

MASON'S WILL

by

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, the late Joyce Ann Mullins, who was loyal and brave enough to read all my first drafts. I'll miss her always.

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Special thanks to radio news director Tim Renshaw of KGLO in Iowa, for an interview that gave me my first tantalizing taste of publicity and fame. I'll never forget it.

PROLOGUE

Dr. Sabrina Craig peeled out of her driveway like a madwoman and broke all speed limits with shameless expertise.

The Saturday morning traffic was blessedly light. Fifteen minutes after leaving her home on the Point Loma peninsula, she zoomed into downtown San Diego.

Her fairy godmother must have smiled again, for she was able to find a parking space on North Harbor Drive, directly in front of the Terradyne Building.

Harriet Craig was waiting for her in Phillip Marshall's luxurious tenth floor law office.

The attorney stood as Sabrina swept into the room.

"Ah, there you are." His craggy face relaxed, and he almost smiled.

"Sorry I'm late." Sabrina shook Phillip's hand and greeted her mother-in-law with a peck on the cheek.

"Are you all right, love?" Harriet asked.

The elderly woman's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen – the only clue to her state of mourning. She was dressed in her favorite color: cherry blossom pink.

"Of course I am, Harry dear. Just a little tired."

Sabrina knew she looked a fright, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

She'd overslept that morning and had hurriedly thrown on the tailored black suit she had worn to the funeral the day before – despite the fact that the skirt was now wrinkled and there was a water stain on the silk jacket front. She had twisted and pinned her unruly dark curls into a knot at the back of her head and had rushed out of the house without bothering to put on any makeup.

Phillip and Harriet were lucky to be graced with her presence at all.

If only she could have delayed the reading of the will for another week – there was so much to cope with already. It was for Harriet’s sake that she’d arranged the meeting this soon.

Her mother-in-law had been staying with the Marshall family for several days. The distraught widow couldn’t step foot in her son’s house without breaking down. She would be flying home – to London – later that morning.

“Is Jeremy coming?” Harriet kept wringing her gardenia-scented handkerchief.

“No. He drove back to L.A. last night.” Sabrina took a seat next to her mother-in-law and turned to Phillip, who was now ensconced behind his desk. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

“Right.” The attorney put on a pair of reading glasses and loosened his tie. “I’ll try to get through it all as quickly as possible.”

The manila folder that lay in front of him was stuffed with documents. He opened it, cleared his throat, and began speaking in legalese.

Harriet didn’t try to control her emotions. She cried softly, just as she had during the lengthy eulogy Phillip had given. But Sabrina remained numb and silent throughout the ordeal. She sat rigidly in her uncomfortably elegant chair, listening to the lawyer’s droning voice, her mother-in-law’s grief, all the while staring at the obscenely beautiful view that stretched beyond the wall of glass. She only heard bits and pieces of the will as it was read aloud – not that it really mattered.

Mason had left her the bulk of his estate, as expected, and Harriet was bequeathed the Craig family’s ancestral home in England. Jeremy Brentwood, the stepson from Mason’s first marriage, finally received control of his trust fund. A sizable amount of money had been left to the American Archeological Society and the National Cancer Research Institute.

Sabrina had reluctantly discussed the contents of the will with Mason a few months before his death. Everything appeared to be in order.

The surprising moment came when Phillip showed Sabrina the sealed envelope. He had to walk around his Nebraska-sized desk in order to hand it to her.

It was beige, and made of thick bond paper, the kind Mason had used for business purposes. Her throat tightened when she saw her name on the front, written in his flamboyantly careless style.

He had scrawled instructions across the back of the envelope as well.

Phillip sat on the edge of his desk. Sabrina looked up at him, hoping for an explanation.

He smiled apologetically. “I don’t know why Mason wanted you to wait. He wrote the letter in the hospital a week before he died. It was already sealed in the envelope when he gave it to me.”

Harriet placed a gentle hand on Sabrina’s arm.

“Trust him, love, and do what he’s asked of you. My son had a logical reason for everything he did.”

CHAPTER ONE

Dawn finally arrived on the twenty-eighth of April.

Sabrina watched as the sun climbed free of the magenta-colored mountains in the distance, casting its rays like a net across the cold, blue waters of San Diego Bay.

Spring mornings began with predictable perfection in Southern California.

She turned away from the familiar spectacle and fixed her gaze on the sleek, black feline curled up at the foot of her antique canopy bed.

Roxanne was sound asleep.

