

MILLS & BOON

The Secret Baby Bond
Cindy Gerard



Vintage Desire

Cindy Gerard

The Secret Baby Bond

Аннотация

HE WANTED HIS LIFE BACK....But much had changed in the two years Michael Paige had been presumed dead. Though he still loved her, his wife now wore another man's diamond—and Michael had a son. A beautiful boy he'd never seen before. That changed everything. Tara Connelly Paige thought she'd seen a ghost. But her husband was a flesh-and-blood male. One touch of his hands still stirred her desire.... But when he'd regained his memory, would he recall she'd asked for a divorce the day he'd disappeared? Tara wouldn't keep him from his son, but could they be the family Michael claimed he now wanted?

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AROUND CHI-TOWN

Add Tara Connelly Paige to the list of Connellys having troubles of late. Seems the comely heiress has been getting crank calls and has been followed. The incidents spooked her enough for her father, Grant, to beef up security on the Connelly clan.

But even more bizarre is the “resurrection” of her “deceased” husband, Michael Paige. According to our sources, after being missing and presumed dead for two long years, Michael calmly opened the door of the family’s Lake Shore Manor as if returning from a long day at the office. “Honey, I’m home”? Not.

In a turn of events straight out of a soap opera, Michael had never been on that train that crashed in Ecuador, but instead met with foul play that left him with amnesia. Finally, two weeks ago, he regained his memory and has just returned to Chicago. Certainly truth is stranger than fiction!

No telling how Grant Connelly will react to his long-lost son-in-law’s return. The proverbial bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks, Michael had once stolen away “Daddy’s little girl” for a hasty elopement. And it’s no secret that the Connelly patriarch had new plans for Tara that didn’t include Michael.

Tune in for more details as they break....

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire! This month we’ve created a brand-new lineup of passionate, powerful and provocative love stories just for you.

Begin your reading enjoyment with *Ride the Thunder* by Lindsay McKenna, the September MAN OF THE MONTH and the second book in this beloved author's cross-line series, *MORGAN'S MERCENARIES: ULTIMATE RESCUE*. An amnesiac husband recovers his memory and returns to his wife and child in *The Secret Baby Bond* by Cindy Gerard, the ninth title in our compelling *DYNASTIES: THE CONNELLYS* continuity series.

Watch a feisty beauty fall for a wealthy lawman in *The Sheriff & the Amnesiac* by RYANNE COREY. Then meet the next generation of MacAllisters in *Plain Jane MacAllister* by Joan Elliott Pickart, the newest title in *THE BABY BET: MACALLISTER'S GIFTS*.

A night of passion leads to a marriage of convenience between a gutsy heiress and a macho rodeo cowboy in *Expecting Brand's Baby*, by debut *Desire* author Emilie Rose. And in Katherine Garbera's new title, *The Tycoon's Lady* falls off the stage into his arms at a bachelorette auction, as part of our popular *BRIDAL BID* theme promotion.

Savor all six of these sensational new romances from Silhouette *Desire* today.

Enjoy!

Jan Marlow Golan

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Secret Baby Bond

Cindy Gerard



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This book is dedicated to the intrepid authors who participated in the writing of this wonderful series of books. Ladies, it was a pleasure.

CINDY GERARD

If asked “What’s your idea of heaven?” Cindy Gerard would say a warm sun, a cool breeze, pan pizza and a good book. If she had to settle for one of the four, she’d opt for the book, with the pizza running a close second. Inspired by the pleasure she’s received from the books she’s read and her longtime love affair with her husband, Tom, Cindy now creates her own evocative and sensual love stories about compelling characters and complex relationships.

This bestselling author of close to twenty books has received numerous industry awards, among them the National Readers’ Choice Award, multiple Romantic Times nominations and two RITA[®] Award nominations from the Romance Writers of America. Cindy loves to hear from her readers and invites them to visit her Web page at www.tlt.com/authors/cgerard.htm.



MEET THE CONNELLYS

Meet the Connellys of Chicago—wealthy, powerful and

rocked by scandal, betrayal...and passion!

Who's Who in

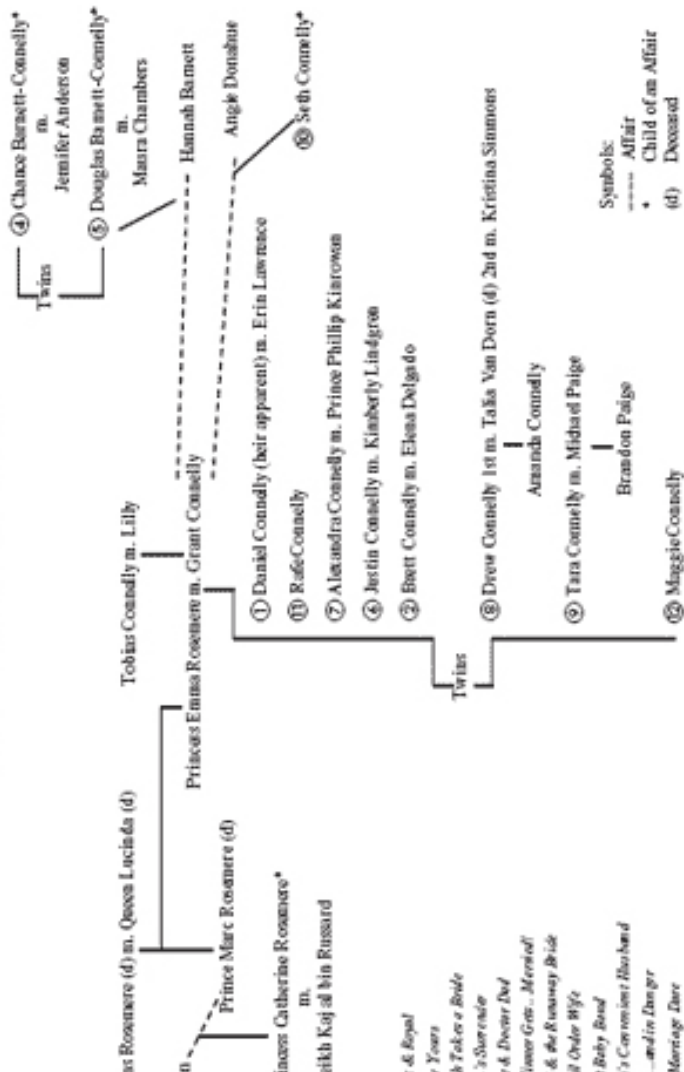
THE SECRET BABY BOND

Michael Paige—He'd spent two years in an Ecuadorian jungle, not knowing who he was, until a twist of fate gave him back his memory and luck gave him a way home....

