

## Prologue

“Hey, Viper, your cell phone was going off upstairs.”

Gavin Blake, known to his SEAL teammates as Viper, nodded as he set his coffee mug on a side table in the barracks’ common area. Standing, he stretched the kinks out of his body and felt his aches all the way to the bone. Their last covert operation had been risky as hell, but they’d succeeded in destroying yet another ISIS stronghold.

In two days they would officially be off duty and most of his teammates would be heading for home. However he had other plans. Getting laid was at the top of his agenda. It had been too long since he’d shared a woman’s bed and he’d already made plans with a beautiful bartender he’d met in Mississippi while helping his teammate Bane out of a fairly dangerous situation several months ago.

Gavin raced up the stairs toward his berthing unit and retrieved his cell phone from the gear in his bunk. He’d missed a call from Sherman Lott, the man who’d lived on the neighboring ranch for years. Panic floated through Gavin’s belly. Had something happened to his grandmother?

Since his grandmother lived alone when he was away, Gavin had given their closest neighbors his contact information in case of emergencies. Of course the foreman was there, running the ranch in Gavin’s absence. Surely if something was going on with his grandmother Caldwell would have contacted Gavin. But what if this was one of those times when Caldwell had gone to Saint Louis to meet with one of their beef distributors?

Gavin quickly pressed the redial button and Mr. Lott picked up on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Mr. Lott, this is Gavin. Has something happened to Gramma Mel?”

“No, Gavin, your grandmother is fine physically. Not sure what’s happening to her mind, though.”

Gavin frowned, wondering what the man meant. Although she was nearing her seventy-fifth birthday, Gavin had never known a day in all his thirty-two years when Melody Blake hadn’t been sharp as a tack. He’d spoken with his grandmother two weeks ago and she had sounded just fine to him. “What makes you think something is wrong with her mind?”

“She’s allowed some fast-talking college professor to convince her that the outlaw Jesse James buried some of his loot on the Silver Spurs, and they plan to start digging up parts of her land next week.”

Gavin refrained from correcting the man. The land was *their* property since Gavin legally owned all eight hundred acres jointly with his grandmother. Instead he concentrated on what Lott had said. His grandmother had given someone permission to dig on the Silver Spurs?

“There must be some mistake, Mr. Lott. You know my grandmother as well as I do. There’s no way she would allow some man to—”

“It’s a woman. A professor by the name of Dr. Harris.”

Gavin drew in a deep breath. Who the hell was Dr. Harris and how had she talked his grandmother into agreeing to a dig on Blake land?

Rubbing a hand down his face, Gavin knew he would be flying home and not making that pit stop in Mississippi after all. *Damn!*

“Gavin?”

“Yes, Mr. Lott, I’m here.”

“I hated to call you knowing you’re probably somewhere doing important work for our country, but I felt you needed to know what’s going on.”

“And I appreciate you doing so. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll be home in a couple of days.”

Gavin hung up the phone and cursed in anger. He then placed a call to his ranch foreman, Caldwell Andrews. The phone was answered on the third ring.

“Caldwell? What’s going on at the Silver Spurs? Sherman Lott just called and he thinks Gramma Melody has gone loco. He said something about her allowing some professor to dig on the ranch?”

He heard Caldwell curse under his breath before saying, “I wish Lott hadn’t called you, Gavin. Your grandmother is fine. She likes the professor. They talked and according to Ms. Mel she read the professor’s report and it’s legit.”

Viper rolled his eyes. “Caldwell, you know as well as I do that there’s no buried treasure on the Silver Spurs. If you recall, when I was in my teens, Dad allowed this outfit to come in and dig up parts of the land when they convinced him there was oil somewhere on it. Not a drop of oil was found.”

“I remember. But I guess Ms. Mel figured a little digging wouldn’t hurt anything since it’s a small area, away from the main house and far away from where the cows are kept. It’s the south pasture.”

“The south pasture?”

“Yes. Nobody ever goes over there.”

*Nobody but me*, Gavin thought. He knew everyone thought of the south pasture as wasted land since it had compacted soil, little or no vegetation and unsuitable irrigation. However, that part of the ranch was where he could escape and find solace whenever he needed to be alone. For some reason, going there always renewed his spirits. It was where he’d gone as a kid whenever he would miss his mother, where he’d gone after getting word about his father being killed in the Middle East. And last year he had camped out there a couple of days after returning from his mission and believing his teammate Coop was dead. It was there in the south pastures where Gavin had dealt with the thought of his good friend dying.

“Like I said, Gavin. Your grandmother has everything under control.”

He wasn’t so sure of that. “I’ll find that out for myself since I’ll be home in a few days. Don’t mention my visit to Gramma Mel. I want to surprise her.” When he hung up the phone he rubbed a frustrated hand down his face.

“Viper? Hey, man, you okay?”

Viper turned to see four sets of eyes staring at him with concern. His SEAL teammates. They were Brisbane Westmoreland, team name Bane; Thurston McRoy, team name Mac; Laramie Cooper, team name Coop; and David Holloway, team name Flipper. The five of them had survived all phases of SEAL training together and were not only teammates, but like brothers. More than once they’d risked their lives for each other and would continue to have each other’s backs, on duty or off.

“Viper?”

He heard the impatience in Mac’s voice and spoke up before Mac’s edginess got the best of them. “It’s my grandmother.”