“Sorry, old gal.” Sabrina scooped the cat up into a firm embrace and ignored the howl of protest that followed. “I need a little moral support.”

She only had to carry the warm, wriggling body a short distance; Mason’s study was adjacent to the master bedroom.

Waiting all these months for what would have been their ninth wedding anniversary had not been an easy thing to do. She had wanted to read the letter back in July, on the same day Mason’s attorney had told her of its existence.

She paused in the doorway of the study. The room smelled of leather and incense of sandalwood, reminders of him. It still hurt to be reminded, to remember what was gone now, forever.

Roxanne complained loudly, and dug a claw into the sleeve of Sabrina’s red silk kimono.

“Okay. Here we go.” She stepped off the plush hall carpeting onto the chilly hardwood floor.

Mason had spent countless hours here, in his private domain. It held his essence, his spirit, just as it sheltered his mortal remains.

He had told her, bluntly, that he wanted to be cremated.

“You should put me in that ebony urn we bought a few years back, darling. The one that has the skinny African figures carved on it. I daresay I resemble those odd-looking chaps quite a bit these days.”

She had laughed. Then she had burst into tears.

In accordance with his wishes, the urn now rested atop a marble stand by the study’s huge Palladian window. There were no curtains to hide his favorite view. Outside the ocean waited, vast and mysterious and ever changing.

She had walked by the doorway on many a clear night and seen Mason standing there in the dark, seemingly transfixed by the effects of moonlight on water. The same light would fall upon him, caressing his long, wavy hair until it shone like liquid silver. Sometimes she would disturb his solitude. She would slip up behind him and wrap her arms around his trim waist. She would kiss him on the back, between the shoulder blades, as far up as she could reach, until he turned around with soft laughter and took her in his arms.

Stop it, stop it, stop it.

Sabrina pushed the memories away. They were only making the task harder.

Mason’s desk was in the center of the room, facing the arched window. She sank into the soft leather chair behind it and released her struggling prisoner. Roxanne immediately jumped onto the dusty surface of the teakwood desk and stalked across it, leaving behind a trail of angry paw prints. She sat on the edge of the farthest corner, her back to her mistress.

Sabrina took a deep breath and switched on the alabaster floor lamp.

The envelope was in the top drawer. She took it out with shaking hands and tore it open. She could do this. Mason had kept no secrets from her, she was sure of that. The letter was simply his way of saying goodbye.

She unfolded the first page.

14 July 1992

My darling Sabrina,

You will read this letter nine months from now. (If you are able to wait that long – curious child.) I hope enough time has passed for these words to bring you comfort instead of pain. I have tried so often to say them out loud, but you don't want to listen. You don't want to discuss the future, or my imminent demise.

It has become frightfully clear to me in the last few days how very little time I have left. It wasn't easy for me to accept the inevitable. But I have, with some relief and few regrets. For the last year, I have been fighting a constant battle against this invading melanoma, with you at my side to give me courage. Now it seems the war will soon be over.

I apologize, darling, for leaving you. I fully expected to see the next century, and to dance with you on our twenty-fifth anniversary. Forgive me for not being there.

Forgive, Sabrina. When I look into those incredible amber eyes of yours, they always tell me what you're feeling. I see the anger in you now, and the bitterness. I hope you've let it go. There is no one to blame. As my infinitely wise mother would say, "It's just life."

Brief and wonderful and cruel.

When I was only seventeen, I took a trip with my uncle to Afghanistan. You may remember this story. We went up into the Hindu Kush Mountains, past the Valley of Bamiyan to the Lakes of Band-i-Amir. I've always wanted to take you there to show you

the indescribable beauty of the place. I shall never forget my encounters with the Afghani people, the Sufis especially. Their country's mystique, its history, totally captivated me. I was awed by the sacred temple ruins and archeological sites my uncle studied. The experience was overwhelmingly profound. From then on I knew exactly who I was and what I wanted to be.

This realization first came to me as I watched the sun rise over the Lakes of Band-i-Amir. Now, at this very moment, I can't think of a more beautiful, more appropriate, final resting place.

I understand, of course, that a visit to Afghanistan is not without risk. If you decide to fulfill this request, please don't go until you feel it is safe enough to travel there. I have always been an impatient man, outside of my profession, but the passing of time will soon cease to be an issue for me. In this case, also, you should not allow it to be a concern for you.

Think sensibly, woman. I don't want you hurt in any way. Lord knows I've taken enough risks for the both of us.

