him, wonderful and terrifying. *I'm home.*

Sarah began to move under him and he could control himself no more. He dove into her again and again. He could feel she was near the edge and slipped a hand between them. He rubbed lightly and in only moments Sarah bucking under him in an explosive, earthy, no holds barred climax. It was all he could take. His release followed quickly and with more force than he'd ever known.

Adam tried to slip off her, but her legs locked around him.

"No, don't move. Not yet. I can still feel you," she whispered.

Adam groaned as he kissed her. He could not remember any woman exciting him as much as Sarah.

Chapter Four

Sarah glanced over at the nightstand clock. It read 2:30 in the morning. She reached her arms around Adam's waist and he pulled them tight to him, despite the fact he was still sleeping. Her face was buried in his neck and she took in his scent, a mix of woody spices and sex.

She had to leave. The staff would arrive early, and she couldn't risk them finding her. Her body pressed to him was heaven. Their night had been everything she had fantasized about.

Not yet. Please not yet.

She kissed his neck lightly. She took his earlobe between her teeth and nibbled as her fingertips traced the muscles in his chest.

"Umm...I thought you were asleep," Adam whispered.

"One advantage of my youth. I don't need as much sleep as you older types."

"Oh really?" he shouted as he flipped her on her back with one move. He saw a sadness in her eyes.

"Make love to me," she whispered.

Adam woke at dawn, and he felt an unusual chill. His outstretched arm told him the reason. Sarah was gone. He looked for her clothes.

Gone.

Why the hell did she leave? Adam leapt out of bed and threw on a robe. He'd had thoughts of sharing Christmas morning breakfast with her. They could have spent the day together. Maybe they would've made love under the tree.

As he walked down the hall he ran into his butler. "John, have you seen Sarah?"

The butler's brow knitted in confusion. "Ms. Walker, sir? She doesn't usually arrive quite this early, sir."

That's why she left.

"I wasn't told she was expected at all today, sir. After all, it is Christmas."

Adam sat at the breakfast table with his paper and a foul mood. She left to protect them both, but damn it, he wanted her here. His cook prepared him a lovely Christmas breakfast he hardly touched.

Sarah.

Now what?

Chapter Five

Sarah always dressed casually for this week between Christmas and New Years. Today she wore black jeans, a loose black V-neck sweater and her favorite pair of jean boots. Her original plan had been to tackle the projects she never had time to get to while things were quiet. Adam's desk was its usual disaster. She normally would have had no qualms about pushing him off to the couch so she could clean house. But this wasn't even close to a normal morning.

For the first time in five years, things between them were strained. She sat focused on her laptop, wondering if one night was worth what it had done to their relationship. There could never be a romance and she knew that.

Adam looked up over his file at Sarah's empty desk. She should be pounding away at her laptop, just like always. But nothing about this morning was the same. Sarah had avoided being at her desk all morning. The latest pretext was talking to the staff about an upcoming corporate dinner.

He had spent five years not purposefully noticing her; now he could think of nothing else. The thought of her bottom in her tight jeans was currently driving him to painful distraction. The only thing that saved him from trying to find Sarah and having her on top of some Barrett family antique was the arrival of his daughter.

Adam put his arms around Kathy and squeezed. She may be a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Harvard, but all he could see was the pony-tailed eight-year old with perpetually skinned knees.

“Whoa, Daddy? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Can’t a man hug his little girl?”

“I’m not so little any more.”

Adam tucked his finger under her chin. “You will always be my little girl.” He smiled and kissed her forehead. Adam sat behind his desk and started flipping through messages. Ten a.m. the day after Christmas and Sarah had already left half a dozen messages for him to return. “Did you have a nice time with your mother?”

Kathy started to tell him about Lacey and their trip to Vail. He lost her somewhere around Lacey’s new boyfriend, a ‘retired’ executive named Charles. Adam knew ‘retired’ was translation for unemployed and living off Lacey’s income. He flipped through the pink slips.

“And I’m a lesbian.”

Adam snapped back to the conversation. “What?”

“That got your attention.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m just a little distracted.”

“No. I get a little distracted when I open a carton of Benny & Jerry’s. You were really out there.” She ran her hand over his shoulders. “Is everything ok, Daddy?”

“Everything’s fine, sweetheart. I just have a few things on my mind.”

“It’s a woman.”

Adam’s head snapped up. “What?”

Kathy smiled and sat on the edge of his desk. "It's about time. I hate that you sit in this big house all by yourself. Did Mr. Matthews finally fix you up with a live one?"

"How do you know it's a woman?"

"Because I've never seen you like this, and you've never been serious about anyone since Mom. Therefore, it's a woman."

"How did I get such a smart daughter?"

It was her turn to kiss his forehead. "It's in the genes. Tell me. Who is it?"

Sarah entered the office and handed Adam a manila folder. "Hello Kathy. Did you have a nice holiday?"

"Yes, and you?"

Sarah glanced at Adam as her cheeks flushed slightly. "Yes, it was very nice." Sarah nodded at the folder in Adam's hand. "This is the file on the Kulpsville property. Once you get Black to talk to you I don't think he should have a problem with this offer."

Adam held the file and her gaze "Thank you."

"I will leave you two alone. I'm sure you have some catching up to do." Sarah closed the door behind her.

Kathy turned to her father and laughed. "It's Sarah?"

Adam's attention snapped from the closed door to his daughter's smiling face

"What are you talking about?"

"Sarah is the woman who has you so distracted."