“What about Gramma Mel?” Flipper asked, moving closer. Each of them had at one time or another gone home with Viper and met his grandmother.

“Is she sick?” Bane asked.

Viper shook his head. “No, it’s nothing like that. My neighbor called to let me know that Gramma Mel gave some college professor permission to dig on our property. This professor has convinced my grandmother that Jesse James buried some of his stolen loot on the Silver Spurs.”

The worried expressions on his friends’ faces switched to relief and then amusement. “Is that all?” Coop asked, grinning, resting his broad shoulder against a wall.

“That’s enough. Nobody has permission to dig on the Silver Spurs.”

“Evidently your grandmother gave it,” Bane pointed out.

“Well, that permission is being rescinded and I’m going to make sure Gramma Mel and this professor know it.”

“Did you talk to Caldwell?” Flipper asked.

“Yes, but he’ll go along with anything my grandmother says. Now I have to head straight home instead of making that pit stop in Mississippi like I’d planned. Hell, that means I’m giving up a chance to get laid for this foolishness.”

Mac grinned. “But what if Jesse James did hide some of his loot on your land? If I recall, he and his gang robbed a number of banks in and around the Missouri area.”

Gavin frowned as he zipped up his gear and faced his friends. “There’s not any loot on the Silver Spurs and nobody can convince me otherwise.”

# One

Layla Harris smiled as she accepted the plate of cookies. “Ms. Melody, I wished you wouldn’t have gone to the trouble.”

She said the words out of politeness, knowing they weren’t true. Nobody could bake like Melody Blake and she was glad the older woman not only liked doing so but also enjoyed sharing her baked goods with Layla. Especially when the snack included a delicious tall glass of milk that had been produced right here on this ranch.

“No trouble at all,” Melody Blake said, smiling. “Besides, I enjoy your company. It can get lonely in these parts.”

Layla knew the Silver Spurs was a good half-hour car ride from town. At least Ms. Melody had neighbors living fairly close who checked in on her regularly. Layla had discovered the land owned by the majority of the people in this area had been in their families for generations and most of it was used for ranching cattle.

There was something special about the eighteen hundred acres encompassing the Silver Spurs and the spacious Blake family ranch home. Layla had felt welcomed the moment she had driven into the yard. The sprawling ranch house was massive and Layla figured it had to be over fifty-five hundred square feet. What she liked most was the wraparound porch with a swing that faced a beautiful pond.

Ms. Melody, a retired librarian, had said she didn’t mind living in the huge house alone because she was used to it, and reading and baking kept her busy. The kitchen alone was massive and it was where the older woman spent a lot of her days, creating mouthwatering treats. In addition to the huge main house, there was a spacious guest cottage located within walking distance.

When Ms. Melody had agreed to let Layla conduct her archaeological dig on the property she’d also kindly invited Layla to stay in the main house, but Layla preferred the guesthouse. She could come and go without disturbing the older woman.

According to Ms. Melody, the Silver Spurs had been a prosperous cattle ranch for years. It had even survived when the majority of the men, including Ms. Melody’s husband, left to fight in the Vietnam War. When her husband and son became full-time military men, they’d hired a foreman to keep things running smoothly. Ms. Melody also explained that although her grandson was active in the military as a navy SEAL, whenever he returned home he reclaimed his role as a rancher.

Layla met Caldwell Andrews, the ranch foreman, and found the man pleasant and capable. The same held true for the men who worked for him. They appeared to be hard workers who were dedicated and loyal to the Blake family.

There was so much about Melody Blake that reminded Layla of her own grandmother. Both were independent, in the best of health for women their ages and were active in their churches and communities. Only thing, Gramma Candace wasn’t a baker. She preferred spending her time with a knitting needle instead of a baking pan.

“I thought I’d bake chocolate chip cookies this time. They’re Gavin’s favorite,” Ms. Melody said, breaking into Layla’s musings.

At the mention of Ms. Melody’s grandson Layla couldn’t dismiss the shiver that went through her body. Gavin Blake was a hunk. Although she’d never met him in person, she had seen enough of the man to judge his looks thanks to the numerous framed photographs that hung on several walls in this house. Layla knew it wasn’t the man’s ego that was responsible, but the grandmother who loved her grandson and was proud of the fact that, like the father and grandfather before him, he was a navy SEAL.

From all the photographs she’d seen, Layla could tell just how well built Gavin Blake was, how drop-dead gorgeous. He was definitely eye candy of the most delectable kind. Any woman would be hard-pressed not to feel some kind of sensual pull whenever she feasted her gaze on his image.

Layla had studied one of the close-up photos, which showed dimples when he smiled, a blunt nose, stubborn jaw and full lips. His angular face made him look so much like the warrior she’d heard him to be. She’d also heard he was quite the ladies’ man. That bit of information had been shared by some of the locals she’d met at the café where she occasionally ate lunch. Once they’d heard she was about to dig on Blake property they didn’t hesitate to give her an earful.

According to a very talkative waitress whose eyes lit up whenever she spoke of Gavin, Layla had learned he had been a local football hero who had put Cornerstone, Missouri, on the map after leading his high school team to the state championship. No one had been surprised when he'd gone to the naval academy since he'd come from a military family. His father had been killed in the Gulf War and very little was known about his mother. Rumor had it that she'd been pretty, a few years younger than her husband and the two had married within a week of meeting in New York. Apparently, she'd never adjusted to being a military wife or living out on a ranch and had packed up and left. To this day she had never returned.