You must take Jeremy with you, if and when you make the journey. Despite our differences, he is still like my own son, and I trust him. He would be a useful companion. A journalist could get you into Afghanistan with little difficulty, and remember that Jeremy speaks Persian, the Pashtu dialect in particular. Hiring an interpreter would not be necessary. I believe he still has contacts over there, friends who wouldn't hesitate to help you.

Indeed, as strange as it may sound, at some point in the future we might have one final adventure together. Can you imagine it?

You're still young and beautiful, Sabrina. Smile that breathtaking smile when you think of me, and never forget that I want you to enjoy your life. Live it to the fullest, don't waste a moment, because it really is too precious to take for granted.

We proved them all wrong, darling. Our marriage was my heaven. You made my life so special that I wanted to hold on to it for as long as humanly possible. Don't have any doubts about my feelings for you. The love we had would have lasted forever.

I was, and always will be, your adoring husband.

Mason

Something warm and velvety brushed against Sabrina's damp, dusty cheek. She lifted her head off the desk and confronted a pair of curious gold eyes.

Roxanne moved over and sat on the letter, her tail swishing back and forth.

"Don't worry, kiddo." She scratched the purring cat's ears. "Mama doesn't have time for a nervous breakdown."

What a luxury that would be.

Sabrina longed to stay home and think about Mason's request, decide what to do. But she knew she had to resist the temptation. It was time she pulled herself together and got ready for work.

The hideous prospect of facing a mirror made her groan. She was afraid she'd see Medusa's twin staring back at her: a woman with red eyes and wild, snaky hair – not at all the professional look she normally maintained.

And, Lord, it was Crazy Wednesday. She had a full load of classes to teach.

The first one began at nine o'clock.

Sabrina's car phone began to ring as she exited Interstate 5. She answered it with a yawn.

“Hey, sleepy head. Feel like meeting me for lunch today?”

It was her sister Charlotte.

“Love to. How about George’s at the Cove around 12:30?”

“Sounds good. I’ll treat you this time, okay? Just don’t forget to show up.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“See you then.”

Sabrina hung up the phone and made a right turn onto Gilman Drive, the south entrance to U.C.S.D. She followed the road to the eastern edge of the seaside campus, until she reached Eleanor Roosevelt College, one of six institutions that made up the University of California, San Diego.

U.C.S.D.’s grounds were covered with shaggy Eucalyptus trees. The branches of the giant trees could provide enough shade for an entire class, and Sabrina had, on occasion, taken advantage of this fact to wake up her sluggish students. Wednesdays, however, were far too hectic for such an outing.

She left Mason’s white Saab in the faculty parking lot and hurried over to Oceania Hall.

The long corridors weren’t as crowded as they should have been. She made her way over to the west wing and found Justin Wong standing outside her office, his arms full of books and binders.

“Hi. Got all those exams graded. They weren’t as bad as you thought.”

Sabrina smiled at her teaching assistant. “Justin, for the umpteenth time, what on earth would I do without you?”

He blushed, and handed her a folder full of test papers. “Dr. Humphries was looking for you a minute ago. Didn’t say why.”

“Really?” Sabrina already knew what Alan wanted. “Thanks for the warning.”

Justin grinned. “Oh, almost forgot. If you’d like to attend that seminar on Monday, I can sub for you the whole afternoon.”

“Great. I’ll let you know.” She stuck the folder under her arm and unlocked the office door.

Justin followed her into the room. “I watered your cactuses last night, while the janitor was here. Hope you don’t mind. They were looking, well, a bit . . .”

“Betrayed? Neglected?”

“Thirsty, I guess.”

“It’s a good thing I have a thorny plant fetish. My office would be a graveyard for ferns and vines.” Sabrina laid her briefcase on the desk and slid the folder inside.

“Anyway, I appreciate you coming to their rescue – again.”

“No prob.” He shifted the load of books onto his other arm. “I guess I should go make sure the projector’s set up for the Mayan rituals presentation.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right behind you.”

Justin passed Vivica Slone on his way out. The tall, African-American woman had been a professor of World Religions back when Sabrina was a student. Now she was head of the department.

Vivica leaned against the doorjamb, arms folded, looking as elegant as ever in a white linen suit. “Lady, if you don’t go with Justin right now, you’ll be mighty sorry. Humphries is hot on your trail. I can smell his aftershave already.”

“Aftershave? I think he uses Vicks VapoRub.”

Vivica burst out laughing, and then quickly put a hand over her mouth. “Oops, here he comes. Too late to run.”

