

Chapter 1 of No Place Like Home
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"That woman's not fit to raise my grandson!" The old man slammed his palm down on the mahogany desk in front of him.

Sam Ryan shifted in the ancient leather chair on the one-who'd-been-summoned side of the desk. So much for pointing out the old man's son had chosen to *wed that woman*.

"As for Michael's good judgment," the old man growled, bracing both hands against the broad desktop and leaning toward Sam. "She seduced him. Trapped him into marriage."

Strike two. If the old man was implying she'd gotten pregnant to force a proposal from Mickey, then the pregnancy would have been a record at thirteen months post wedding.

Not that Sam was going to make the mistake of pointing out yet another flaw in the old man's reasoning. He had nearly a lifetime of being reminded how futile it was to argue with Stuart Carrington. Twenty-five years, to be exact, since he'd first sat in this chair under the scrutiny of an uncle who had it within his power to decide his future. He still felt every bit the six-year-old boy he'd been then.

And that brought Sam to the question that had nagged him ever since his uncle had summoned him from the banished lands abroad. Why welcome the family black sheep back into the fold now? It couldn't be to replace Mickey. Hell, Mickey had died over two years ago. If the old man wanted a replacement son, he'd have called him home a hell of a lot sooner.

Not that Sam wanted to replace Mickey...not that he could. Michael—Mickey to Sam—had been the big brother he'd always wanted—needed, giving him the sense of family his globetrotting mother hadn't and buffering him from his uncle's wrath when Sam screwed up...which had been most of the time. He'd idolized Mickey—loved him. The one thing his uncle-slash-surrogate father and he had in common. They both loved Mickey.

No, Stuart Carrington would never replace his son with his sister's mongrel whelp. But a grandson...

Sam sighed in resignation, having known deep down all along the reason he'd been summoned. It was the specifics he didn't know. "Why am I here?"

His uncle's flinty eyes narrowed at him. "I need you."

Sam's heart lurched in his chest before his brain could intercept the reflex. To be *needed* by the only father figure he'd ever known fed into the hunger of the lost boy still inside him. Yet, at the same time, he hated the notion because he knew whatever his uncle asked of him, he would do.

#

So here he was, some three hundred miles north of Chicago sitting in an empty parking lot under a darkened restaurant sign, the Ducati bike engine rumbling with a throaty purr between his legs. Another perk of doing the old man's bidding—getting the keys to whatever vehicle he wanted from his uncle's priceless collection, along with the promise that when he finished the job and headed back to Paris, the bike went with him. But, did he love the bike enough to ruin a woman's life? That was the one question that had sent him riding aimlessly along country roads rather than sticking to the highway and its direct route to his objective.

Sam gazed up at his destination, the white-washed farmhouse gilded by a setting sun. Its multi-gabled upper floors cast soft shadows across the scalloped shingles of the inviting wraparound porch. Beneath the overhang, warm yellow light filtered from the curtained windows of the Victorian era farmhouse's first floor. Even the sidewalk was flower-lined. Norman

Rockwell couldn't have painted a more idyllic scene. Hardly the setting he'd expected of a gold-digger.

But appearances could be deceiving. He knew.

For all the mischief and decadence of his thirty plus years, for all the running away from his uncle he'd done, what he truly coveted was family acceptance. Yup, all he had to do was dig up some dirt on a woman who'd never done him any wrong and he'd be back in Uncle Stuart's good graces.

He flicked off the bike's engine, dismounted and stepped out from under the free-standing sign above him that read *The Farmhouse*. Appearances indeed could be deceiving, he thought, as he gazed into the warm glow coming from the windows of a home turned restaurant.

With his Ducati silver and red helmet tucked under his arm, Sam climbed the broad front steps. A figure moved beyond the first floor curtains, a distinctly female figure. Mickey's widow cleaning up after a day of diners? He hesitated ever so briefly at the top of the porch stairs, doubt still niggling at him. Would Mickey approve of what he was about to do?