"Your grandson and I have something in common," Layla said, returning her thoughts to the conversation, "since chocolate chip cookies are my favorite, as well."

As she bit into a cookie, she thought that chocolate chip being their favorite was *all* she and Gavin had in common. Unlike him, she hadn't spent much time enjoying the opposite sex. She'd spent most of her life in school, getting her advanced degrees and working toward tenure with little time for male companionship. She had doctorates in History and Archaeology, and at twenty-six she was the youngest professor at Flintwood University in Seattle. That position had come with sacrifices such as limiting her social life, especially when it came to dating. The only people bothered by her decisions were her parents. They were hoping a man would come along and put a ring on her finger and a baby in her belly. She was their only child and they didn't hide the fact they wanted grandchildren.

Nor had they ever hidden the fact they weren't happy with her career choice. They were both gifted neurosurgeons and they'd expected her to follow in their footsteps by entering the medical field. They hadn't been pleased when she'd chosen not to do so. The thought of someone digging a hole in the ground instead of saving lives didn't make sense to them. But she'd never felt the calling to be a doctor, and she knew history was important, too. Understanding the past kept people from repeating their mistakes.

"So, Layla, what's the game plan for today?"

Layla smiled. She liked Ms. Melody's attitude. When Layla had shown up on the Blakes' doorstep over a week ago she hadn't known what to expect. She definitely hadn't been prepared for the older woman to believe her story about hidden treasure. She'd faced so much cynicism from colleagues regarding her research she'd come prepared to argue her points. Ms. Melody had listened and asked intelligent questions. Plenty of them. The older woman had also taken two days to review Layla's research, which had resulted in more questions. It was only then that Ms. Melody had agreed, with a request for periodic updates.

Ms. Melody had told Layla that her grandson would most likely not support her decision but she'd also promised she would deal with him when the time came. Besides, she didn't expect him to return home for a few months, and it was highly likely the treasure would be found by then. Layla hoped that was true. Her creditability with the university was on the line. The possibility of tenure was riding on the success of this dig and publication of her findings and techniques.

She'd participated in several excavations but this would be the first one she'd spearheaded. Funds from the university hadn't been as much as she'd requested, due to budget cuts, but she was determined to make good use of what she'd been given and show results. The head of her department, Dr. Clayburn, hadn't offered much support. He'd even tried shifting the funds to another project. Lucky for her, he'd been out of the country when the vote had been taken.

She'd worked all her life for this chance to prove she was an archaeologist of note. If her research was correct—and she knew it was—she'd be the first one to find any of Jesse James's treasure, and she'd be the first to use some of the latest technology on a successful dig.

"Since all the permits are in order, I contacted the members of my team," she said, smiling. "They will be arriving in a week." Her excavation team consisted of students from the university, some from her classes and some from Dr. Clayburn's. She had spoken with everyone and they were as anxious as she was to get started.

"You have to be excited about that."

"Yes," she answered, though she knew that's when the pressure would begin. "The equipment will start arriving on Monday." Layla took another bite into her cookie before adding, "Again, I really appreciate you letting us dig on your property, Ms. Melody." It showed Layla that Ms. Melody believed in her work.

"There's no need to thank me. Anyone who took the time to read your research with an open mind would reach the same conclusion. It's historically documented that James and his gang robbed a bank in Tinsel and then headed to east Missouri before a sheriff posse drove them south. I think you're right. Given how fast a horse can travel loaded down with a cache of gold bars it makes perfect sense that the gang holed up somewhere in

this area before taking a chance to continue east. And it makes even more sense that they got rid of some of their loot before heading toward the state line. Like I said, your research was thorough.”

An inner glow filled Layla. Although others had read the same documentation they couldn't forget her age or inexperience. Because of that, they assumed Layla was on a wild-goose chase, wasting university funds that were needed to finance more important archeological projects.

At that moment they heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up in the yard.

Ms. Melody glanced over at the clock on the wall. “It's not even noon yet. I wonder who that could be.”

Getting up from the table, Ms. Melody went over to the window and glanced out. When she turned back around a huge smile covered her entire face. Layla heard the love in the older woman's voice when she said, “It's Gavin. He's home. The rancher returns.”

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Gavin grabbed his duffel bag from the truck before closing the door. He tilted his Stetson back on his head and looked at the car parked in front of what his grandmother called the guest cottage and what he called the party house. It was where he and his teammates would hang out whenever they visited.

Gavin hoped that his grandmother hadn't extended an invitation for the woman to stay on their property as well as dig on their land. If that was the case, he intended to send her packing quickly. He didn't want anyone taking advantage of his family.

He thought about what he was missing in Mississippi. He'd looked forward to being in bed with that bartender about now. Calling to cancel had been hard. Promising to head her way as soon as he'd taken care of this unexpected family emergency had satisfied her somewhat.

Walking around his truck, he took a deep breath of the Missouri air. This was home and he'd always enjoyed returning after every covert operation. Silver Spurs meant a lot to him. To his family. It was his legacy. It was land that had been in his family for generations. Land that he loved. He enjoyed being a rancher almost as much as he enjoyed being a SEAL. *Almost*. He would admit that being a SEAL was his passion.