Tara Connelly Paige—Sex was never the problem between her and Michael; communication was. But at the sight of her husband, she's the one who's speechless....

Ruby—This unflappable manager of Lake Shore Manor has served the Connellys for thirty-five years. There are few things she hasn't seen....

DYNASTIES: THE CONNELLYS



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Prologue

For two years, Michael Paige had been a dead man. To some, he was a dead man still. In actuality, not only was he alive, he finally remembered the many things that he'd forgotten.

He remembered what he'd had.

He remembered what he'd lost.

And he wanted it back.

From a distance, from behind dark glasses, he watched Tara—the wife he'd lost even before the world had decided he was dead—while his wildly beating heart reminded him how very much alive he truly was.

Sitting quietly on the park bench, while the early September sun shined brilliant and pure through the shifting oaks and the scent of summer's last roses drifted on the breeze, he watched. And he remembered the way she moved, the way her short, sleek cap of stylish black hair felt sliding like silk between his fingers, the way her violet eyes clouded to misty lavender when he made love to her. Two years ago. A lifetime ago.

She smiled, her face full of love for the child who toddled by her side. The boy wore tiny running shoes, a baby-sized Chicago Cubs jacket and cap and stared up at his mother through laughing gray eyes.

Through his eyes.

A lump formed in his throat that he couldn't swallow.

He had a son.

He had a son whose name was Brandon, whose face he'd seen and whose name he'd learned for the first time just two weeks ago. Michael buried his hand in his jacket pocket and clutched the dog-eared piece of newsprint. The photo of Tara in the grainy gray print of a tabloid newspaper had caught his eye in a Quito, Ecuador supermarket and blindsided him with a staggering rush of memory. So had the dramatic account of his own death.

A shooting pain stabbed through his right temple. He touched two fingers to the scar there and rode it out. It would pass soon and until it did, he focused on reality.

The reality of his wife. The reality of his son.

An ache swelled and grew and filled his chest with a love and a longing so profound that he almost went to the boy then. Just to gather him close. To feel that robust and healthy little body warm and real against his own. To look into his liquid silver eyes and see a reflection of himself there. To cement into fact that the amazing miracle he and Tara had made together was not a cruel trick of his imagination. And to confirm, unequivocally, that he really was alive.

But the man who had been Miguel Santiago for the past two years couldn't do that. Not yet. Not here. So he stayed where he was and accepted that this was not the time. This was not the way. He couldn't just walk up to his child—his child who didn't know him. He couldn't just smile and say to his wife, "I'm not dead. I was just lost for a while. And I've missed you."

He couldn't say any of those things because to Tara, he was dead. And because, just before he died, she'd told him she wanted a divorce.

So he sat, unable to move, unwilling to leave as his son tumbled to his back with a shriek of gurgling laughter—and the man at Tara's side bent to pick him up and lift him into his arms.

Then the three of them walked away together. Tara, his son and the man who would take his place—or so said the tabloids.

It was only after they'd faded to a memory that he realized his hands were clenched into fists inside his pockets, that his eyes were staring blankly.

“Mister... Hey, mister, you okay?”

He looked up abruptly, squinted against the crisp September sun. A tall, gangly teenager frowned down at him. The boy had a basketball tucked under his arm and freckles bridging his nose. He wore baggy pants, a sloppy Chicago Bulls T-shirt and an expression that mixed wariness with concern. Even from where he stood, a cautious couple of yards away, Michael could smell the salt and sweat and vitality of him.

“Man,” the kid said. “You're white as a ghost.”

A ghost.

It should have been funny.

If the kid only knew.

Michael took one last look at the spot where his wife and son had disappeared. Then he rose and started walking.

This time he promised himself that when he walked, it would

be out of the shadows. This time he would walk toward the living, not away.

He wanted his life back.

He wanted his wife back.

He did not want to be dead any longer.

One

Tara Connelly Paige sat cross-legged on the plush rose carpet that covered the floor in the den at Lake Shore Manor. She stared into a fire that cut the unusual chill of the early September evening.

Beside her, on his favorite quilt that was soft and blue and plump with the loving care his great-grandmother, Nana Lilly Connelly had sewn into it, fourteen-month-old Brandon slept like the babe he was: blissful, innocent, ignorant of the turmoil his mother was feeling.

“It’s a little late for second thoughts, Tara,” her father said carefully from the sofa behind her.

Tara looked up and over her shoulder into the concern in Grant Connelly’s eyes. It shouldn’t surprise her anymore that her father could read her thoughts. His insight was almost frightening. He didn’t call it insight, though. He called it understanding.

Maybe he was right. It seemed that since she’d moved back home to Lake Shore Manor after Michael died two years ago, her father could read her mind almost as well as he read the market. It was another reason that it was past time for her to move back out on her own—or move in with John.

Move in with John.

Too much reluctance accompanied the possibility. With reluctance came guilt.

“I know it was a hard decision, honey, but John is right,” her father continued. “And you’re right to finally have Seth initiate the legal work to have Michael declared legally dead.”

Michael. Dead.

She drew in a serrated breath. Tried, as she always tried, to let go of the hope that after all this time he could be alive. Intellectually, she knew it wasn’t possible. If her intellect wasn’t enough, her family’s gentle but insistent persuasion was. Even Seth had finally jumped on the wagon.

Thank God for Seth. Her brother, the lawyer. Her brother who had morphed Tara into Terror when they were kids and whom she loved to tease—or at least she had once loved to tease him.

“Hey, Seth, what do you call five hundred lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?”

“I’ll bite, brat. What do you call five hundred lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?”

“A good start.”

A small smile lifted one corner of her mouth then quickly dropped away. She hadn’t seen much of Seth’s flashing grin lately. But then again, he hadn’t seen much of hers, either.

He was there for her, though, as the rest of her brothers and sisters had always been there for her. Seth was handling the paperwork it had taken her two years to gather the courage to set in motion. Smoothly, efficiently, discreetly. Seth was a man you could count on. Much like their father.

Tara looked at him. At sixty-five, Grant Connelly was still a

handsome man. His granite jaw was a perfect complement to his deep tan and dark hair, but it was his eyes that set him apart. One quelling look from Connelly Corporation CEO's steel gray eyes and grown men cowered, women wept.