He would if it saved his son from a mother who used the boy to gain her own end. Stuart was certain she was holding his grandson as collateral against the inheritance he denied her. And ransom had been the kindest of the words Stuart had used to describe his daughter-in-law's refusal to give the boy up to his care—his very money-advantaged care.

Sam stood there facing the leaded glass panel of the front door—facing his dilemma. Was he really doing this for Mickey's family or for himself? Mickey, after all, had chosen her—married her—fathered a child with her; and Mickey had never been fooled by womanly enchantments.

Then again, perhaps he could do right for both family and self. What harm would there be in visiting Mickey's wife and kid if there was no dirt to dig up? After all, Uncle Stu's army of detectives hadn't ferreted out anything he could use in court. What were the odds he, the family screw-up, would find anything?

And if he did?

Mickey would want his kid protected. The kid was all that mattered.

Still, Sam opened his silver windbreaker with its red Ducati emblem and let in the balmy breath of the summer evening. As if anything could warm him—make him feel less reptilian about introducing himself to his cousin-in-law as a friend.

"Simon Legree had more heart," he muttered and raised his hand to knock on the door.

Yet something stilled his hand from completing the motion. Mickey, who'd raised a child with this woman for two years? Mickey, who'd emailed him pictures of a happy family and written endlessly of his love for them? Was the memory Mickey's way of trying to give him one more chance to do the right thing—the honorable thing? And was the right thing to *leave*? Stuart's needs be damned?

Sam backed away from the door. That's when he heard the clatter of toenails coming fast toward him from the side porch—when the vibration of heavy footfalls reverberated up his legs from the old floorboards. He turned toward the stairs just as the biggest dog he'd ever seen skidded around the porch corner, ears flying, jowls flapping, strings of drool trailing from a fang filled mouth.

He flung his helmet at the black and white blur of a dog coming at him, turned, and threw his body against the front door. But the door didn't budge. The next thing he knew, he was plastered against the leaded glass panel of the door and a pair of massive paws had him pinned by the shoulders.

Dixie Rae Carrington stepped into the entry hall just as the guy she'd spotted prowling her porch hit the door. With cheek and lips smeared across the glass, he didn't look so menacing. In fact, he looked downright comical.

A glance the length of the door's oval glass insert and she amended her opinion yet again. He had on a pair of jeans faded out in all the right places. Yessiree. Faded and polished thin in the very best of places...those jeans. Set the mind of a widow to pondering on activities she hadn't partaken of in a couple years. That's what those tight, faded jeans did to her.

Too bad the fellow wearing them had been prowling around her front porch. No good ever came from a skulking man.

Or maybe it had been the motorcycle helmet he'd been carrying that had her thinking ill of this comical-looking man wearing decidedly sexy jeans. Though the helmet had been an innocuous silver color. That's what had caught her attention first; the light reflecting off the helmet as the man had skulked past her dining room windows. What kind of man wore a silver motorcycle helmet? Not a Hell's Angel. That was for sure.

Still, any guy lurking about had to be trouble. So much for that thick mop of chocolate-brown hair making her fingers itch for a feel.

Then again, his big brown eye was huge with a plea for help. And was that Ben on the end of Bear's leash shouting for the dog to get down? Blast that kid, but he was getting good at giving her the slip. She'd better get out there and rescue the stranger from dog and four and a half-year-old.

#

An image of blond hair and buxom shapeliness imprinted upon Sam Ryan's brain as his head hit the glass. But the fact that his uncle's Dobermans were trained to bite chunks out of trespassers on command, and whatever had pinned him to this door was easily three times the size of any Doberman, prevented him from fully enjoying the view. Besides, the shapely blonde had just fled what appeared to be an entry hall⁸ and whoever controlled this doggie King Kong sounded suspiciously like a kid.

Sam chanced a glance over his shoulder. A biscuit-scented muzzle huffed in his face and a huge, pink tongue sliced through the saliva strings and over glistening fangs. He shouldn't have dropped his helmet. Better high-impact plastic jammed between those canine teeth than any part of him.

"Nice doggy," Sam croaked.