Gavin appreciated having a good man like Caldwell to keep things running in his absence. The older man had done the same thing during Gavin's father's time. And Caldwell's father had been foreman to Gavin's grandfather, so Caldwell and his family also had deep history with the ranch.

While he was home Gavin intended to return to ranching. He couldn't wait to get back in the saddle and ride Acer as well as help Caldwell and the men with the herd. And he needed to go over the books with Phil Vinson, the ranch's accountant.

However, the first thing on his agenda was a discussion with his grandmother about her giving someone permission to dig on their land. Hopefully he'd have everything settled by next week and he would hightail it to Mississippi. All he needed was one night with a woman and then he'd be good for a while.

He had taken one step onto the porch when the front door swung open and his grandmother walked out. She was smiling, and when she opened her arms he dropped his duffel bag and walked straight into the hug awaiting him. She was petite but her grip was almost stronger than that of a man. He loved and admired her so damn much. This was the woman who'd been there for him when his own mother had left. The woman who'd been there for him when he'd laid his father to rest sixteen years ago. She had, and always would be, his rock. That's why he refused to tolerate anyone trying to take advantage of her kindness.

“Welcome home, Gavin,” she said, finally releasing him so she could lean back and look at him from head to toe as she always did when he returned from one of his assignments. “I didn't expect you for a few months yet. Did everything go okay?”

He smiled. She always asked him that knowing full well that because of the classified nature of his job he couldn't tell her anything. “Yes, Gramma Mel, everything went okay. I'm back because I understand you and I need to—”

He glanced over his grandmother's shoulder and he blinked, not sure he was seeing straight. A woman stood in the doorway, but she wasn't just *some* woman. She had to be the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen. Hell, she looked like everything he'd fantasized a woman to be, even while fully clothed in jeans and a pullover sweater. He didn't want to consider what his reaction would be if she was naked.

His grandmother sensed his attention had shifted. She turned around and smiled at the woman. “Layla, come out here. I want you to meet my grandson.”

*Layla?* Where had she come from? Was she the granddaughter of one of his grandmother's fellow church members or something? He recalled Mrs. Cotton had a granddaughter who visited on occasion from Florida and her name was Layla...or was it Liza? Hell, he couldn't remember. He wasn't thinking straight. When this Layla

began walking toward him he ceased thinking at all. She was wearing stretch jeans and a long sweater and had an eye-catching figure with curves in all the right places.

Gavin fought for air as she neared. He studied her features, trying to figure out what about them had him spellbound. Was it the caramel-colored skin, dark chocolate eyes, dimpled cheeks, button nose or well-defined kissable lips? Maybe every single thing.

Wow! Was he that hard up for a woman or did this Layla actually look *that* good? When she stopped beside him, a smile on her lips, he knew she actually looked that good. He kept his gaze trained on her face—even when he really wanted his eyes to roam all over her.

Not waiting for his grandmother to make introductions, his mouth eased into a smile. He reached out his hand and said, “Hello, I’m Gavin.”

The moment their hands touched, a jolt of desire shot through his body. It’s a wonder he hadn’t lost his balance. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before and he touched women all the time. From the expression that had flashed in her eyes he knew she had felt it, as well. Yes, there was definitely strong sexual chemistry between them.

“It’s nice meeting you, Gavin,” she said softly. He even liked the sound of her voice. “And I’m Layla. Layla Harris.”

*Harris?* His horny senses suddenly screeched to a stop. Did she say Harris? Was Layla related to this Professor Harris? The woman’s daughter perhaps? Was she part of the excavation team? She looked young, around twenty or twenty-one. Now he had even more questions and he was determined to get some answers when he had that little talk with his grandmother. “It’s nice meeting you, too, Layla.”

It was only when she eased her hand from his that he realized he still held it. She turned to his grandmother. “Thanks for the cookies and milk, Ms. Melody. I enjoyed them. I need to run into town to pick up a few items. Anything I can get for you while I’m there?”

“No. I’ve got everything I need.”

Layla nodded. “Okay. I should be back in a couple of hours.”

“Take your time.”

Giving Gavin one last smile, she quickly walked down the steps toward the parked car. He stood and watched her every move until she was inside the car with the door closed. It was then that he turned his attention back to his grandmother. Not surprisingly, she was staring at him.

“For a minute I thought you’d forgotten I was standing here, Gavin Timothy Blake III,” his grandmother said in an amused tone.

So he’d been caught ogling a woman. It hadn’t been the first time and he doubted it would be the last. “What can I say, Gramma Mel?” He grinned sheepishly. “She’s awfully pretty.”

He decided not to mention how he appreciated that sway to her hips when she walked, or how nice her breasts looked beneath her sweater.

“Yes, she is pretty. Come inside. Just so happen I baked some chocolate chip cookies this morning.”

That made Gavin smile even wider as he picked up his duffel bag. His mouth watered just thinking about the cookies. Now if he could only get that image of Layla Harris’s backside out of his mind...

“How are the rest of your teammates?” his grandmother asked, leading him through the front door. “You guys were together for over two months on this mission.”

He glanced around as he entered. Everything looked the same. However, instead of smelling like vanilla, his grandmother’s favorite scent, the house smelled of woman. Namely Layla Harris.