Alan Humphries was the kind of person who went around whistling Christmas carols in July. The portly, middle-aged professor suffered from a hopeless case of terminal cheerfulness.

“Well, well, here we all are. Good morning, ladies.” He fiddled with his crooked bowtie. “I’d very much like to speak to you, Dr. Craig, if you have a free moment.”

Sabrina stared at the peeling, red bald spot on the top of Alan's head. It looked painful.

She checked her watch. "Can we talk after lunch? I really need to get to my first class."

"Of course, of course. Don't want to hold you up."

It was impossible to offend the man.

"Actually, Alan," Vivica took hold of his arm and steered him away from Sabrina's office, "I could use your advice on something. I need to choose another guest speaker for the opening of the Cultural Research Center. Do you have any suggestions?"

Sabrina snatched her briefcase off the desk and went out into the hall. When Vivica glanced over her shoulder, Sabrina mouthed the words *Thank you* and then walked briskly in the opposite direction.

She wished the dedication ceremony for the new research center would be cancelled. Alan had been hounding her for over a week about whether or not he could be her escort to the event. She would finally have to stop running and turn him down in a few hours. But knowing Alan, and his New Englander resolve, it would take an eon for her rejection to sink in.

"Poopy darn." Charlotte frowned at the menu she was holding. "I can't decide if I want the scallops or the linguine."

"Have both."

"Sure. With advice like that, I'm never going to lose any weight."

Sabrina grinned, and once again marveled at how much her sister favored their mother, with her straight black hair – cut boyishly short – and an olive complexion that never needed any makeup.

Her own skin was fairer, like their late father's, and she had inherited his curly, dark brown locks.

The sisters were sitting under a giant yellow umbrella on the restaurant's sunny cliffside terrace, where the panoramic view of the Pacific could easily distract one away from the thought of food.

As Sabrina indulged in a little people watching, enjoying the feel and smell of the salty breeze, a snazzily dressed waiter named Mario suddenly appeared from behind a potted palm.

"I'll have the scallops, please." Charlotte handed him her menu.

Sabrina ordered a small garden salad with Portobello mushrooms.

Her sister gave her a disapproving look. "That's all you're going to eat? Pretty soon we won't be able to see you."

"That sounds like our mother talking."

"It does, doesn't it? But I agree with her. You're getting too thin – not that I wouldn't love to have that problem."

Charlotte adjusted one of the shoulder straps on her red and white striped jumper. To her utter dismay, she had never been able to shed the extra pounds she had gained during her pregnancy.

"How's Nicole?" Sabrina asked, effectively changing the subject. Charlotte could talk about her five-year-old for a solid hour without taking a breath.

"She asked me, just last night, when her Aunt Brina was going to take her back to the zoo."

Sabrina felt a twinge of guilt. "You pick the weekend and I'll take her anywhere she wants to go."

"Scott and I are taking her to Sea World this Saturday. Want to come?"

"I'm not sure I'll be here. I might have to drive up to L.A."

The waiter arrived with their meals. As soon as he walked away, Charlotte speared one of the steaming scallops with her fork and waved it at Sabrina.

“Okay, out with it. The tone of your voice tells me you’re on a mission of some sort. What gives?”

“Thanks for inviting me to lunch. You remembered, didn’t you?”

“Ha! It’s a curse. I can’t forget a birthday or an anniversary. And now that you’ve brought it up, how are you, really?”

Sabrina moved a mushroom around on her plate. “I need a vacation. Everybody says so.”

“That’s why you’re going to Los Angeles?”

“Not exactly. I need to ask Jeremy for a favor.”

“Whoa.” Charlotte put down her fork. “You’re kidding, right?”

The Friday evening commute meant moving at a snail’s pace on what was supposed to be an expressway. There was no getting around it.

Sabrina shoved her favorite Enya CD into the car’s disk player and let her mind wander ahead a few hours. She would be calling Jeremy as soon as she got home, but she didn’t plan on explaining the entire purpose of her visit over the phone. If he agreed to see her, she would drive to Los Angeles right away. She wanted him to read Mason’s letter for himself.

Her decision to fulfill the request had been made two days earlier, while she was en route to meet Charlotte for lunch. But if she cared to be honest with herself, she would have to admit that no matter what Mason may have asked of her, refusal could never have been an option. She would have been determined to make it happen.

She was determined.

Lydia Hernandez Harris would have to be kept in the dark for a while, though. Sabrina understood the necessity of it just as Charlotte did: Their mother was Queen of the Worrywarts.