"Get down, Toto," cried a child-like voice as the hound from hell pawed Sam's shoulders. He'd be two inches shorter by the time anyone hauled the beast off him and, at five foot ten, he couldn't afford to lose any height.

Sam squinted past the gleaming fangs. Yup. It was a kid swinging back and forth on the handler end of a dog leash like a midget Quasi Moto. What responsible adult put a pint-sized kid in charge of the jolly giants of dogs?

An unfit mother?

That's what Uncle Stuart had sent him to ferret out. That's why he was now on the porch of an old farmhouse turned restaurant along a highway in North-eastern Wisconsin about to get his jugular torn out by a dog big enough to saddle and ride.

"Auntie Em," the kid shouted. "Help me, Auntie Em."

Auntie Em? Toto? Either he'd taken a wrong turn out of Chicago and wound up in Kansas, or Cousin Mickey's widow had relatives in residence that his uncle's detectives had missed.

Arruf, went Hellhound in his ear.

"Shhh, Toto," the kid pleaded. "Icky witch'll hear."

A witch, too? Make that a wrong turn to Oz.

"Bear, quiet," commanded a decidedly feminine voice from behind them.

"Quiet?" Sam croaked out, straining to see over his shoulder and through the droopy jowls of Toto, or Bear, or whatever the dog's name was, at this 'Auntie Em'. He was about to be turned into kibble and all the woman could say was *quiet?*

"How about getting this beast off me?" he demanded.

"Bear means no harm," the languid female voice responded, nearer this time. "He's just a puppy."

"Some puppy," Sam grumbled, trying to dodge the huge tongue lapping up the side of his head. "You should post a warning sign. *Beware of greeting by big, rambunctious puppy.*"

"Bear, down," the woman commanded in a voice smooth as a thirty-year old single malt liquor, closer this time.

The weight of the dog's paws lifted from Sam's shoulders. But the hot breath against the back of his neck warned him the dog hadn't gone far. Cautiously, Sam turned, faced the Godzilla of Great Danes and...

Angel of all angels.

She stood behind the dog, just out of reach...the golden-haired vision he'd glimpsed in the entry hall. An ankle-length skirt draped her womanly hips and a white, tailored blouse was buttoned to her throat. But the frilly bib-apron cinched to her narrow waist defined every inch of her female ripeness. Those curves made every woman his Uncle Stuart had tried to marry him off to seem anemic by comparison.

Auntie Em?

The woman placed a small, porcelain-pale hand on the kid's shoulder. "Go in the house, Ben."

Sam's attention snapped to the boy. Ben? As in Benjamin Carrington, only grandson of Stuart Carrington?

As in, Cousin Mickey's son?

"But Toto an' me gotta get to the Em'rald City 'fore Icky Witch catches us," the kid protested.

Maybe Uncle Stu hadn't overstated his case this time. Under the mother's care, the poor kid had clearly developed an identity crisis.

The mother's care. Sam thumped the back of his head against the leaded glass door insert. If Benjamin thought he was skipping along the *yellow brick road* and *Toto* was really Bear, of course Auntie Em must be the nefarious Dixie Rae Carrington whom his uncle had sent him to expose as an unfit mother and extortionist.

"Into the house," she said in a tone that brooked no argument. "You know you're not supposed to play outside after dark."

Okay. So, she didn't *let* the kid stay out this late.

"Ah, gee," the kid protested.

"Go. But leave Bear."

Leave Bear? Hellhound's abandoned leash slapped across Sam's toes, reminding him he still had a dog the size of a mini-van holding him at bay. The Dane's ears swiveled in the direction of a door slamming at the back of the house. Now it was just him, Hellhound, and—

"So," the woman who was no doubt the kid's mother drawled in the flirtatious timbre of the late, lusty Mae West, "What are you doing snooping around my porch?"

"Looking to see if the restaurant is open?" Sam ventured. A voice like that could distract a man from the worst of circumstances...or most stalwart of plans.

"Sign's not lit." She nodded toward the parking lot where his bike stood alone beneath the towering restaurant sign. "That usually means closed."