“Everyone is fine, just anxious to get home. Bane and his wife are renewing their vows in a few weeks and I plan to attend the ceremony,” he said, placing his duffel bag on the sofa for now. “This was Coop’s first covert operation after being rescued and he’s good as ever.”

The only reason Gavin shared that much info with his grandmother was because when he’d come home last year before the holidays everyone had believed Coop had been killed on assignment. The entire team had taken Coop’s death hard. Then right before Christmas, they’d found Coop was alive and being held hostage in the Syrian mountains. Gavin and his team had been sent in to get Coop, as well as other hostages, out alive.

“This was Bane’s first time back, too, right?” his grandmother asked.

Did his grandmother not forget anything? Bane, being master sniper, had been recruited to work in DC for six months teaching SEAL recruits. “Yes, we were glad to have him back as well. And before I forget, I plan to head for Mississippi next week. I’ve got important business to take care of there.” His grandmother didn’t need to know that the important business was getting laid.

As soon as he entered the kitchen he went straight to the sink to wash his hands and then quickly headed for the coffeepot. After pouring a cup, he turned and watched Gramma Mel arrange a half-dozen cookies on a plate for him. He smiled. Anyone else would eat just one or two, but his grandmother knew him well. He needed at least a half dozen to get things started. "You need a fresh cup of coffee?" he asked her.

"Thanks. That would be nice, Gavin."

After pouring another cup he moved away from the counter to sit down and she sat across from him. He placed her coffee in front of her and grabbed for a cookie. She slapped away his hand. "Say grace first."

He chuckled, recalling the protocol she expected of him. After quickly bowing his head in silence, he grabbed a cookie and almost swallowed it whole. He loved his grandmother's chocolate chip cookies.

She shook her head as she took a sip of her coffee. Now was as good a time as any to bring up what had brought him rushing back to the Silver Spurs. "What's this I hear about you giving some professor permission to dig on our land?"

Gramma Mel raised a brow over her cup of coffee. "And you know this how?"

He held his grandmother's gaze. "Sherman Lott called. He thought I had a right to know."

She frowned. "As far as I'm concerned, Sherman needs to mind his own business."

Gavin stared at this grandmother as he bit into another cookie. "The way I figure it, Caldwell is the one who should have called me. He's paid to keep me informed about what's going on around here. But he wouldn't call because he'd think doing so would be disloyal to you. And we both know what you mean to him."

His grandmother didn't say anything. She just stared into her cup of coffee. There really wasn't anything to say. Gavin had known for years that his grandmother and Caldwell had a thing going on. He wasn't stupid. Nor was he insensitive. He wanted the two people who meant the most to him to be happy. He figured that one day they would stop trying to be so damn discreet. In the meantime, what they did was their business. He'd only brought it up now to make a point.

"Caldwell would have told you had he thought it was important," his grandmother finally said.

"Whatever." He took a sip of his coffee. "So what about it? Did you give permission for a dig to take place on our property?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Yes, I gave my permission and I see nothing wrong with it."

Gavin kept his cool. "Well, I do. Honestly, Gramma Mel. You actually bought into this professor's tale about Jesse James's buried treasure?"

"Yes, I read her research and found it thorough and convincing. I have a copy if you want to read it for yourself."

"I don't need to read anything to know the research is false. There's no buried treasure on our land, and I'm against the idea of anyone digging around for nothing."

His grandmother leaned forward in her chair. "And I happen to disagree. But what you believe is a moot point since I've given Layla permission and from what she told me this morning, her equipment will arrive in a few days—"

"Hold up," he said, giving the time-out sign with his hands. "Why did you give Layla Harris permission? It's her mother who's running things, right?"

His grandmother look confused. "Her mother? I never met the woman. Layla is in charge or should I say Dr. Layla Harris is in charge."

Surprise made Gavin raise his eyebrows. "Layla is the professor?"

"Yes, and a very competent one."

Gavin shook his head, not believing such a thing was possible. "She's young."

"She's twenty-six. However, I admit she does look younger."

*Twenty-six?* That was still young and yes, she definitely looked younger. He drew in a deep breath, trying to force back the memories of just how she'd looked...in her jeans and sweater. And then the thought that she'd deliberately oozed her way onto his grandmother's good side made him mad.

"You might have given your permission but I have not given mine. Something that major means we need to be in full agreement."

"No it doesn't. If you recall, we agreed that any time you were away on military business I could make decisions in the best interest of the Silver Spurs."

"I don't consider digging up our land to be in the best interest of anything."

"I disagree. I'm excited about what Layla might find. And I also gave her permission to stay in the guesthouse."

The line of Gavin's jaw tightened. He'd figured as much. Melody Blake was stubborn but then so was he. He ate the last of his cookies, drained his coffee and stood. "I'm tired and need a full day of sleep. But we will talk about this again, Gramma Mel. In the meantime, I suggest you tell Dr. Layla Harris to hold up on bringing any type of equipment to the Silver Spurs."

And without saying anything else Gavin walked out of the kitchen.