She'd been the benefactor of those looks herself, though not for a while. Definitely not tonight. Tonight his eyes were gentle, as they always were for his wife and for his children. When Brandon snuffled in his sleep and tucked his chubby little fist under his chin with a sigh of baby ecstasy, steel-gray transitioned to an indulgent, smoky silver.

They shared a smile then for this precious child whose power ran the gamut from melting hearts with his laughter or his tears, to raising roofs when he was full of himself and wanting everyone's attention. Out of the softness of her father's smile came more concern.

"The boy needs a father, Tara."

She swallowed, looked at her hands and agreed softly. "I know."

"John wants to be his father. He wants to be your husband. He's a good man, honey."

Yes, John was a good man. A little stuffy, per Seth, but good. Good for Brandon. Good for her. He gave her direction, offered security, even the extravagant lifestyle she was accustomed to. The opportunity to move back out from under her parents' roof. She'd taken advantage of their indulgence long enough.

John offered all the answers, provided all the solutions—all

but one. She didn't love him. Not that way. Not the way she'd loved Michael.

The fire crackled. She looked from the blue/yellow flame to her left hand and the two-carat diamond solitaire John had given her three weeks ago. Firelight glinted off the brilliant and perfectly faceted marquise. She thought of the inexpensive, plain gold band Michael had given her, remembered the love and the hopes and the dreams he'd offered with it.

Love, however, hadn't solved the problems they'd amassed during their turbulent five years together. Love hadn't been the be-all or end-all to everything that had gone wrong between them. For that reason, it didn't seem essential for love to factor in to her relationship with John. She cared for him, as much, she thought, as he cared for her. In the end, it seemed reason enough to finally agree to marry him.

"So," her father persisted as he lifted the one scotch he allowed himself every evening. Ice shifted, clinked softly in the Waterford crystal glass. "Are you close to setting a wedding date?"

She let out a deep breath. Like her father, John had also been pressing her to set a date. She'd been dragging her feet ever since the story had been picked up by every legitimate and illegitimate news publication in the country. The public announcement of their engagement two weeks ago had seemed like an act of betrayal. It also seemed so final.

She rubbed a finger across her brow, unable to ignore the

dull headache pounding there. She hadn't been prepared for the media circus the announcement had become. The tabloids had taken cannibalistic delight in catching pictures of her and John together, pictures of Brandon.

The worst, though, was the resurrection of the photographs of the train wreck in Ecuador that had claimed Michael's life. Reliving the sensationalized and gruesome accounts of Michael's disappearance had been a nightmare. Because of it, she hadn't been able to think about setting a wedding date with John. For reasons she didn't fully understand, she hadn't wanted to.

"It's a little early for definite plans considering..."

Grant frowned at his drink, then at his daughter when her words trailed off.

"Considering that you've never gotten over Michael."

She folded a corner of the quilt over Brandon's little body. The flannel felt soft and real beneath her fingers. Very few things felt real lately. She scooted back until her shoulders rested against the sofa.

"I was over him before he died," she said, trying to make them both believe it.

"And yet..." Grant covered her slim shoulder with his hand. She was his little girl and she was hurting. "And yet it hurts you to think of his death as an absolute."

"Yes," she admitted, covering his hand with hers, feeling the strength there, needing the compassion. "It hurts."

After all this time, it still hurt.

“I think of him,” she confessed, drawing her knees to her chest. “I think of Michael more and more often lately.”

She looked over her shoulder, met her father’s troubled eyes and shrugged self-consciously at her admission.

“Sometimes...sometimes, I’ll see someone in a crowd and the likeness to Michael will startle me so that for a moment, I actually think it’s him.”

Returning her gaze to the fire, she wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees.

“Those damn crank calls haven’t helped,” her father muttered angrily.

She thought of the phone calls she’d received the past two weeks—the ones where there had been nothing but silence on the other end. The ones that had shaken her enough that she’d stopped by to talk to her brother Drew. When she’d met up with Kristina, Drew’s new bride, instead, she’d pocketed the phone numbers of private detectives Tom Reynolds and Lucas Starwind that Kristina had given her.

“I wish you would have called Tom or Lucas, or even the police,” Grant added.

She’d been spooked enough by the calls that she’d actually considered calling them—considered, but not followed through.

“They have their hands full investigating the problems you’ve been dealing with since last December.”

Grant grew silent.

The problems all appeared to be tied to the unsolved murders

of her grandfather, King Thomas Rosemere of Altaria, her uncle, Prince Marc, and the subsequent attempted assassination of her brother, Daniel, who, as the eldest son of Emma Rosemere Connelly, had taken Thomas's place as king.

Absolutely, the Chicago P.D. and her father's hired investigators had their hands full.

"Besides," she said, "what would I have told them? That I'd received some strange phone calls? 'No. No heavy breathing. No, the calls hadn't seemed ominous. No, they hadn't felt like pranks, either. Hadn't felt like wrong numbers.'

"It's not much for anyone to go on, Dad, and it wasn't enough for me to follow through with the detectives. And yet..."

"And yet what?" he asked when she paused.

"Last week," she said, speaking more to herself than to her father, "I was walking out of a shop and...it was like I felt Michael there, watching me, waiting for me."

"It's all this business with your grandfather's death and Daniel's attempted murder," her father said with gentle concern. "All the extra security I've had set up is making you nervous. This whole damn situation is making you nervous."

"No. No," she assured him. "It's not that. I've never felt threatened on that front even though I know you've been concerned for me. For all of us. It's... I don't know. Like today in the park. There was a man." Her heart stuttered now as it had when she'd seen him. "I couldn't stop thinking about Michael."

She rubbed her arms, closed her eyes. "Sometimes lately, it

feels like he's...still here, Dad.”

Her father sighed. “It’s because you never had closure.”

No. There had never been closure. Instead, there’d been a train derailment in the jungles of Ecuador, endless nights of not knowing, the empty ache of waiting. The helplessness of uncertainty. Of needing to hear. Of wanting to know, yet not wanting to know the worst of it. Then just wanting to know anything.

The jungle was dense and wild, the cavernous cliffs below the derailment site impassable. Michael’s body hadn’t been the only one that had never been recovered. And Tara had never recovered from the guilt of knowing that the last words she’d spoken to him had been the last words he’d expected to hear.

She still remembered every moment of that day as if it were yesterday. She drifted back to that day at the airport—that horrible day. She could still see the shock and pain on Michael’s face in her mind. Still heard the hurtful words....

“You don’t have to see me off at the gate,” Michael said as he closed the trunk, hefted his flight bag over his shoulder and set his Pullman on the curb by the car.