"The dining room lights are still on," he returned hopefully.

"Just a few," she leveled and cocked her head to one side, setting in motion the soft curls that had come loose from her upswept do. The movement stirred the air, carrying the aroma of fresh-baked bread and spiced apples to him, a distraction he couldn't afford.

He forced a smile over the Dane's pricked ears. "How about calling off your dog and we talk things over?"

She planted her hands on her hips. "Whether I call off my dog depends on whether or not you're a process server."

Process server? What the hell? No wonder she was in no hurry to call off the dog.

He shook his head. "I'm no—"

"We string up process servers in this neck of the woods," she leveled back at him, not a hint of flirtation in her tone now.

"I'm not a process server. I'm Mickey's er Michael's cousin...Sam, Sam Ryan," he rushed out.

She reached around the dog, caught Sam's chin between her fingers, and tipped his face into the light shafting over his shoulder.

"I know we've never met," he hastily added.

"I've seen pictures," she said, kneeling the dog out from between them.

"Great," he murmured. His life and limb depended on stiffly posed family portraits which depicted a tightly collared lad with slicked back hair. The only thing the boy in those pictures had in common with the man he now was extreme discomfort.

"I'm surprised all photos of me weren't purged from the family records?" He tried to laugh, but all he managed was a lame squeak.

"Spoken like the Sam our Michael knew and loved," she said, smiling once more and releasing his chin.

The Sam Michael knew and loved.

The air went out of Sam as if he'd been sucker punched. But who had delivered the final blow—an uncle who slanted the truth to fit his purpose, or a gold-digger with the voice of a seductress?

Or did Mickey somehow reach out from the grave to get his attention? Mickey who'd been more brother than cousin to him, and had accepted him just the way he was.

A sense of loss cut through Sam. Maybe if he hadn't run off to Europe to escape yet another of Stuart Carrington's attempts at turning him into a corporate clone, life wouldn't have taken the turn it had. Maybe if he'd followed suit of the cousin who'd been a big brother to him, Mickey would have stayed with Carrington Corporation. Maybe Mickey wouldn't have followed his ill-thought out example, wouldn't have rebelled and married a woman his father disapproved of...and died.

That's what had happened, right? Mickey had taken a page out of his younger cousin's book of rebellion. Mickey, the responsible one. Mickey, the honorable one.

Mickey, the golden boy for whom things always went right...until the day he died.

Sam studied Mickey's widow. Stuart had told him Mickey's son needed rescuing from Dixie Rae's clutches. But his cousin had chosen to marry this woman who wasn't tall and willowy or

anything like the women Sam remembered Mickey dated. This woman was petite and voluptuous, like some sexy cherub with all the cushioned invitation of a Reuben's woman. Not Mickey's style.

Then again...

Dixie Rae was doll-like, almost fragile in a porcelain doll sort of way. It made Sam want to protect her, not unmask her. Is that what had appealed to Mickey?

Then she laughed.

She threw back her head, the light tangling in the strawberry-blond curls that defied restraint, and laughed a full, lusty laugh. It reminded him how easily she'd used her sexy voice to lure him in, then interrogate and intimidate him, how ready he'd been to buy anything she said for a chance to lose himself in her soft curves. So much for the fragile doll.

Protect her, hell. This woman could have manipulated Mickey into turning his back on his family. Maybe he should stick around and give her enough rope to hang herself.

#

Dixie knew she shouldn't be amused. She was one disaster away from bankruptcy—away from losing her livelihood and her grandmother's home. She didn't want to think about what that might cost her son. But she was so relieved the guy prowling her darkened porch hadn't been another of her father-in-law's legal lackeys that she couldn't contain herself.

"Sorry, Sam," she chirped, shooing the dog out from between them. "But a woman can't be too careful these days."

She offered him her hand. "I'm Dixie, and the little tyke who thinks he's a wizard, is your second cousin, Benjamin."

"So I gathered," he said in a tight voice, his hand meeting hers in an uncertain handshake.