"Kathy ...I..."

"It's about time," Kathy declared.

Adam's mouth dropped open.

By Kate Simon

“Oh, for God’s sake, Daddy. Sarah has been in love with you for years.”

“In love?”

“Of course. A blind man could see she adores you.”

“I don’t think so, Kathy. She dates...Jack Bell for instance.”

An exasperated sigh burst through her lips. “I’ve seen the way Jack Bell looks at her and take it from a woman, it’s completely one-sided.”

Adam stood and put his arms around his daughter. He had the sudden notion he didn’t do it nearly enough. “A woman, huh?”

“Damn straight.”

“She’s not that much older than you are. Don’t you find that a bit...awkward?”

“Daddy, Sarah’s not like the bimbos Mr. Matthews was always trying to fix you up with. She’s bright, she beautiful, and she’s in love with you. The only question is, are you in love with her?”

Adam smiled when he realized the answer didn’t frighten him. “Yes, sweetheart, I believe I am.”

“It’s about time you figured that out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Daddy, have you ever wondered why you’ve never been serious with anyone?”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me.”

“Because of Sarah. I’ve seen the way you look at her. I see the way she can make you laugh at yourself. When you’re with her, you’re happy. Have you ever met anyone who competes with her?”

Adam shook his head and laughed. She was going to be a brilliant psychiatrist. “No pumpkin, I don’t believe I have.” He stroked his daughter’s unruly waves inherited from him, and smiled with a love for her so deep he fought back tears. “Kathy, I never told you this, but I am really sorry it didn’t work out between your mother and me.”

“I know, Daddy.”

Kathy amazed Adam. She had always seemed wise beyond her years, always a thoughtful, intelligent child. “You really don’t blame us, do you?”

“Of course not. I was sad about it, but I knew the two of you were better off apart. Mom is happy with her clubs and her parties. That was never enough for you. It was just never meant to be.”

Adam kissed his daughter’s cheek. “That’s where you’re wrong, pumpkin. We were meant to be, because we had you. Giving the world you will always be my greatest achievement.”

Kathy’s eyes welled. “I love you too, Daddy.” She slapped his chest and pushed him back. “Now go talk to Sarah and work this out.”

Chapter Six

Sarah looked out the conservatory window onto the snow-covered grounds. The large stone patio led out to the fountain, now silent for winter. Beyond the hedges she could see the edge of the pool. Covered like a greenhouse, it could be used all year round. The idea of swimming while surrounded by snow had always appealed to her, but she had never used the pool. The pool was for family, and she was definitely not family.

What have I done? It's never going to be the same. It can't.

Sarah remembered how Adam held her in his arms. How he kissed her and made love to her, and it was everything she'd ever imaged it could be. It was perfect, if only for a moment. A warm tear splashed on her hands.

“There you are.”

Adam's voice made her heart jump. She quickly dashed a tear from the corner of her eye. “Yes. Is it something with the contract?”

Adam took her by the shoulders. “Forget the damn contract. I'm sure it's perfect.” He brushed her tear-streaked cheek with his thumb. “Sarah, I...”

“You don't have to say anything, Adam. Nothing happened that I didn't want to happen. But it didn't leave me with any expectations. I know how you feel about these situations. It was a lovely Christmas Eve. Let's leave it at that.”

“Then why the tears?”

“I’m not crying.”

Adam smiled softly. “You’re a lousy liar.” He stroked a stray curl. “Kathy says you’re in love with me, have been for years.”

Sarah’s resolve vanished. Her lower lip started to tremble. “Jesus, Adam. What do you want me to say? That I’m a sap who fell in love with her boss the first time I laid eyes on him. That I compare every man I meet to him, and no one has a chance to measure up so I don’t stand a chance of meeting anyone I can have a relationship with.”

Sarah took a deep breath. Five years of emotions were spilling out and she had no hope of stopping them, so instead she made a dash around him towards the door.

Adam reached for her and pulled her into his arms. “So you *are* in love with me?”

All Sarah could manage was a slight nod. She was stunned when she saw a wide smile spread across Adam’s face.

“Do you know what else my daughter said?”

Sarah’s voice trembled. “What?”

“That I’m in love with you. Have been for years. It’s why I compare every woman I meet to you, and no one has a chance to measure up so I don’t stand a chance of meeting anyone I can have a relationship with.”

Adam leaned to Sarah and claimed a kiss. It was soft and tender and a promise of more to come. “Clever girl, my daughter.”

“Very,” she whispered. Her heart was in her throat. She had to be dreaming, because having everything she’d ever wanted could only exist in dreams. *Yes that’s it. I’ll wake up and this will all be over.*

Adam kissed her neck and whispered, “I love you, Sarah.”

She held him tight in her arms. He was most definitely real, and he loved her.

“I love you, Adam.”

He claimed another kiss, and this one held all the passion of five years of waiting. Adam pulled the clasp from her hair and ran his fingers through her thick brown waves. “Umm...much better.” He continued to kiss her cheek, her neck and then her lips as his hands caressed her. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. She was up to something. He tapped her forehead with his fingertip “What’s going on in there?”

“I was just thinking about white sand beaches, clear blue water. You see, I got a special Christmas bonus this year.”

An image of Sarah in a string bikini flashed in front of him, and he resolved to call his pilot within the next thirty seconds. “Your boss must like you,” he said as he placed light kisses on her neck.

Sarah closed her eyes and sighed at his touch. “I’m beginning to think so.”

Merry Christmas