Around them horns honked, hotel shuttles jockeyed for parking. Travelers hunched their shoulders against the cold, struggled with their luggage, rushed to make their flights.

It was so cold. Cold outside. Cold inside. The bite of it stung her cheeks as she stood there, the collar of her red wool coat turned up against the wind, the air as heavy as the lead-gray sky.

Stray snowflakes taunted, promising the bitter Chicago winter to come.

Michael's eyes were troubled as he watched her face. He knew something was wrong. Finally, he knew. After months of combative silences and fractured truths, he finally understood. Finally. Too late.

"We'll talk," he promised as he gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him. "You know I have to go on this trip. It could make or break my promotion, babe." He rocked her gently, lifted one corner of his mouth in that crooked smile she'd never been able to resist.

When she didn't react, he bent his knees, met her at eye level. "When I get back, we will talk."

"It's too late, Michael. It's too late to talk." Her words sounded as frigid as the wind that whipped off Lake Michigan and picked up speed and force as it funneled through the city and cut its way to O'Hare. "It's been too late for a long time now."

He straightened, his hands tightening on her shoulders. He drew her toward him protectively when a woman sprinting for the terminal doors bumped against them with a mumbled apology. His breath puffed out in smoky white clouds of frost that crystallized on the brittle air.

"It didn't feel like it was too late last night."

Last night when they'd made love.

Against all odds, when they could no longer communicate on a verbal level, they'd never lost their ability to communicate in bed.

As she stood there, feeling the heat of his strong hands through her winter coat, seeing the passion in his eyes, she knew that sex had been the only thing keeping them together for some time now.

“Michael...this is hard.” She worked up her courage to say the words but she couldn’t look at him. “I...I want a divorce.”

She felt his shock like the blow that it was. For a moment he was utterly still. Then his hands loosened their hold on her shoulders, dropped to his side.

“You don’t mean that,” he said after a moment in which they both felt the truth and the finality of her decision like the cut of the wind against their faces.

“Look at me,” he demanded, each word a command, each breath an effort. “I deserve to have you look at me when you tell me you want to rip my life apart.”

“Our life.” She raised her head, felt her heart beating with anger and hurt and utter helplessness. “It’s our life that’s being ripped apart, and I’m not the only one responsible. This didn’t start here, Michael. Not today.”

She felt the tears and couldn’t blink them back. “I—I can’t do it anymore. I don’t want to.”

“I don’t accept that.” His words were as clipped as the wind.

She lifted her chin, looked past him at the glut of humanity crowding toward the terminal doors.

“I’m sorry. But your acceptance doesn’t change things. I want a divorce,” she repeated, meeting the bleakness and the anger in

his gray eyes one last time. Then she turned away.

Like an automaton, she walked around the front of the car, opened the door and slid behind the wheel. She wasn't aware that she'd fastened the seat belt, turned the key and slipped the car in gear. But as she checked the rearview mirror, she was very aware of him standing there. The wind tugged and whipped his dark hair around his beautiful face; his strong cheeks were red from the cold, his gray eyes were set with defiance and denial.

It wasn't until after she'd parked in front of their apartment that she'd realized she was still crying, that she couldn't stop crying.

Tara blinked herself away from a moment that even now, two years later, remained as vivid as Lake Michigan in the swell of a storm. She looked toward the floor-to-ceiling windows of her parents' manor house and felt like crying now.

She still missed what she and Michael had once had. The passion, the hopes, the dreams, the defiance that had them eloping on prom night simply because they were in love. They were in love, but he was the boy from the wrong side of the tracks and she was the princess her wealthy parents wanted to exile to an exclusive girls school to get her away from him. Away from Michael, who hadn't been good enough for her, who could never provide for her by Connelly standards.

“John won't wait forever, Tara.”

Her father's voice broke through the years, through the tears she hadn't been able to shed for some time now. The accuracy

of his statement undercut all the might-have-beens and should-have-beens, and relayed the truth.

“I know.” She laid a gentle hand on Brandon’s bottom, needing to feel his sturdy little bulk, to touch what was real when the surreal threatened to outdistance it.

The door to the den opened with a subtle creak.

“Mr. Connelly, I’m sorry to intrude.”

Ruby, dressed in her starched black uniform even at this late hour, stood in the doorway. Her hands clenched the doorknob so hard her knuckles had turned white. Her eyes were as round as the buttons on her blouse, her cheeks as gray as her apron.

Her father realized that something was wrong at the same moment Tara did. The unflappable Ruby, who had been their head housekeeper, a fixture and a friend for all of Tara’s memories, was far from the composed manager of Lake Shore Manor.

“Ruby?” Grant’s brows knit together with concern. “What is it?”

“Mr. Connelly,” Ruby repeated, clearly struggling for control. “There...there’s a gentleman here. He wishes to...he wishes to see Miss Tara.”

“At this hour?” Grant snorted. “And does this gentleman—who has the audacity to come to my home at—” he raised his arm, shoved back the cuff of his custom tailored white shirt and checked his watch “—just after nine o’clock in the evening—have a name?”

A preemptive anticipation had Tara's heart suddenly pounding. Her breath inexplicably clogged in her throat as she rose jerkily to her feet.

If possible, Ruby turned a whiter shade of pale. Her gaze shot to Tara, apologetic, even a little alarmed, and yet guardedly hopeful as she opened the great oak door wider.

A man stepped into the room, a shadow in the doorway, a ghost from the past.

"Good Lord," Tara heard her father murmur in shock and incredulity as Michael Paige's lean, athletic frame filled the doorway.

Tara shook her head, disbelieving, yet wanting, with everything that was in her, to believe. She touched her fingers to her lips, tears brimming as the man's somber gray gaze sought and found hers.

"Michael."

Her father rose to his feet behind her; his strong hands gripped her shoulders, steadying her. But all she could see, all she could feel was Michael.

Blood roared through her ears. Her heart pounded like thunder—in her chest, in her throat. Her legs grew wobbly and weak. Tears stung in a hot, burning flooding of emotions.

Through the watery mist she stared as her husband stood there, his eyes—those flinty gray eyes—warm on hers, unblinking on hers.

He took a step forward and caught her hands in his. She cried

out at the shockingly familiar feel of his fingers grasping hers. His grip was hard, his hands callused. Warm. Real. Alive.

She stared down at their clasped hands, aware that hers were shaking, and she studied the strength and the scars—some she recognized, some she did not.

“Tara.”

She raised her head at the gruff need in his voice, watched his eyes as he searched her face, then cast an unspoken plea at her father. Her father squeezed her shoulders protectively, hesitated, then with reluctance, dropped his hands.