The Carringtons weren't a touchy-feely bunch, Dixie reminded herself. Even Michael had been a tad formal in the beginning. But, given Michael's description of Sam, she hadn't expected Sam to bear that particular family trait... Sam of the worn-in-all-the-right-places jeans. The latter was definitely not the norm in Carrington dress codes.

She settled back on her heels, planted her hands on her hips, and studied him. "Imagine, mistaking a fellow family exile for a process server."

"Get many of them on your doorstep, process servers, that is?" He wiped dog drool from his neck and frowned at his palm.

Dixie bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing. "Not lately. But a while back, every time I turned around, some guy was handing me a legal document."

"Most of them from Stuart Carrington, no doubt," he grumbled.

"*All* of them from Stuart Carrington," she said, paying way too much attention to the lean hip against which he wiped his damp palm.

"Bully the opposition with legal brawn. That's Uncle Stu's style."

"Spoken like a man who's experienced Stuart's wrath first hand," she retorted, unsure of what she was trying to evoke from Sam Ryan.

"In spades," he returned, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and dropping his chin so he peered at her through thick eyelashes fringing heavy eyelids.

There. That sad, hungry look. That's the telltale sign she'd been looking for in Michael's cousin... the wounded Sam Michael had told her about, the litmus test of the real Sam. That lost boy look made her want to reach up and smooth down the tuft of hair moussed with Bear's saliva.

Of their own volition, her fingers slid through the thick, dark hair that was a tad shaggy.

Michael's hair had always been close-cut. Nor did Michael have a full bottom lip like Sam. And Michael's eyes were blue and clear as a cloudless sky while Sam's were...

Surprise glinted from the eyes the color of strong coffee. What was she doing noticing Sam's eyes and hair...and lips?

Lips that were now tugging an uncertain, crooked smile. *Not at all the typical straight-laced Carrington.*

"Do I pass muster?" he asked.

She pulled her hand away, his hair slipping between her fingers, tickling. It'd been a long time since she'd run her fingers through a grown man's hair, too long.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed that kind of contact until now. Though that wasn't what surprised her. Twenty-eight year old widows had plenty of life yet to live. But, did the first man to kick-start her hormones have to be her husband's cousin? A cousin-in-law was definitely off limits, especially one that was more brother than cousin to Michael.

Especially one who'd boycotted hers and Michael's wedding. But then all the Carrington clan had been a no show. That had hurt Michael; though he'd forgiven Sam. He'd been an ocean and half a continent away when they'd impromptly wed. And strangely, she suspected she understood why Sam had missed Michael's funeral. Still, why would he show up now?

#

"Tell me Stuart sent you here with an olive branch," she said, her tone closer to the one she'd used when she'd sent her son off into the house.

Sam gaped at Dixie. She'd just slipped her fingers through his hair and looked up at him as though he were the answer to her prayers.

"Olive branch?" he questioned, confused by the mixed signals this woman put out.

"Yeah. A peace offering." She bent and plucked up his helmet. "A gesture demonstrating Stuart has given up trying to take my son away from me." She handed him the helmet that, in the moonlight now slipping between them, turned a dove gray. "Did Stuart send you here to mediate peace between us?"

This was just the kind of question a conniving gold-digging woman asked. Wasn't it?

"Aren't you the direct one," he said, vying for time to...to *what?* Come up with the right answer?

"Comes from a lifelong habit of having nothing to hide." The cornflower blue eyes narrowed at him. "How about you, Sam? Why the evasiveness?"

What could he tell her that she'd believe without revealing his true purpose for coming to her restaurant—her home—that he'd come to dig up dirt on her as a means back into the good graces of his family?

He braced the helmet to his hip and rubbed the back of his neck. A reasonably true explanation came to him and he peeked at her. "Blame it on road weariness."

"Sure. But, did Stuart send you here or not?"

Just his luck, Mickey had married a woman with the focus of a homicide detective. Indeed, looks were deceiving.

"And before you answer," she said in without a hint of flirtation, "You should know I rank liars right up there with process servers."