Charlotte herself hadn't been too thrilled by the plan. She had been supportive, as always, but not without expressing her every concern.

Her sister was used to voicing her opinion and taking charge. Their father, Ben, had died fighting an arsonist's blaze when Sabrina was twelve. The warehouse had exploded, killing all six firemen inside, shattering all six families left behind.

Their mother had been paralyzed with grief. Sixteen-year-old Charlotte had been forced to pick up the pieces and run with them. She had come up with the idea of "The Gingerbread House," the day care center Lydia had started three months after her husband's death. Organizer Charlotte had quickly become a partner.

And a role model for her little sister.

Sabrina's train of thought was forced back onto the highway when an obnoxious green Pinto cut her off, almost causing her to miss her exit.

The swear word she whispered sounded so pretty in Spanish.

She barreled south on Catalina Boulevard towards Point Loma, and made a tight right turn onto Promontory Road. The narrow lane meandered upwards past rows of short, fat palm trees. Her house was the last one at the top of the street, and sat high on a hill, giving her views of both the bay and the Pacific.

Promontory Road continued on for a short distance, dead-ending at the Old Cabrillo Lighthouse on the edge of the Sunset Cliffs.

In the evening, Sabrina would often walk out to the eighty-foot tall, one hundred and fifty year old stone monument. Even when there was a cold wind tearing through her hair, numbing her face, she would sit on the cliff's edge with the waves crashing below her and watch the sun go down in a blaze of glory. The sight never failed to inspire her. She would stay there, sketchbook in hand, until the darkness forced her home.

To Mason's home. It was his house – a sprawling one-story made of sandstone, with massive columns lining the facade, framing the high arched windows. Vaulted ceilings and ceramic tile floors were prominent on the inside. Mason had filled the house with an uncluttered mixture of things modern and antique.

Sometimes it felt like a museum after hours. Like a tomb.

Thank God for Roxanne.

The cat meowed plaintively as Sabrina let herself into the kitchen from the attached garage.

“Hi, baby. Are we hungry?”

Roxanne wrapped herself around Sabrina's legs.

“Okay, okay. Chow is on the way.”

The feline wasn't so finicky on this particular evening. She soon had her nose buried in the turkey and giblets dinner her owner had scooped out of a can.

“Now it's my turn.” Sabrina tossed a hefty potato into the microwave.

She was nervous about calling Jeremy – hence the decision to eat first.

Sabrina left the kitchen and passed the living room, entering the hallway on the north side of the house. The master suite's double doors were straight ahead.

She entered the room and looked longingly into the adjoining bath at the deep, enticing whirlpool tub by the window. Later. Much later.

Sabrina kicked off her high heels and unpinned her heavy shoulder-length curls. Her navy blue suit was traded in for black cotton jeans and a short-sleeved white sweater.

She dug a pair of loafers out of her closet and made it back to the kitchen just as the timer on the microwave began to beep.

A minute later, the hot baked potato was smothered in spicy salsa. Eyes watering, lips burning, Sabrina drank an entire bottle of spring water along with her meal.

She took her time clearing the table. Roxanne jumped onto the counter and began the important ritual of cleaning herself, keeping an eye on Sabrina's progress as she did so.

There really wasn't much tidying up to do. Finally, when she couldn't put the call off any longer, Sabrina took the cordless phone into the living room and dialed Jeremy's number.

While it rang, she paced back and forth between the stone fireplace and the dove-gray sectional couch. She was ready to hang up by the sixth ring, but then she heard a breathless voice say hello on the other end of the line – a female voice.

“Kendal? It's Sabrina.”

“You wench. It's been ages since you've called. Wouldn't you know it?”

“Know what?”

“I'm on my way out the door. I've got to be at a photo shoot in half an hour and I know I won't make it home 'til midnight. Can I call you back tomorrow, maybe?”

Sabrina sat on the square, marble-topped coffee table. “Actually, I need to talk to Jeremy before then, in person. Is he there?”

“He's teaching a photography class until 8:30. Is something wrong?”

“It's about Mason's will, and it's a little complicated. That's why I was hoping I could drive up to your place this evening and discuss it.”

“What are you waiting for? I'll tell Security you're coming. You can spend the night with us if you need to.”

“Thanks, but I'll be heading back. I've got a date for Saturday.”

“Cool. Who and where?”

“I'm taking my niece to Sea World.”

Victoria's Ridge, an exclusive condominium complex, was perched high on a hillside off Coldwater Canyon Road, ten miles northeast of Los Angeles. If Sabrina had been

sitting in daylight instead of darkness, she would have been afforded an awesome view of the valley below.