## Two

Layla pulled her car off on the shoulder of the road, unable to drive any farther. Once she killed her vehicle's ignition she forced herself to breathe deeply a few times. Never in all her twenty-six years had any man wreaked havoc on her senses like Gavin Blake. Never had any man left her in such a mind-blowing sensuous state. Who would have thought a man could have her nerves dancing, her mind racing, her stomach swirling and her nipples actually feeling like they'd been stroked? She had been tempted to glide her hands over every inch of his sexy, sculpted body.

She had known he was the epitome of male perfection from all those photographs she'd seen. To be honest, that's where her troubles had started...with those photographs. In one, his lips had curved a little at the corners as he stared at her as if to say he knew exactly what she was thinking. She knew it was her wild imagination, but every time she glanced at that particular photo it was as if he was checking her out with those intense dark eyes of his. As if he knew her fantasies included him. Even in his photo, his muscular power had nearly overtaken her senses.

Pretty much like he'd done today. She hadn't counted on the real thing being even more explosive than his pictures. Before he'd realized she was in his grandmother's doorway, she had stood there spellbound as a rush of emotion made her body ache with desire. Then, when he'd noticed her, those eyes had made her yearn for something she didn't need. Something she had never needed. A man.

Gavin Blake had stood on his grandmother's porch wearing a pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt with his military tag hanging around his neck. Even wearing her sweater she found the air cool, but the temperature hadn't seemed to faze him. Was he as hot-blooded as he looked?

The one thing she did know was that he was a big guy. Tall. Muscular. Built. She could imagine him as the football hero she'd heard he used to be, tackling players with little or no trouble. And she could definitely imagine him as a SEAL, taking on the bad guys to protect his country.

And she couldn't help but imagine him naked in bed...with her. Unfamiliar sensations raced through her just thinking about it. When he had touched her hand while staring into her eyes, she'd forgotten all about Ms. Melody standing there and had all but purred out loud. Blood had pounded through her entire body. She doubted she would ever use her hand again without remembering the feel of him. If her body reacted from a single touch to her hand, she didn't want to imagine him touching her anywhere else...her breasts, her stomach, between her legs. And when he smiled at her, she'd been a goner. She could still feel the impact in the pit of her stomach.

She had never experienced this kind of need in her life. She didn't even have a battery-operated boyfriend like some of her single female colleagues joked about owning. Sex was something that had never been on her "must do" list. She'd put her energy into her academic career. But there was something about Gavin that made her think of heat and desire. Something that made the area at the juncture of her thighs quiver. Made her hormones sizzle.

Drawing in another deep breath Layla admitted she needed to get a grip. She wasn't in Cornerstone, Missouri, to lust after the man who jointly owned the land she needed as an excavation site. All she wanted to do was stay on schedule and have a successful dig. Besides, Gavin Blake probably looked at other women the same way he'd looked at her. Hadn't that waitress in town enlightened Layla as to just what a ladies' man he was? Now seeing was believing.

Seeing was also a warning to keep her common sense intact and be on guard. An involvement with Gavin Blake was the last thing she needed, even though her body was trying to convince her otherwise.

There was something else she should be concerned about, something she just remembered. Ms. Melody had said that her grandson might be against the idea of a dig on the Silver Spurs. Although Ms. Melody had given the okay, would Gavin's return change anything? The thought of losing the permission she'd gained sent nervous jitters through her.

Maybe she should talk to Gavin Blake herself. She would present her research to him the same way she'd presented it to Ms. Melody. Layla wanted to believe he was reasonable. It wasn't as if she would be digging all over his property. She had narrowed it to one location.

Yes, she would talk to him herself but only after she talked to Ms. Melody—and after Layla convinced herself she could talk to him without every part of her turning to mush.

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Gavin's eyes flew open and his entire body went on full alert. His ears picked up the sounds around him and it was then he recalled he was back in the United States and not in some godforsaken country where he had to be on guard 24/7.

It was always this way for the first few days after he returned home. He had to regroup and get his mind back in sync with normal life, deprogram from battle mode and ease back into the life of a rancher.

Glancing at the clock on his bedroom wall, he saw it was ten at night. He wasn't surprised that he'd slept nearly nine hours straight. His ears perked up at the sound that had woken him. Was that a harmonica? Granted it was far off but he could still hear it. His teammates teased him about having sonic ears, because of his ability to hear a sound over a hundred feet away.

He wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse when he involuntarily eavesdropped on conversations he wished he hadn't. Like the time Mac was outside the barracks and downstairs in the yard talking to his wife on the phone, telling her in explicit sexual terms what he planned to do to her when he returned home from their mission. Gavin had heard every single word and the details had nearly burned his ears. They had definitely made him horny as hell. For a fleeting moment it had made him wish he had a wife or an exclusive woman he could return home to instead of a little black book filled with names of willing women.

Gavin pushed the whimsical thought from his mind as he lay in bed and listened to the music. It sounded pretty damn good. He sat up and rubbed his hands across his face as if to wipe away the sleep. Pushing the bedcovers aside, he eased out of bed. Not bothering to cover his naked body, he strolled over to the window, pushed aside the curtain and looked out. The October air produced a chill that would send shivers through a normal person's body. But because of his SEAL training, Gavin could withstand temperatures of the highest and lowest extremes.

The way the moonlight crested the rocky bluffs, dissecting the valleys and rolling plains, was simply breathtaking. There was nothing more beautiful than Silver Spurs at night. For as long as he could remember he'd always been moved by the grandeur of the land he was born on.