With his gaze fast on hers, Michael pulled her into his embrace.

She fell into his arms on a sob, clung to him desperately, wept without shame—for him, for herself, for everything they’d lost.

He was here. My God, he was alive. Strong, warm and real. He smelled—oh, he smelled like Michael. She buried her face in his neck, needing more assurance that it was him—really him—and not some horrible trick of imagination and misery and guilt.

His hands roamed her back with a tender urgency, a familiar intimacy that said he, too, was struggling with the reality. His heart beat wild and strong against her breast as he whispered her name against her hair.

She pulled back so she could see his face, to cement into fact that it was really Michael.

The man she had loved.

The man she had asked the courts to declare legally dead.

The man she planned to divorce.

Two

Michael buried his face in Tara's hair, wallowed in the silk and honey scent of her. It seemed like forever since he'd felt the sweet press of her breasts against his chest, her slim hips aligned with his. It seemed like a thousand forevers—and yet it felt like yesterday and the hundreds of yesterdays they'd shared.

He'd seen everything from shock to joy, disbelief to denial, hope to love in her eyes before she'd flown into his arms. He didn't care that her reaction had been knee-jerk, maybe even involuntary. The only thing he cared about was that he was finally holding her.

“Michael...son.”

He heard Grant say his name a second time before he reluctantly lifted his head, searched Tara's eyes. He touched his thumb to the aristocratic arch of her cheekbone, smiled gently, then transferred his attention to her father.

The man looked shaken. He appeared to be in as much shock as Tara and Ruby.

Son. Grant had never called him son during the five years he'd been married to Tara. Michael strongly suspected he never would—not when he had steady legs under him. The word had slipped out, a figure of speech, an indicator of just how much his appearance had unnerved the great Grant Connelly.

“Hello, sir.”

“Michael, how— What...” Grant trailed off, held up a hand, a gesture of utter confusion from a man used to being in total control.

“I know.” Michael read the questions in Grant’s eyes. “I know. You have questions.”

He looked down at Tara, at her violet eyes, misty now with that edgy mix of disbelief and shock.

“You all have questions.”

He couldn’t stop looking at her. He wanted to look into her eyes forever. He wanted to take her somewhere. Make love to her. Tell her all the things he’d been dying to tell her since he recovered his memory two weeks ago. But there was more, much more that he’d missed.

Linking his hand with Tara’s, needing to touch her, to be touched by her, he looked down at the little boy asleep on the floor.

His child.

He swallowed back emotions so consuming and complex he couldn’t put a name to them, blinked back the burn of tears that blindsided him. He did not want to give in to them. Not here. Not in front of Grant Connelly.

“May I?” His words came out gruff and thick with the knot of emotion that clogged his throat.

A long hesitation, then Tara’s voice, barely a whisper. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

From the corner of his vision, he saw her touch a hand to her

mouth, saw a tear leak down her cheek as her father wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders.

He bent down, picked up the stout little bundle and straightened, laying him against his chest. The child snuffled, a sighing, baby sound of contentment, then snuggled against him in his sleep, fearless of this stranger who was his father.

Soft. He was so soft and so sturdy and so vulnerable. He smelled of powder and little-boy smells. The silk of his hair caught in the stubble of Michael's beard; the heat of his hearty little body warmed Michael in ways he'd never thought possible.

"I'd heard that having a child could change a person," he murmured, unaware that he'd spoken aloud.

Something had definitely changed inside him the day he'd seen his son's picture in that tabloid. Changed him enough that it had shocked his memory back. He'd discovered then and there that there was nothing he wanted more than to reclaim his life.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, fighting with his emotions, offering an apology. "I wasn't prepared for this."

The burst of love was so profound he felt the pulse of it thrum through his body in tandem with his heartbeat. He struggled to collect himself, but lost the battle and turned his back on the room. He pressed his face to the sweetness of Brandon's neck, giving in to a sense of longing and loss so absolute that he couldn't stop the tears.

When Emma Connelly hurriedly entered the room on a surprised intake of breath, he was hardly aware that she'd

joined them. He was only remotely aware of Ruby—crusty and sometimes crotchety Ruby—dabbing a tissue to her eyes.

“Michael.”

Tara’s voice was gentle, her hand on his shoulder supportive and full of compassion. It brought him back, reminded him of other obligations.

“Would you...would you like to take him upstairs and put him to bed?”

She understood. He needed some time. He needed some space to compose himself.

He squeezed his eyes tight and nodded. Without a word, he turned and followed her out of the room.

Grant regarded him with granite-hard eyes as he passed him by. Emma touched his arm, squeezed gently. Ruby grinned like a goose and finally made him smile.

He was back. He was home. And nothing—not Grant Connelly, not a legal divorce action and not a man by the name of John Parker—was going to keep him from claiming his wife and becoming a father to his child.

A half hour later Michael was back in the family room. If not completely composed, he was at least determined to field Grant Connelly’s questions.

He stood in front of the fire, felt the heat of it through his pant leg along with the burn of expensive liquor in his belly. He’d braced one hand on the mantel, wrapped the other around the snifter of cognac Ruby had thrust at him with a “drink it, you’re

gonna need it” arch of her brow.

She’d been right. All eyes were on him. The adrenaline rush that had gotten him this far had ebbed, but the liquor had steadied him.

“I’m sorry. I know this is a shock showing up this way.” He met Grant’s hard gaze, then Emma’s. She smiled in encouragement.

“I ran through a hundred scenarios. Tried to figure out a way to make this play out easier for you. Finally, I decided the only thing to do was come over here tonight.

“This has to be very hard.” He glanced from face to face. “For all of you.”

“This isn’t hard, Michael.” Emma Connelly sat on the sofa beside Tara, holding her daughter’s hand in her lap. “Losing you was hard.”

Sincerity shone in her kind blue eyes. It made him smile. Grant Connelly’s wife loved her husband very much. So much that thirty-five years ago she’d turned her back on the small European country of Altaria, abdicated her rights as princess and moved across the Atlantic to Chicago to marry a man her family regarded as a crass, American upstart. The press still played on the fairy-tale elements of the story—and on the creation of Grant Connelly’s dynasty of wealth and power, as well as the lives of his many and colorful children. The Connelly dynasty not only made money for its own, it continued to provide a lucrative source of revenue for the paparazzi.

In addition to loving Grant, Emma Connelly also loved her

children—all of them. Tara was no exception. Emma hadn't always been in Michael's corner.

