

Breaking Brodix

Chapter One

Brodix ran the numbers again, even though he knew it was useless. The renovations on the Blackwater Bar and Grill were finished, and right on schedule too. It was Saturday, and the grand opening was scheduled for Friday. Six days away. Brodix groaned. "It had better be a frigging record-breaking night," he mumbled to himself. They needed the cash flow in a bad way. He'd crunched the numbers, done what he could to keep things on budget, but the bills were piling up. He sat back in his chair and pushed a hand through his hair. What were they going to do if the restaurant failed after all the money and time they'd put into rebuilding it?

He looked around at the work they'd done. The old diner was gone. His chest tightened at the thought even as pride shot through him at all the work they'd done. The bar top Vance had designed had a beautiful, dark wood finish, and the smooth swirl design down the sides of the bar was a work of art. The old, plain white walls had been replaced with more rustic, weathered barn siding. He and his brothers had even added on to allow room for a dance floor. They'd decided on live music for the busier weekend crowd, and it had become Reilly's job to find the right band for the job. They wanted someone with a Southern rock sound, but as of yet, Reilly hadn't settled on anyone. They'd taken out the ugly, harsh lights and installed recessed lighting, which created a cozier atmosphere.

The changes were all going to be good for business, and although the place no longer resembled the little diner it'd once been, Brodix could still picture his father, Chet Jennings, standing behind the counter with his apron tied around his waist and laughing with the customers, even as he worked himself to the bone to keep the place running. Letting the restaurant go now would be more than any of them could bear. It had to do well. There was no other choice. It was a part of their family, their father's legacy. None of them would let that go without fighting tooth and nail. A high-pitched yelp tore Brodix out of his maudlin thoughts. He looked out the front window, but no one was there. Still, he could've sworn he'd heard a woman.

Reilly came striding out of the kitchen. White paint from the finishing touches he'd been putting on the trim in the kitchen splattered the black T-shirt and sweats he wore. Christ, he was a mess. His shaggy black hair needed a decent trim too, Brodix realized. Now that he was looking, Brodix noticed his little brother had somehow gained a few more muscles. When had that happened?

"Did you hear that?" Reilly said. "Sounded like a woman."

Brodix nodded and stood. "Yeah. Were you expecting anyone this early?" The depressing numbers he'd been working on all morning were forgotten as they both went to the front door.

"Nope."

Brodix flipped the lock and stepped outside into the cool springtime sun. He heard a string of curses and glanced down to see a woman sprawled out on the ground. A sexy, curvy woman. His blood heated instantly.

Brodix wanted to sink his fingers into the blonde curls flowing around her shoulders. Their gazes met, and for a moment, Brodix got caught in the pretty blue depths of the woman's almond-shaped eyes. But something wasn't right. The eyes, the hair, they were all too familiar, and not in a good way. She all but growled his name, and that was when it hit him. She was none other than Sarah Greer, a reporter for the local newspaper. And the one woman he'd been dodging for the last two weeks.

She squinted up at him. "Do you think one of you could possibly help me up, or is that simply too much to ask?"

Brodix forced himself to stop eyeballing her. "Are you all right?" He crouched in front of her to get a better look at the ankle she held in the palm of one hand as if she'd twisted it. "Does it hurt?"

She rolled her eyes. "Only my pride managed to get bruised, I assure you."

Brodix knew he shouldn't look past her face, but he didn't seem to have any control over his own body at the moment. When his gaze traveled her length, his heart sped up. She had curves, but they weren't overblown and in your face. They were subtle. As if a man had to get up close and personal before he could truly appreciate them.

Not a bad idea.

The fact that her black skirt had gotten pushed up around her thighs, showing a tantalizing glimpse of smooth, sexy skin, hadn't escaped his notice either. They were quite possibly the longest, prettiest legs he'd ever seen. When he took in the angry expression pinching her brows together, his lips twitched. Oh yeah, she was good and pissed.