The harmonica stopped and he knew the sound had come from the party house where Layla was staying. Since the woman was still in residence he could only assume his grandmother had not delivered his message. Had she done so he was certain Professor Layla Harris would have left by now.

Maybe he should talk to Layla Harris himself. Make it clear where he stood. He moved back toward the bed. Instead of getting into it, Gavin ignored the voice of reason saying he should wait and talk to Layla in the morning and grabbed his clothes off the chair. After sliding into his jeans he tugged his T-shirt over his head. He put on his socks and boots and headed for the door.

The music from the harmonica started up again.

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Layla placed her harmonica aside. Playing it relaxed her and she would always appreciate her grandfather for teaching her. She could vividly recall those summers when she would sit on the front porch of her grandparents' New Orleans home and listen to her grandfather play his harmonica, then beg him to teach her how. When Grampa Chip passed away ten years ago, his request had been that she play the harmonica at his funeral and she had.

Thoughts of losing the grandfather she adored always made her sad and that was the last emotion she wanted to feel right now. Even when she had no idea what would happen with this dig she wanted happy thoughts. Earlier, Ms. Melody assured Layla that all was well. Her grandson was too exhausted to think straight and he needed a full day of sleep.

Layla hoped that was good news considering she had all that machinery on the way. She figured Ms. Melody knew her grandson better than Layla did. She would wait for Gavin Blake to get his full day of sleep. Hopefully, after another discussion with Ms. Melody, he would see things the way his grandmother did.

Layla glanced around the guest cottage, thinking how much she liked it here. The place was larger than her apartment in Seattle. She definitely didn't have a huge living room with a fireplace or a spacious master bedroom with a large en suite bath with a walk-in shower and Jacuzzi tub. The cottage also had a loft that could be used

as additional sleeping space, and an eat-in kitchen. She loved the wood floors throughout and the high ceilings. And because it sat a distance away from the main house she could play her harmonica without worrying about disturbing anyone. That was something she couldn't do at her own apartment.

She stood to stretch and was about to head toward the bedroom when she heard a knock on the door. Glancing at the clock on the wall she saw it was after ten. Usually Ms. Melody was in bed every night by eight since she was such an early riser. Had something happened? Had the older woman decided not to butt heads with her grandson and didn't want Layla and her team to dig on the Silver Spurs after all?

Layla moved toward the door. It didn't have a peephole so she leaned against the wooden frame and asked, "Who is it?"

"Gavin. Gavin Blake."

Her gaze widened and heat swirled around in her lower belly. She tried forcing the sensations aside. Why would Gavin seek her out at this time of night? Had something happened to Ms. Melody? From their talks she knew the older woman suffered occasionally with migraines.

She opened the door and the man stood there, almost bigger than life, and looking as yummy as a chocolate sundae. He was dressed as he had been that morning. Jeans. T-shirt. Western boots. But her brain wasn't computing *what* he was wearing as much as *how* well he was wearing it.

Although it was cold, he wasn't even wearing a jacket. He leaned in the doorway looking exactly like any woman's dream. Hot. Sexy. And then some. He was one of those can't-get-to-sleep nighttime fantasies that left you hot and bothered with no relief in sight. It was those thoughts that had her unable to speak, so she just stood there and stared at the penetrating dark gaze holding hers as her heart beat violently in her chest.

She knew SEALs stayed in shape but the body of the man standing before her was simply ridiculous. She knew of no other man whose body was so well built. So magnificently toned. His jeans appeared plastered to him in the most decadent way. He made her think of wicked temptation and sinful delights.

Doubting she could stand there much longer without going up in flames, even with the blast of cold air, she swallowed deeply and then forced her voice to ask, "Is something wrong with Ms. Melody?"

From the look that quickly flashed across his features she could tell he was surprised by her question. "What makes you think something is wrong with my grandmother?"

Layla sighed deeply. "What other reason would bring you here?"

That, Gavin thought, was a good question. Why *was* he here? He had heard the harmonica. And had quickly figured out the source was Layla in the party house. So what had driven him out into the night? He definitely could have waited until morning to talk to her about the dig. Had he come here just to stand in the doorway to try and get his fill of looking at her?

"Gavin?"

And why did the sound of his name from her lips send desire throbbing through him? In his horny state, it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge. "Yes?"

"If nothing is wrong with Ms. Melody, why are you here?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I heard you playing a harmonica."

Layla's jaw dropped in surprise. She must have been shocked that he heard her. The guest cottage was far away from the main house and on the opposite side of the bedrooms. Gramma Mel had probably told her he would be sleeping hard for a full day.

But he wasn't sleeping. He was here. He rubbed his hand down his face in frustration. He needed to get to Mississippi fast or else...

Or else what? He would begin thinking of Layla Harris in his bed? Too late. His mind had already gone there. More than once. Those thoughts had pretty much settled in the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Having her at the party house wasn't helping matters. Typically, all he had to do was snap his fingers to get any woman he wanted. Why were his fingers itching to be snapped? With Layla Harris would it be that easy? Why didn't he think so?

"I am so sorry," she said now. "I didn't mean to wake you. I know you need to get all that rest and—"

"You didn't wake me."

"But you said that you heard me playing."