Once she'd understood that Michael loved Tara, however, Emma had done what she could to soften Grant's anger and resentment. She did what she could now. Even though Grant's back was to the room, Michael felt the subtle waves of his anger. He'd expected no less.

With his feet braced for battle, Grant stared through the French doors that lead to the east terrace. Finally, dramatically, he turned to face Michael.

"I went to Ecuador, Michael. Many of us went—Daniel, Justin, Rafe, Seth—anyone who could manage it. We searched for days. Days, Michael, and came home convinced that no one could have survived that derailment."

"I seriously doubt that anyone did." Michael lifted his gaze from his cognac to Grant's steel-gray eyes that demanded an explanation. Then he dropped his first bomb. "But I wasn't on that train."

He scanned the faces in the room during the long moment it took for them to digest that shocking piece of information.

"What do you mean you weren't on the train? That's why you went down there," Grant insisted when he found his voice. "You were going to inspect... What was it?" He waved a hand through the air, searching his memory. "A new source of exotic wood. Something about a potential supply for Essential Designs."

"That's right." Michael nodded. "The company had sent me

down for that reason. I'd flown the first leg to Dallas then on to Quito. And I was booked for passage on that train."

Michael looked at Tara. Upstairs, in Brandon's bedroom, she'd hung back even after he'd pulled himself together. He'd wanted to wrap her in his arms again, kiss her until they were both breathless, make love to her until they were both senseless.

While he wanted all of those things, after their initial embrace, she'd withdrawn into silence. Even now, she watched him with a suspended sort of wonder and a wariness that would have angered him if he hadn't understood what a shock this was for her.

Obviously she needed time to deal with her feelings for him. It was enough to deal with the fact that he was alive. He didn't figure she was ready for the whole story of his disappearance, either, so he cushioned it as best as he could.

"I had an overnight layover in Quito. I had time to kill so I decided to see a little of the city." He stared at his cognac, then at Tara. "Turned out it wasn't such a good time to be out on my own. Essentially what happened was that I got mugged."

When Tara closed her eyes, he was glad he left out the part about being so angry and hurt over their parting words at O'Hare that he'd gotten blind, stinking drunk. He hadn't been sight-seeing. He'd been wallowing in self-pity, nursing his hurt from one dive to the other, effectively making himself easy pickings for the gutter rats that had attacked him.

"Oh, my dear child." Emma's eyes glimmered with tears. "You were hurt. Hurt terribly, weren't you?"

“There’s no easy way to say this.” He looked away, then back. “They worked me over pretty good. Stole everything I had on me, including my ID. As close as I can piece it together, they must have driven me out of the city, dumped me in the jungle and left me for dead.”

Even Grant winced at the last statement.

“But you didn’t die.”

“No.” He met Grant’s eyes, gave him the benefit of the doubt that he saw more shock than disappointment. “I didn’t die.”

He tossed back the rest of his drink, let out a long breath.

“I know this is hard to swallow. The rest is even harder. Long story short, a man by the name of Vincente Santiago found me on the other side of the mountain range. He and his wife, Maria, nursed me back to health. Maria is a healer.”

Michael read the speculation on the faces in the room and knew that his voice had warmed as he talked of the two people who had not only saved his life, but had taken him in as one of their own. There would be time enough later to explain his special relationship with the Santiagos.

“You’ve been recovering all this time?”

Grant again. Michael thought grimly that he’d have made a good D.A.

“No. It was... I don’t know...maybe six months before I recovered physically from the injuries.”

“Six months? That was eighteen months ago. Why the hell didn’t you come back when you were well?” Grant had moved

past stunned and was edging well into anger.

“Why didn’t you at least contact us? Tara was half out of her mind with grief. You had to know we were all worried!”

“Grant, if I could have contacted you, I would have. But the problem was I didn’t know.” He met each pair of eyes, lingered, at last, on Tara’s. “I didn’t know you were worried. I didn’t know anything. I took some pretty good shots to the head in the beating.”

He touched his fingers to the scar on his temple, unconscious of the gesture.

“When I finally came around, I didn’t know up from down. I didn’t know how I’d gotten there, didn’t know where I’d come from. Didn’t know my own name.”

“Amnesia,” Ruby muttered. “Lord above.”

She marched with single-minded intent to the bar, uncorked a bottle and helped herself to a shot of her employer’s very old and very pricey brandy.

“Yeah, amnesia,” Michael echoed. “And you thought it only happened in the movies.” Hell, he’d thought it only happened in the movies.

“Two years. Two years, Michael? You expect us to believe you just wandered around down there for two years not knowing who you were?”

“Grant,” Emma admonished gently. “The boy has been through a harrowing ordeal. For goodness sake. Let him finish.”

Michael smiled a thank-you to Emma then addressed Grant.

“As I said, I was a good six months recovering, and learning Spanish,” he added with a tight smile. “The Santiagos spoke very little English at that time. The fact that I did was my only link to my identity. I figured I was American, but it didn’t narrow things down much.

“And I didn’t wander,” he added as Grant’s frown deepened. “The Santiagos took me in. I worked for them. And then I worked with them, as a partner in their lumber business.” There was much more to that story but Michael figured it could wait for another time.

“When...when did you remember?” Tara asked, her brows pinched together. She’d pulled her hands away from Emma’s and locked them tightly together in her lap.

“Two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks?” Grant’s tone and expression made it clear he was still at odds with the story. “What? You just suddenly woke up one morning and remembered you had another life?”

“Look, Mr. Connelly, I know this is hard to accept. Hell, I still have trouble sorting it all out.”

“Just take your time, dear.”

Michael smiled at Emma again, grateful for her support.

“What did prompt the return of your memory?” Tara asked.

“You,” he said without hesitation.

Her face drained to pale.

“You did,” he repeated. “You have to know that like the Kennedys or the Trumps, the Connelys are American royalty to

the rest of the world. What you do, where you go makes the news—even the international news.

“I was in a Quito equivalent of a supermarket.” He paused, rocked, as he was always rocked when he thought of that day. “I was checking out and spotted this trashy tabloid.

“Your face—” He stopped again, drew a bracing breath. “Your face and Brandon’s were splattered all over the front page, along with the announcement of your engagement to John Parker. My picture was there, too—complete with the gory details of my death.”

“My God.” Emma rose shakily and joined Ruby by the sideboard. Ruby poured her a glass of brandy, refilled her own. “How horrible for you.”

“Horrible? Yes and no. I’ve got to tell you, it scared the hell out of me at first. The rush of memories it triggered was staggering. Everything just came slamming back—I apologize for the expression—like a train wreck.” Along with an excruciating pain in his head.