He started to help her to her feet, but his brother was quicker. Sarah's face softened as she placed her hand in his palm. He grinned down at her. "Reilly Jennings. And you are?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Reilly. I'm Sarah Greer." The sweet smile spreading across her face turned her into a gentle beauty right before their eyes. She had the look of an innocent. A delicate flower in need of a man to keep her safe and secure. What a crock. Sarah was as ruthless as they came. Oh, Brodix didn't know her personally, but he'd seen her type a hundred times over. Had even dated a few, much to his dismay.

Sarah had a reputation for being ruthless when it came to getting a story. Brodix remembered the article she'd written last summer about Blackwater's mayor, Michael Coburn. She'd gotten her facts wrong when she'd accused the man of taking contributions from a controversial source. As a result of Sarah's erroneous information, Coburn's reputation had nearly been ruined. Hell, Brodix was surprised she was still a reporter after that fiasco.

Brodix stood and glared at Reilly, willing him to back off, but Reilly suddenly only had eyes for Sarah. That would change, he knew, as soon as Reilly found out why Sarah had shown up at the Blackwater Bar and Grill unannounced. What had she thought? That she could get around him with her baby blues and cute smile? It'd take a hell of a lot more than that. Brodix hid a grin and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked over at Sarah and waited while she brushed fresh grass clippings off her white blouse. When her gaze met his, the frown came right back.

Sarah released Reilly, and Brodix relaxed a fraction. For some ridiculous reason, he didn't much care for the smile Reilly was giving Sarah, as if he was a step away from asking her to dinner. Sarah looked down at the ground and lifted her right foot in the air, twisted it this way and that, then sighed and stood on both feet once again. "I've been attempting to get in touch with you, Mr. Jennings," she said as she pinned him with a hard glare. "You've been avoiding me." Her voice was as stern as a schoolteacher scolding a naughty child. "I've left several voice-mail messages on your cell phone and at your office. You haven't returned a single one of them."

Brodix grinned. "That should have clued you in right there, but yet here you are."

She let out a sigh. "Look, I don't see why you won't consider my proposal. Your backgrounds would make a fabulous human-interest piece, and the exposure would be good for business. From what I've learned about the Blackwater Restaurant, Mr. Jennings, you could use all the help you can get with the grand opening."

Reilly cleared his throat, and they both looked over at him. "Exposure? Someone care to catch me up here?"

Brodix quirked a brow and pointed to Sarah. "I can see how you might not recognize our little reporter here, considering the stains on her blouse and the blades of grass in her hair."

Reilly frowned. "Reporter?"

Sarah clearly wasn't daunted by the change in Reilly. He'd gone from flirtatious to cautious in a heartbeat. Sarah merely turned on the charm like a pro. Brodix tried not to let the sexiness of it affect him, but his dick was already standing at attention. Damn it all to hell.

"Yes," she answered as she held her hand out for Reilly to shake. "I'm here to interview the Jennings family for the front page of the Gazette." She jabbed a thumb at Brodix. "I've explained everything to your brother here, but it's clear he didn't bother to fill you in."

Brodix wasn't the least surprised when Reilly didn't move to shake Sarah's hand. In fact, he actually took two slow steps backward. Brodix glowered at him. Hell, he didn't much care for reporters either, but it didn't feel right for Reilly to snub Sarah in such an obvious way. Their mother had raised them better than that.

"You're a reporter?" Reilly asked as if attempting to swallow cotton.

Sarah seemed oblivious to his brother's mounting tension. "Yes," she said, "and I'm here to help you promote the grand opening of the Blackwater Bar and Grill. As I stated in my messages to your brother, the fact you and your four brothers were all adopted from foster care and raised by a local couple would make a fantastic story." She grinned as if she were imparting some fantastic news. "Unfortunately, your general manager here," she aimed a frown toward Brodix, "has been very difficult to pin down. So I decided to take my chances and come straight to the source."

"There will be no interviews," Reilly said as he took a step back. "Now or ever."

"But you haven't even—"

Reilly held up a hand. "You've wasted your time, Ms. Greer. None of the Jennings are interested in what you have to say."

