

Sam's Promise

Chapter One

Sam rolled his eyes. "You better be on your way, damn it. You promised Mom." As he shut off the engine, Sam stared out the driver's side window at the large, two-story brick house. It'd been the first real home he and his four brothers had ever known. Guilt washed over him as he realized how long it'd been since his last visit. Nearly a month. Nice.

"Christ, relax," Brodix muttered on the other end of the cell phone. "I'm on my way. Besides, have I ever missed Thanksgiving?"

His brother was right. Shit. "Sorry for snapping. I'm sort of on edge is all."

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Because of Mom's phone call?" Brodix finally asked.

Sam started to get out of his SUV, but Brodix's words stopped him. "She called you too?"

Brodix sighed. "Yeah. Sounds like there might be trouble in paradise, huh?"

"The Blackwater Diner has always done a good business, but Mom sounded worried. If she's worried, then I'm worried," Sam said. "I wonder if she called the others."

"I haven't talked to them about it, but I imagine she did." He paused, then added, "She told me the restaurant is our legacy, Sam. That Dad wanted it to stay in the family. She sounded heartbroken, like she'd let him down or something."

Sam didn't want to think of their mother as anything other than happy. She'd been his guardian angel since the first day he'd met her. She'd walked into the social worker's office and smiled at him as if he were someone worthy. Someone other than the nobody he'd been. Someone other than a kid who'd never even known his father and had a drug addict for a mother. And like any belligerent twelve-year-old boy who'd been dragged through the system kicking and screaming, Sam had cursed at her. He'd known what would come, and he'd braced himself, waiting for the slap, or worse. Wanda had only patted him on the back. The kind gesture had sucked all the anger right out of him. It hadn't taken him long to know she was different from all the rest. She was special.

"I'm going to get some answers after dinner." Sam stepped out and headed toward the front porch. "Since I'm the one with the most job flexibility around here, I plan to go over to the restaurant tomorrow and check out the books, and I'm not leaving until things are back on track." One of the perks to being an all-around handyman/carpenter was that he could set his own hours. "Which is part of why I'm calling. Between you and me, you're the one with the head for business, so maybe you can give me a hand."

“I can stay for a few days, but my condo is a two-hour drive, and I can’t exactly take an impromptu extended leave from work.”

“Do you have any vacation time coming?”

Brodix went silent, and Sam let a grin slip. While most people had to look at their calendar to see what was on their agenda for the following day, Brodix could figure out within seconds what the next four weeks looked like, right down to the hour, simply by concentrating.

“Yeah,” his brainiac brother finally replied. “Actually I could probably take a few weeks off.”

“Let’s wait and see what’s going on before we make any plans. It might not be necessary.” Even as he said it, Sam knew he was lying to them both. When he’d called his mom to confirm the time for dinner, she’d seemed stressed, and Sam’s gut had been bothering him ever since.

“Whatever it takes, man.”

“Good. Now get your ass here.”

“God, you’re worse than an old woman. I’m less than fifteen minutes out. Chill.”

Sam heard the distinctive sound of a diesel engine from behind. He turned in time to see Vance pulling into the driveway in his black pickup truck. Behind him was a new, shiny, silver BMW. “Vance just arrived. River and Reilly are right behind him.”

He heard Brodix curse. “Great. I’m the last one. Why am I always the last one?”

Sam laughed. “Because you suck more than the rest of us.”

“Thanks for clearing that up, bro.”

“That’s what big brothers are for.” Brodix offered up a few anatomically impossible ideas, then hung up. Sam shoved his cell back into the holster on his belt and watched as his brothers parked and got out. One by one, they made their way toward him. Sam hadn’t seen them since early summer. They’d all been busy. Too damn busy to visit? He grimaced when he thought of what his father would’ve said about that were he still alive. Family, his father had always said, is all that really matters in this world. Sam gave in to the instinct to look each of them over now. He needed to see for himself they were well.