“I passed out cold. Must have been quite a sight,” he added with a slight lift of the corner of his mouth. “When I came to, I was laid out flat in the aisle along with the contents of three sacks of groceries, and I started to remember. Everything.”

He looked pointedly at Tara, knew by the expression on her face that she was thinking about their last conversation. If possible, her face grew even paler.

“I suspect that right now you’re all feeling something close to

what I felt that day,” he continued. “It...it felt like I’d been hit by a two-by-four.”

He touched his fingers to his temple again. A sharp, intermittent pain that had become his recurrent friend stabbed through his head.

“Michael!” Tara shot to her feet, raced to his side and touched his arm. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” He shook it off, made himself focus, smile for her. “Just a little reminder of the past two years.”

“A long two years,” Grant put in. He looked from Tara to Michael, appeared to be not altogether pleased that she’d rushed to his side. “I can’t tell you how sincerely glad we all are that you’re alive.”

“But,” Michael said, offering the opportunity for the other shoe to fall.

Emma looked pained and apologetic.

“But it’s been two years, Michael. Two years,” Grant restated for emphasis. “We’ve heard nothing. Nothing.” He paused dramatically for emphasis. “Life has gone on. Tara has moved on.”

Michael watched Tara while her father spoke. Despite what Grant maintained, Michael could see that she hadn’t moved anywhere. Not yet. And if he had anything to say about it, the only direction she was going to move was toward him.

He was back. And he was prepared to fight. For his wife. For his son. For his marriage. It wasn’t a battle he was prepared to

start tonight, though, not with Grant Connelly present.

“With due respect, sir,” he began as he met the older man’s eyes. “I don’t think that’s a decision Tara’s made yet. And when she does, that decision will be between her and me.”

It was the deepest part of the night, the hour reserved for lovers. Moonlight danced across tall walls cloaked in ivory damask. Fine linen sheets tangled and slid to the foot of the bed in the second-floor bedroom of Lake Shore Manor where Tara Connelly Paige slept.

The sheer ecru silk of her gown twisted around her hips; a delicate sheen of perspiration misted her throat and her brow. The slender fingers of her right hand clutched a cool spindle of the brass headboard as she moaned in frustration, ached for release.

Her left hand lingered at her breast in an unconscious caress. She dreamed of her lover’s mouth there, suckling, adoring. She dreamed of Michael, his gray eyes smoky with desire, his broad shoulders blocking the moonlight, his strong arms caging her in as he braced himself above her.

She sighed his name, arched her back and rode with the wild and stunning pleasure that he gave and took and demanded. His lean hips pumped into hers, his body filled hers as he enticed her to go with him to that place where sensation ruled and passion promised to make her whole again, make her real again, as she hadn’t been real since he’d left her.

“Michael,” she whimpered and, in her sleep, ran her hand over

her ribs, across her abdomen, down to the place that ached for him, throbbed for him. “Michael...”

She sat up straight in bed, wrenched out of sleep by her own cries. Her breath slogged out in serrated gasps. She looked wildly around the room.

It was not the apartment she had shared with Michael.

It was her room in Lake Shore Manor.

Where she'd slept. Alone. For two long years.

A dream.

It had only been a dream.

She collapsed to her back on the bed, threw an arm over her forehead and willed her heart to settle, her breath to steady. And then she lay there in the dark of night, in a silence disrupted only by her ragged breaths. Aching for him. Burning for him.

Michael wasn't a dream. He was alive. She'd seen him tonight, talked to him, touched him. And right now she wanted him so badly she hurt.

She missed lying with him in his bed. Missed the length of him, the strength of him, the heat of his mouth, the stroke of his hands.

She didn't have to miss him anymore.

Staring hopelessly at the ceiling, she trembled with the need to call him, to ask him to come to her. To make love to her.

The ache intensified to pain.

It would be so easy.

And so wrong.

The tears came then. Tears of relief that he lived. Tears of grief that she hadn't let herself shed since the day, two years ago, when the news had arrived with its ghastly presumption of death. Tears for all they'd had, for all they'd lost.

Michael was alive and she was so glad. And yet the one thing he wanted couldn't happen.

He'd made it clear. He was determined to pick up where they'd left off. She dragged her hands through her hair, drawing on her resolve. That couldn't happen. She could not resume her life with him. She couldn't go through the pain of loving him again. Loving Michael hurt too much. Loving Michael had always hurt too much.

She closed her eyes, rolled to her side and hugged her arms to her breasts. And then she hid in the night and clung to the one absolute that overshadowed his miraculous reappearance.

On this point she could not waiver. For reasons that only she could understand, she was going through with the divorce. She had to. She had to because she knew what no one else did: She was a fake. A fraud.

The image the media and even her family held of Tara Connelly as a headstrong, independent, gutsy and self-assured woman was a lie. A complete sham.

The real Tara Connelly was a wimp. She wasn't strong enough to do much more than drift through life with her emotions tightly under wraps. She wasn't equipped to do much more than heed her survival instincts that warned her to stay under the radar,

to exist with as little involvement as possible. Which meant she wasn't capable of surviving another attempt at loving Michael Paige.

And as she lay in the dark, fighting the want, denying the need, she was ashamed of the knowledge that the real Tara Connelly was too afraid to even try.

Three

The next morning Michael started his day waiting for Tara's brother Brett at an affluent Lake Shore Drive condominium complex. He stood in the visitor's parking lot at the address Brett had given him, leaning against the fender of a rented BMW.

Belmont Harbor spread out before him like a water-color of sun, surf and sails. Pricey pleasure crafts rocked in their moorings; silver-white sails dotted the relatively calm waters of the bay. He felt a million miles away from the lush jungles of Ecuador, even farther from the projects in the rough part of the city where he'd grown up, although the distance in miles was under ten.

"And how many miles do you have to go to get your wife back?" he asked under his breath and thought about everything that had happened last night.

Tara had changed. He didn't think he was wrong about that. Seeing him out of the blue when he was supposed to be dead had been a hell of a shock for her. But there was something... something else that he'd sensed. He hadn't been able to put his finger on it. But he would. He knew Tara. Knew her better than anyone, including John Parker, could ever know her.

A car door slammed behind him. He turned to see Brett Connelly walking toward him, a smile of disbelief and welcome spreading across his face. Michael grasped the hand Brett

extended then felt himself pulled into a back-pounding embrace.