Fifteen minutes earlier, at exactly nine o'clock, she had knocked on Jeremy's townhouse door and found no one at home. It had seemed a shame to sit in her car when the night was so inviting. A slight breeze was blowing in from the desert, cool but comfortable. She chose to wait on the deck that wrapped around the west side of the condo.

She could keep an eye on the front door from this vantage point.

Ten more minutes passed before she spotted Jeremy's black jeep. He pulled into the detached garage below, the automatic door clattering shut behind him. She saw him exit the building through the side entrance. He had to climb a flight of steps to reach the deck, and she knew that the dim light shining above the townhouse door would not be enough to illuminate her presence.

He reached the top of the stairs, and Sabrina smiled. He was belting out the lyrics to "I Shot the Sheriff." And it didn't sound too shabby.

The man didn't look too shabby either. He was wearing a charcoal-colored crew neck sweater and a pair of black chinos.

Jeremy fumbled with his house key, trying to unlock the door and hold on to his briefcase – and a bag of takeout – all at the same time.

His singing turned into whistling.

"Is that the Eric Clapton version, or Bob Marley's?" she asked, stepping out of the shadows.

Jeremy dropped the briefcase on his foot. "Bloody *hell*."

Sabrina burst out laughing. It was her first honest-to-goodness, spontaneous laugh in weeks. She quickly went to his aid, leaving her purse behind on the deckchair.

His leather briefcase was overloaded. She moved it up against the door and took the paper bag out from under his arm. Something curried, and squashed, was inside.

Jeremy ran an agitated hand through his sun-bleached hair. He was staring at her now, with a superior we-are-not-amused expression. His eyes looked black, but Sabrina remembered their true color: They were an unusual indigo-blue.

He finally spoke. "I assume that, aside from crippling me and having a good laugh at my expense, you have another reason for being here."

Mason's accent had sounded the same: very proper, very British. His letter was tucked away in her purse.

"I need to show you something." Sabrina bit her lip and gazed up at Jeremy.

He raised an eyebrow. "We'd better go inside, then, hadn't we?"

Hanging in the entryway was a portrait of Gwyneth, Jeremy's Swedish mother, and Mason's first wife. It had been painted twenty years previously – only a few months before her untimely death in a car accident.

Jeremy shared many of his blond mother's attractive features: a square jaw, high cheekbones, and the small cleft in his chin that drove his girlfriend crazy.

Kendal Hathaway was a minimalist, Sabrina observed. If it hadn't been for Gwyneth's portrait, she wouldn't have been able to tell that Jeremy even lived on the premises. The condo was sparsely furnished with a décor that was way too colorless for her taste. Everything, including the carpet, was white, or made of glass with little bits of brass to hold it together. It was a home that said, "Absolutely no children or pets allowed."

Instead of sitting on the spotless sofa, she chose to wander around the living room and survey the walls. Kendal was all over them. The framed covers of fashion magazines, such as Vogue, Glamour, and Cosmo, displayed the stunning redhead in a number of alluring poses.

Sabrina smiled into her friend's confident green eyes. They had both known, even in high school, that Kendal would be famous one day. And now, fifteen years later at the age of thirty-three, the model was still hot property.

Jeremy was a lucky man, and he had Sabrina to thank for it. Five years ago, she had swallowed her pride and invited him to the surprise party she had planned for Mason's fiftieth birthday. Jeremy had shown up alone, and Sabrina had introduced him to Kendal during the festivities. The couple had moved in together less than a year later.

"You're not seriously considering his request."

It was a statement, not a question. Sabrina turned around to face Jeremy, who stood in the doorway to the kitchen, the letter in his hand, his supper long forgotten.

"Would I be here tonight if I weren't?"

"If you had any sense you'd let me talk you out of it. It's too dangerous."

The arrogant tone of his voice brought back the memory of a painful scene she had hoped would remain buried in the past. In her head, Sabrina heard him say the hateful words again, just as clearly as she had all those years ago.

Gold digger.

She found it difficult to speak for a moment. When she did, her voice trembled.

"If I wait too long, it will never happen. And I *need* this trip to happen – can't you understand? I think they call it...closure."

Sabrina turned her back to him, tears stinging her eyes. "What I don't need is your help or your approval. I'll do this alone if I have to – or I'll hire someone else to come along."

She heard him sigh as he moved up close behind her.

"You're not going over there without me."