Having run out of time for further debate, Sam sighed. "I think Stuart has exhausted every legal means at the disposal of his considerable wealth." *True enough.*

"That's something." She drew her arms across her stomach. "But no olive branch, huh?"

"He didn't send me here with an olive branch." *Absolutely true.*

"Thanks for the warning."

Is that what he'd just done, warn her? If Stuart found out, the old man would filet him.

Make that, *when* Stuart found out. There were no *ifs* where the senior Carrington was concerned.

"Then what's the deal, Sam? Surely you didn't come here looking for a hideout."

He glanced at the Ducati a mere dozen yards away. Escape or...

He shrugged. "Just passing through, I guess."

"And thought you'd stop by for a visit?"

The dubious note to her question snapped his attention back to Dixie. He expected to see condemnation in her eyes, something that damned him for dropping by now that it was too late to ever see Mickey again...or for Mickey to see him. Instead, he found a sadness in her eyes that edged on pity. Damn, but he couldn't get a fix on Dixie Rae, and that made her almost as lethal to his wellbeing as his uncle.

"Guess I came too late," he said, regretting the words before they were completely out of his mouth, knowing he was too late for a lot of things.

"Never too late to visit," she said, snagging him by the arm and tugging him toward the corner of the porch. "Ben is going to love getting to know his second cousin."

"I'm not staying," he said, dragging at her pull, hell-bent on saving his own hide. "I heard you ran a restaurant. Thought I'd stop for a bite to eat. Meet you and Ben."

"Great." The seductive lilt was back in her voice. Did she mean *bite* to imply more than food? The restaurant kitchen may be closed but mine isn't."

Sam eyed the closeness with which she hugged his arm as she towed him along the side porch, felt the intimacy as his arm pressed into the cushioned side of her breast. She sure had a familiar way about her, maybe too familiar. The modus operandi of a gold-digger?

But the Mickey he'd known would have been too smart to get snared by a woman who used sexual wiles to trap a man. He was certain of it.

Dixie Rae raised a Cheshire cat grin at him. "If you're not too fussy, we can find you a place to sleep."

"I'm not staying the night."

"But it's late, already past Ben's bedtime. If you don't stay, how will he get to know you? Besides, you're tired. Road weary, you said."

She had him with that.

"Unless it's our sparse accommodations that are scaring you off."

A "yes" would gain him freedom. But a "yes" would also be a lie, and something warned him Dixie Rae could spot a lie at a hundred paces.

"I don't travel first class near as much as you might think," he said, not sure why he was admitting anything about himself to a woman who might be holding her child, Mickey's son and Stuart's grandson, as collateral against a trust fund.

"Sorry I can't offer you the guestroom," she said, blinking up at him. Or had she batted her lashes at him?

"We had to rent it out," she continued as she hauled him around the back of the house. "Can't afford the luxury of an empty room these days."

Stuart had said she'd spent her way through everything Michael had left her, that she'd even lost the Chicago restaurant Michael had bought for her. Maybe she could read a lie so well because she was a master at telling them?

They stepped into the light slanting across the porch from the back door, illuminating a

speculative look in Dixie Rae's eyes. Was she sizing him up for what worth he might be to her?

Before he could be sure what he saw in her expression, boyish hoots blasted them and the expression in Dixie Rae's eyes softened.

"Sugar high," she said above the din, any hint of calculation gone from her features...if there'd been any there in the first place. "He went to a birthday party this afternoon. My Cousin Annie's girls turned twelve. You'll meet them tomorrow. Annie waitresses for me and her girls help watch Ben."

Babysitters barely twelve years old? Was that old enough to be responsible for a four-year-old? He'd never been around kids younger than him so he didn't know.

Beyond the rusty screen, Ben wheeled about a small sitting room, a towel tied around his neck flaring back from him. Was letting the kid over-indulge bad parenting? Is that what he was supposed to reveal...if he stuck around?

Dixie ushered him across the threshold into the pandemonium she declared their private quarters. A couch, television, two over-stuffed chairs and a dated assortment of side tables crowded the boxy room. The kid bounced around the space like bubbles in a pot of boiling water.