Vance looked good, bigger and meaner than ever, but good all the same. As usual, he wore black work boots, a pair of faded jeans and the brown leather coat their mom had gotten him four or five Christmases ago. Hell, he looked more muscular, if it were at all possible. Owning his own construction company suited him, apparently. Reilly and River were mirror images of each other with their pale green eyes, shaggy black hair and lean six-foot-four build. The only difference between the twins was River’s constant scowl. Sam’s gut clenched. He could count on one hand the amount of times his youngest brother had cracked a smile in the last decade.

“Brodix is on his way,” Sam said by way of greeting.

Vance snorted. “Late, what else is new.”

Sam laughed. “In his defense, he does live farther away than the rest of us.”

Reilly smiled and held up a bag. “Picked up some fresh bread from that bakery on Fifth. River’s been salivating the entire way here.”

River glared at his twin and slammed a fist into his shoulder. “I still don’t see why I couldn’t have a piece, damn it.”

Reilly rolled his eyes. “Mom would’ve skinned us both, and you know it.”

Sam shook his head. “You’re a bottomless pit, River.”

“Are you boys going to stand out here in the cold all day or what?”

The soft, feminine voice had them all turning. Their mom stood in the doorway with a dish towel in one hand and a wide smile curving her lips. She looked flushed, Sam thought, and her normally neat-as-a-pin grey hair was messy, as if she’d been running her fingers through it. Sam’s worries went up another notch. None of them spoke as they closed the distance. She ushered them in and quickly shut the door behind them. “You boys always could stand the cold easier than me.”

“That’s because our hides are tougher than yours,” Vance said as he leaned down for a hug.

Sam unzipped his black Carhartt and tossed it over a chair. “Happy Thanksgiving, Mom,” he said when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her rounded figure and the scent of honeysuckle always gave him a feeling of peace. Of home.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Sammy.”

“Brodix is on his way.” Sam answered the unspoken question in his mother’s blue eyes as he stepped back to let Reilly and River have their turn. “Should be here any minute.”

“I’m here.”

Sam turned. Brodix stood in the doorway wearing a dark grey wool coat and carrying a glass pie pan.

“If that’s your pumpkin pie, I just might kiss you, Brodix,” River said as he crossed the room to take the dish.

Brodix unbuttoned his coat. “It makes absolutely no logical sense how you stay so lean, River.”

“Leave your brother alone and give your mom a hug.”

Brodix chuckled and opened his arms. “Yes, ma’am.” Sam watched on as their mom stepped into his brother’s embrace. The only thing missing was their dad. It would be their second Thanksgiving without him. Pain hit Sam square in the chest when he thought of how much he missed the man who’d raised him. By example, Chet Jennings had shown them how to be men worthy of respect. Sam still missed hearing his booming voice and feeling his rib-crushing bear hugs. He looked over at his brothers and saw the same unhappy expressions.

“I know what you’re all thinking, and you might as well stop it right now,” their mom chastised. “We always had laughter and love filling this house when your father was alive. Do you think he’d want that to change just because the good Lord chose to bring him home?” As one they all shook their heads, and she smiled. “Good, then. Let’s get this dinner on the table so you boys can fill me in on what you’ve been up to.”

Vance laughed. “You just want to know if any of us have found our one true love yet.”

She tsked. “Well, I’m not getting any younger, and I’d like to have grandkids while I’m still able to feed myself.”

“Speaking of age,” Sam said as he noticed his mother perspiring. “It might be time to think about slowing down a little, Mom.”

Her brows drew together. “You mean retiring, don’t you?”

Sam started to answer, but the doorbell rang. He frowned. “Are you expecting anyone else, Mom?” Their Thanksgiving dinners had always been for immediate family only. It’d been that way since Sam could remember, and he wasn’t real fond of change.

His mom’s eyes lit up, and she turned and headed for the door. “I nearly forgot Julie!”

“Julie?” River asked as he looked over at Reilly. “Is that the waitress you were telling me about the other day? The one from the restaurant?”

Julie? Sam mouthed as he looked over at his brothers. They all shrugged and stared at the door, as if equally curious. Sam watched and waited. Considering they’d never asked an outsider to Thanksgiving dinner before, he figured Julie must be pretty special or his mom never would’ve extended an invitation to their private gathering.