Sarah opened her mouth, no doubt to continue arguing her case, but Brodix knew it would be a waste of time. Ever since their foster-care days, when one of his two younger brothers, River—Reilly's twin—had been sent to live with Mr. and Mrs. Larry Briggs, Reilly and River had hated reporters with a passion. Larry had been a reporter. He'd also been an abusive piece of shit. He'd treated River like garbage.

When River had once confided in a teacher about the beatings, charges had been filed. But Larry knew how to manipulate people, and he'd worked the police like a pro. He'd twisted River's words so efficiently that by the time he was through, everyone thought River had made it all up. Was it any wonder that River and Reilly considered reporters to be the next best thing to the antichrist? As River's twin, Reilly still harbored a truckload of bad feelings for anyone who had anything to do with reporting the news.

When Sarah started to speak once more, Brodix could easily see things getting out of hand. He stepped between the two and clapped Reilly on the shoulder. "I've got this." Reilly hesitated a moment, but when Sarah went to step around Brodix, Reilly nodded and went back into the restaurant.

"Wow," Sarah said. "Okay, so I'm getting the feeling that you all don't care for reporters much."

"No, we don't." When he caught her favoring her right foot, he muttered, "You did get hurt."

"Not really." She winced when she tried to put weight on it. "It's just a little twinge, nothing more, I promise you."

Brodix closed the distance between them and took her elbow in his palm. He could feel the warmth of her skin through the flimsy material of her blouse, and it turned him on. To hell if he wanted to be turned on by the woman, though. She was nothing but trouble. The mess she'd made of Coburn's life was proof.

"Come on, we'd better get some ice on it before it swells. We can...talk."

As if he'd just handed her a million dollars, her eyes grew wide. "You're going to do the interview?"

"No," he gritted out, dashing her hopes. "Interviews are out of the question. But maybe we can figure out something else. Something that will help you with your story and help the Jenningses drum up business for the restaurant."

She stared at him a few seconds, mulling over his words, then nodded and followed him into the restaurant. "Okay, but I warn you. I'm not letting up about the interviews."

He chuckled, despite the fact she was a complete pain in the ass. "I didn't really think you would."

"The thing is, Mr. Jennings—"

"Brodix," he corrected her. "Every time you call me mister, it reminds me of my father. He was a good man, but I'm a little raw about him just now." He paused, wishing he hadn't said so much. "So, please, call me Brodix."

"I'm sorry. He died a few years ago, didn't he?"

"Save the questions, little Miss Nosy." He patted a seat at the bar. "Here, stay out of trouble while I get some ice."

Brodix headed around the bar, but Sarah called out his name, and he turned. "Yeah?"

"I can make polite conversation, you know," she stated. "I'm more than a reporter."

The sadness dulling her bright blue eyes had a knot forming in Brodix's throat. Had he hurt her feelings? The way she suddenly found the bar top fascinating told him he had. The woman was an enigma. In that moment, Brodix decided the only way to have any peace of mind would be to learn more about her. Maybe while she was busy trying to learn all his dirty little secrets, he could learn some of hers.

Wait, what was he thinking? He must be insane to even consider spending time with a reporter. Ever since River had been forced to endure Larry's abuse, it'd been an unspoken agreement among the Jennings that reporters were right up there with lawyers, basically bloodsuckers and ambulance chasers and nothing more. But Brodix had a feeling Sarah was different. For one, she wasn't Larry. Even though Brodix had spent only a few minutes in her company, he could see he'd been letting his attitude about River's foster dad color his view of Sarah. Still, she'd dragged Coburn's name through the mud, hadn't she? It was clear the woman was no saint. Did that mean Sarah didn't deserve to be heard, though? What harm could it do?

The bigger question was, what would his brothers want? Reilly didn't want anything to do with an interview, which meant River most likely wouldn't either. But what of Vance and Sammy? If they knew how important it would be to the success of the grand opening, would they agree to do

whatever was necessary? A nasty dose of guilt washed over him. Hell, just bringing her into the bar seemed like a betrayal to all River had been put through. Sarah had pegged it, though. They did need the publicity. They couldn't afford to turn up their noses based solely on what Larry had done. As for the disastrous article about the mayor, it was in the past. Like the horrors of River's childhood, it was over and done with. Time for all of them to move on. Besides, the free promotional opportunity wasn't something to scoff at, not this late in the game.