“I’ll be damned.” Brett stood back, gave Michael an assessing once-over with smiling blue eyes. “It really is you. Son of a gun, I thought I’d seen the last of your ugly face. I can’t tell you how glad I am that I was wrong.”

Michael had always liked the Connellys’ youngest son. Both Brett and his twin brother, Drew, were outgoing and friendly. Brett had also had enough of the rebel in him to appreciate Michael’s wild streak.

“Well, just goes to show,” Michael said, grinning, “nothing’s ever over till it’s over.”

As he’d been leaving the Connellys’ last night, Emma had asked him where he was staying. He’d sensed that she’d been on the verge of inviting him to move out of his hotel and into Lake Shore Manor when Grant had thrown her a murderous glare.

“Call Brett in the morning,” Emma had said instead, deferring to her husband’s unspoken command. Then she’d written Brett’s phone number on a slip of paper and pressed it into his hand with an affectionate squeeze.

“Brett’s a married man now,” she’d said, beaming brightly. “And a new daddy. He and his wife, Elena, just moved into their new house. The last I knew they hadn’t yet sold or sublet their condo. It should accommodate you nicely until you’re more settled.”

Speaking of settled, it looked like life had done well by Brett. He looked good, really good, as he grinned at Michael part in

disbelief, part in pleasure.

“If Mom hadn’t filled me in with a 6:00 a.m. phone call, I’d have flat-out keeled over when you called.”

“It’s a shock, I know.”

“The best kind. Come on.” With a hand on his shoulder, Brett steered Michael toward the front entrance of the building. “Let me show you the condo. If you like it, it’s yours.”

“I appreciate this, Brett.”

“That’s what family’s for—and you’ve always been family, even though it may not have seemed that way at times.”

Inexplicably touched by Brett’s warmth, Michael acknowledged his overture with a grin. “Okay, brother, fill me in on this new family of yours.”

Brett did, with a huge smile and a beaming pride that told Michael how happy he was.

“Now fill me in on John Parker,” Michael said after congratulating Brett on his good fortune. He knew nothing about Parker but what he’d read in the tabloids that had linked him to Tara. Sensationalized news stories were no substitute for Brett’s take on the situation.

“What am I up against here?” Michael asked.

“That’s one thing I always admired about you, Paige.” Brett sobered as he punched in a security code to access the elevator. “You cut right to the chase. Good to see some things never change.

“Parker’s a nice enough guy,” Brett continued after a

thoughtful pause. The elevator doors slid open.

“He’s quite a bit older than Tara. She doesn’t love him,” he added with a contemplative scowl as they entered the elevator. The car rose in hushed precision to the top floor. “I take it you’ve seen her.”

“Last night.”

Michael had to force the words as he digested Brett’s news. Tara didn’t love Parker. The relief nearly sent him to his knees. He hadn’t realized until that very moment how much the possibility had been eating at him. It would have made a difference if she’d loved Parker. Michael would like to think he’d have been able to be a man and walk away, knowing she was happy.

He drew a bracing breath and followed Brett with a lighter step to the far end of a long hall and what Michael had decided were the penthouse suites.

Brett slipped a key in the lock and shoved open the door. They walked through the airy foyer and into a spacious living room. A bank of floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded the room on three sides.

Brett strode across the room and with the push of a button, opened the vertical blinds. The view of Lake Michigan from twelve stories up was breathtaking.

“Nice,” Michael said, taking in the dining area at the far end of the living room and the kitchen just beyond it.

“Bedrooms are this way.” Brett nodded toward the hall then

headed in that direction. “Two, and two baths. Oh, and the basement garage has assigned spaces.”

“How is she?” Michael asked without preamble.

Brett met Michael’s eyes without blinking, seemed to consider how much he should reveal, then just let it go.

“She’s not Tara the Terror anymore. After you ‘died’ the old Tara disappeared.

“It’s not good,” Brett added grimly. “She’s too quiet, too... I don’t know. It seems like she’s just drifting. Oh, she loves Brandon and protects him like a mama bear but she’s lost all of her spunk, you know? Hell, I can’t even get a good rise out of her anymore and you know how she likes to argue.”

Brett shook his head, like he was trying to pin things down himself.

“I think...well, my gut instinct tells me that she agreed to marry John—you’ve probably already figured out that Parker’s one of Dad’s associates—because he can provide stability for Brandon.”

Michael clenched his jaw.

“It damn near killed her to lose you,” Brett continued, his eyes on Michael. “Brandon seems to be the only thing she really lives for. She just plays at her job at City Beat.”

“City Beat?”

“One of Chicago’s latest and greatest forays into the publishing industry.” They walked down the hall, Brett talking as he opened bedroom doors, showed Michael the closets.

“It’s one of those trendy, upscale magazines—fashion, interior design, city living, that sort of thing. Tara’s a consulting editor for the interior design segments. Part-time,” he added. “I don’t think she’s particularly passionate about it. It’s more like it fills the time for her.”

“Interior design, huh?” Michael poked his head into the guest bedroom.

Tara had studied interior design at the University of Chicago. He was glad she was able to do something with her degree. He’d insisted that she go to college even though it was all he could do to pay the rent and put food on the table during those early days of their marriage.

“Lots of rooms to fill here,” he said then met Brett’s thoughtful gaze. They exchanged a conspiratorial look. “Looks pretty bare.”

“What you need is a good interior decorator,” Brett said with a grin.

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“Look,” Brett said, suddenly sober, “I know things were a little rocky for you and Tara before Ecuador. I don’t know what happened between you two and I don’t want to know. That’s your business. But she’s my sister and I love her. You want her back? Then you see to it that you make her happy. All right?”

“I want her back. And I want her happy.”

“That’s good enough for me. Anything I can do to help?”

“Nope, but thanks for the offer. This is something I need to handle on my own.”

And it was something he intended to handle—as soon as he figured out how to convince his wife that what was right between them five years ago was something he could make right again.

Michael made the fifteen-minute drive from the condo to Lake Shore Manor in record time. He was still having a little trouble readjusting to the Chicago race pace. Time stood still in parts of Ecuador. Many times during the past two years he'd very much enjoyed being a part of those time warps. Since returning to Chicago, he'd actually found he missed them. He'd missed Tara more.

After the gatekeeper buzzed him in, he pulled up in the circular drive, climbed out of the BMW and stared at the classic Georgian mansion that was located in the city's most fashionable neighborhood. A calm settled over him along with a comfortable realization. He wasn't the same man Tara had wanted to divorce two years ago. That man had been hungry for power, determined to succeed, both intimidated and angered by this palace and all it represented.

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