As she pulled the door open, Sam got his first look at the mysterious woman. Long, dark hair was about all he could make out. There was a hell of a lot of it. The big, blue tote she carried blocked part of his view of her face, and the heavy black parka covered everything else. “Julie, dear, I’m so glad you could make it.”

“I’m sorry I’m late, Wanda” she said, a little breathless. “I would’ve been here sooner, but I had to make a second batch of sweet potatoes. The first batch burned. I’m afraid I got a bit distracted studying.”

“No, no, you’re right on time,” his mom said as she took the bag out of the woman’s hands. “The boys just arrived, and the turkey is just about ready to come out of the oven.”

Vance stepped forward and took the bag from his mom, while Brodix helped the woman with her oversized coat. Sam was too busy staring to be of any real use. Curves. He could see them now that her coat wasn’t hindering his view. She had sweet, luscious curves and a smile that kicked his heart into a sprint. She wore a tight red sweater that stretched over breasts he desperately wanted to touch. More than a mouthful, he thought. A hell of a lot more. The long black skirt wouldn’t be anything overly sexy on the average woman, but on her it looked hot as hell. She had wide hips and some damn long legs. His mind went straight into the gutter as he imagined them wrapped tight around him while she rode him into oblivion.

“Julie Rose, I’d like you to meet my sons. The tallest there is Sam. He’s the oldest and is sort of a jack of all trades.”

Sam stayed where he was, safely several feet across the room. “Pleased to meet you, Julie.”

She smiled but didn’t speak as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. He had the crazy notion to untuck it. “And the one grinning from ear to ear there is Vance,” his mom went on.

Julie’s gaze went to his brother. “You’re the one with the construction business?”

Vance grinned. “Yep,” he said as he stepped forward and shook her hand. “Nice meeting you, Julie.”

“And Brodix there,” his mom pointed out, “is the executive of the bunch.”

Brodix didn’t smile. He simply nudged Vance out of the way and took possession of Julie’s hand. “Happy Thanksgiving, Julie,” he murmured in that annoyingly charming way he had.

Julie blushed. “Thank you. Same to you.” For some unknown reason, Sam had the urge to toss Brodix on his ass.

“You’re quite welcome,” Brodix said. “Such a pretty face is a refreshing change around here.”

Sam noticed Brodix still hadn’t bothered to let go of Julie’s hand.

“Brodix, behave,” his mother admonished as she slapped his forearm. Brodix let go and moved to the side of Julie, then glanced over at him. Sam glared at his younger sibling, willing him to back off. Brodix, the leech, only wagged his eyebrows.

“You’ve met Reilly, but I don’t think you’ve met his twin River yet.”

Reilly winked. “Nice to see you again, Julie.”

“Hi, Reilly.” She looked over at River. “Reilly’s told me quite a bit about you.”

River squinted at his twin before glaring at Julie. “In case he wasn’t clear, I’m the sexy, smart twin.”

Julie laughed, and Sam went rigid. Damn, she was gorgeous when she did that. And unless he missed his guess, his brothers thought the same thing. None of them seemed capable of speech all of a sudden.

“Modest too, I see,” Julie responded, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

His normally brooding brother actually cracked a smile. “At last, a woman who gets me.”

Sam noticed the way Julie bit her lip and looked down at the floor. “Okay,” his mother intervened. “Now that we have the introductions out of the way, how about we get dinner on the table?”

“Thank God,” River said. “I’m starved.”

Everyone laughed and filed into the kitchen. Sam held back, waiting for Julie to go through the doorway first. She smiled shyly as she stepped in front of him. As he took up position behind her, his gaze inexorably went to her ass. Ah hell, he never should’ve looked. Sam had a thing for that particular body part on a woman, and Julie had nicely rounded globes that he eagerly wanted to reach out and squeeze. He felt a hair guilty for mentally undressing the woman, but as he glanced up and caught Brodix’s gaze, he knew he wasn’t the only one thinking dirty thoughts. The knowledge sent his good mood into the crapper.

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