When he grabbed some ice out of the freezer and turned to get a towel, Reilly was standing there, glaring at him. Shit. "Might as well say it," Brodix muttered as he picked up a towel off the counter and wrapped it around the cubes of ice.

Reilly pointed to the door leading to the main room. "What the hell is she doing sitting at the bar? I thought you were going to get rid of her."

"I was until I saw her ankle." He held up the makeshift icepack he'd taken out of the freezer. "She's hurt and on our property. That's not good no matter how you slice it."

"So ice her ankle and send her on her way," he bit out. "We don't need her kind here."

Brodix didn't much care for his brother's attitude toward Sarah. She was a veritable stranger, but a sense of protectiveness shot through him all the same. "Look, I'm not any crazier about Sarah snooping around than you, but she's not Larry. I don't think it's fair to measure her by his misdeeds." Brodix left off the part about Sarah's own misdeeds. He didn't think Reilly needed more of a reason to hate the woman. Hell, if Reilly didn't remember the Coburn article, then Brodix sure as hell wasn't going to remind him.

"She's committed a few sins of her own, and you damn well know it," Reilly gritted out.

Brodix felt his face heat. "I was hoping you'd forgotten about that," he admitted.

"Not damn likely. Now she wants to interview us, Brodix," he said, his tone rising right along with his temper. "And we both know the questions she'd ask.

'What was it like growing up in foster care?' 'Where are your biological parents?' 'Why'd they give you up?' And if she gets even a tiny hint about River's lousy foster homes, she'd go for the jugular, and we both know it."

"Keep your voice down," Brodix warned as he leaned against the refrigerator. "I hear what you're saying, but before we dismiss her completely, let me talk to her."

"Is this because she's hot? Is that it? You're attracted to her, so you're willing to give her the benefit of the doubt?"

Brodix knew Reilly had it at least half right, but to hell if he was willing to admit it aloud. "Let's stick to the facts, shall we? First, this restaurant is teetering on the brink, and we need all the help we can get to bring it back into the black. Second, this is Dad's legacy, and it's close to disappearing in a puff of smoke. Third, the publicity she's offering could do us a world of good here. Do we agree so far?" When Reilly nodded, Brodix continued. "We need the grand opening

to be a hit in a bad way. We need the exposure she's talking about giving us. Give me a chance to talk to her. That's all I'm asking."

Reilly shoved a hand through his hair. "Do you even know what her master plan is besides dissecting our entire life and plastering it on the front page for everyone in Blackwater to see?"

"No," he growled, his own temper flaring to the surface. "And until I hear her out, I don't think we should make any hasty decisions."

A few seconds of silence passed between them before Reilly finally let out a long sigh. "You need to bring the others in on this."

"We all agree or nothing," Brodix said, knowing Reilly was right. "I get it, believe me. First, I need to see if there's anything to vote on."

Without another word, Reilly went back to painting. Brodix wanted to say more, to reassure his brother, but he didn't know what he'd be reassuring him of. Sure, the fact they were all adopted was known around town, but the dirty details of their past weren't. The abuse and neglect, they'd managed to keep that shit hidden. On the other hand, Brodix was a businessman. He better than anyone knew that connecting their story of triumph over adversity with the diner would win the sympathies of the small-town residents. And that would surely be good for business.

Would it even be worth trying to balance exposing some of their painful secrets while attempting to keep the worst of it private, just to make people curious enough to check out the restaurant? Only one way to know.

When Brodix brought the ice out to Sarah, he found her sitting at the bar where he'd left her. She was hunched over and staring at her phone, her hair hanging on either side of her face like a shiny golden curtain. His body responded with a rush of heat to his groin. God, she was pretty. Yeah, Reilly had been right on the money. Brodix was attracted to little Miss Nosy, and mixing business with pleasure was something he'd always sworn never to do. Some things were worth breaking a few rules for, though.

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