"It's best to let him burn off the energy before trying to put him to bed," Dixie explained, leaning into Sam in what he considered a too familiar way.

He didn't know whether to question that flirtatious nature or her parenting skills. Not that he felt qualified to judge the latter. Though there did seem to be good rationale to letting the kid burn off his high. Maybe had his own high-energy childhood not been stifled, he might not have screwed up so much.

Or maybe he'd have turned out a lot worse.

"Scoot on over here, Ben," she called, the lilt of her voice Sam's nerve endings.

Do not walk. Run.

"Come meet Cousin Sam," she said.

The kid glanced off one stuffed chair, ricocheted around the coffee table, and scrambled up onto the arm of the couch where he tipped a smudged face up at Sam. A pair of blue-gray eyes studied him from beneath tawny lashes, Mickey's eyes.

For the second time since arriving at The Farmhouse, the breath went out of Sam as though he'd been punched in the gut.

"I'm the wizard," Ben declared, drawing a makeshift cape over his narrow shoulders.

Mickey's kid.

Dixie bumped her cheek against Sam's shoulder. The scent of cinnamon enveloped him. "He's been fixated on the Wizard of Oz ever since seeing it."

And how long ago was that? Sam wanted to ask, needing to know how long she'd allowed her child to fixate on some mythical land and its fanciful characters—needing to know if that was normal or lax parenting...or worse. What if the mother really was using the kid to gain her own ends, to gain control of the trust fund that would one day be little Ben's?

But Mickey had chosen her. Sensible, perceptive Mickey.

The kid smeared a grimy finger across the silver dome of the helmet tucked under Sam's arm. "Are you the Tin Man?"

The Tin Man who went to Oz for a heart. Sam's chest tightened. For the life of him, he couldn't feel his heartbeat.

Heartless to spy on a mother. Heartless to prove her unfit. Heartless to cost a child the only parent he had left. Sam knew what it felt like to grow up without parents. He knew what it was like to be left with no one but a stern uncle to share the anger and a nanny to wipe away the tears.

What would Mickey do—Mickey who'd had enough heart for them both?

Watch out for the kid. That's what Mickey would do—what Mickey had done for him. Perfect Mickey who had loved him in spite of all his failings.

But he didn't have Mickey's integrity, Mickey's smarts, or Mickey's charm. What passed for Sam Ryan charm was better labeled sham. He'd connived his way out of more than a few tight spots and into a few choice positions...including his share of beds.

Was that what Stuart had in mind when he'd offered Sam a way back into the good graces of the family? That he bed the curvaceous Dixie so he could play the morality card? But it would take a string of documented bed partners before any court would take a child from his mother, and surely Stuart could get that list without him.

Dixie was laughing at her son calling him Tin Man. Not the head-thrown back kind of laugh she'd given out on the porch that had dispelled the illusion of china doll fragility. No, this one was far more subdued, but still came from deep enough that the side of her breast bobbed against the side of his arm.

Sam shifted uncomfortably. Had Stuart enlisted his aid because he thought it would take a con to catch a con? Is that how Stuart thought of him, a conman?

Disappointment pulled at Sam's shoulders. He'd hoped for more. He'd hoped Stuart might finally have seen whatever it was Mickey had always managed to see in him. Maybe then he could see it, too.

Sam stared into the Mickey blue eyes looking back him from Ben. Not a hint of an answer reflected from those eyes. Just Mickey's kid, scrubbing a grubby finger against his helmet. Did the kid *really* need his help?

Maybe if someone had helped him when he'd been dumped on the doorstep of a stern uncle he'd be able to read the signs.

Aaah, but someone *had* helped him. Mickey.

Mickey, whose kid might well need his help now. And if that meant bedding the kid's mother to get close enough to her to dig up dirt on her...to make sure he was alright, so be it. Sam sighed. For a guy who'd spent a lifetime avoiding responsibility, he'd gotten himself hip deep in it this time.