"I did, but that's not what awakened me." Gavin figured there was no reason to tell her how disrupted his sleep patterns tended to be during his first few days back home. Which still left her question unanswered. Why was he here? Why had he sought her out? In the middle of the night? "You play very well," he said.

Gavin thought she was even more beautiful than she had looked this morning. He blamed the easy smile that touched her lips.

“Thanks, but I’m sure you didn’t come all this way just to give me that compliment.”

No he hadn’t. He’d actually come to give her hell for feeding his grandmother a bunch of crock about buried treasure on their land. So he needed to say what he had come to say. “We should talk. May I come in?”

\*

It was funny he would ask. After all, she was the visitor on his land. This was his house. Ms. Melody had told her that Gavin and some of his SEAL teammates had built it a few years ago as a place to hang out whenever they visited.

Gavin and his friends could get loud and rowdy here at the cottage without disturbing his grandmother. That accounted for why the place was so spacious with the cupboards bare—except for a refrigerator stocked with beer and wine coolers. Not to mention that a deck of cards seemed to be in every room.

“Yes, of course you can come in. You own the place.”

“But you’re my grandmother’s guest.”

Had he said that to remind her she wasn’t *his* guest? To remind her that her presence on the Silver Spurs was something he didn’t support? Layla would find out soon enough.

She moved from the door and he followed, closing it behind him. “Would you like something to drink?” Grinning brightly, she said, “There’s plenty of beer and wine coolers in the fridge.”

Gavin chuckled. “I’ll take a beer.”

She nodded. “One beer coming up.” She felt his gaze on her backside.

“Here you are. I feel funny doing this,” Layla said, coming back into the room carrying a cold bottle of beer.

He lifted a brow. “Doing what?”

“Serving you your own beer.”

“No reason that you should. You’re my grandmother’s guest.”

That was the second time he’d said that, Layla thought. Not one to beat around the bush, she crossed the room to hand him the beer, and then wished she hadn’t. Their hands had only briefly touched so why was heat filling her? And why was he looking at her as if that same heat filled him?

She quickly took a step back and wiped her hands down the sides of her jeans.

“You think that will get rid of it?”

She met his eyes. She knew what he’d insinuated but she wanted to be sure. “Get rid of what?”

“Nothing.”

He then opened the bottle and took a huge gulp. Afterward, he licked his lips while she watched. Her chest tightened. He lowered the bottle from his mouth and held her gaze. “Want a sip?”

She drew in a deep breath to clamp down on her emotions. Was he offering to share his beer? For them to drink from the same bottle? Doing something like that was way too intimate for her. Evidently not for him. A distinct warmth coiled around her midsection. The way his eyes darkened wasn’t helping matters.

She should call his bluff and take a sip. But that might lead to other things. It might give him ideas. The same ideas floating crazily through her head. The last thing she needed was an involvement with a man. Any man. Especially him. Her work was too important to her. The idea of an October fling was not. “No thanks. I had one earlier and one was enough for me.”

Instead of saying anything, he nodded and raised the bottle to his lips to drain the rest. She watched his throat work. When had seeing a man drink anything been a turn-on?

When he finished the bottle and lowered it, she asked, “Want another one?”

He smiled at her. “No, one was enough for me.”

She couldn’t help but smile back at his use of her words. “I don’t know, Gavin Blake. You seem like the sort of guy that could handle a couple of those.”

“You’re right, but that’s not why I’m here.”

His words were a reminder that he hadn’t shown up tonight for chitchat and drinking beer. “Yes, you said you wanted to talk. Is there a problem?” Layla knew there was and figured he was about to spell it out for her.

“Who taught you to play the harmonica?”

She’d expected him to just dive in. His question threw her. “My grandfather,” she said, angling her head to look up at him. “He was the best. At least most people thought so.”

“And who was your grandfather?”

“Chip Harris.”

Surprise made Gavin's jaw drop. "Chip Harris? *The Chip Harris*?"

Layla nodded. "Yes," she said, intentionally keeping her voice light. Very few people knew that. It wasn't something she boasted about, although she was proud of her grandfather's success and accomplishments. He'd been a good man, a great humanitarian and a gifted musician. But most of all he had been a wonderful grandfather. Her grandparents had helped to keep her world sane during the times her parents had made it insane.

Layla saw Gavin's dark, penetrating eyes suddenly go cold. "Is anything wrong?"

"So that's how you did it."

She raised a brow. "That's how I did what?"

"How you were able to talk my grandmother into going along with your crazy scheme of Jesse James's treasure being buried on my property. You probably heard she's a big fan of Chip Harris, and used the fact that you're his granddaughter to get in good with her. Get Gramma Mel to trust you and—"

"You jerk." Anger flared through her. His accusations filled her with rage. "How dare you accuse me of doing something so underhanded, so unethical and low? You might not know me but you know your grandmother. How can you think so little of her to imagine she has such a weak mind she could be taken in by anyone? How can you not trust her judgment?"

Layla drew in a disgusted breath and then added furiously, "For your information, I never once mentioned anything about my relationship to Chip Harris to her. Ms. Melody's decision was based on my research, which she took the time to read. And she asked questions and found some of her own answers. So regardless of what you believe, her decision was based on facts, Gavin Blake. Facts and nothing more."

Gavin was stunned by Layla's rage. When her words sank in he regretted accusing her of manipulating Gramma Mel. He'd crossed the line and he knew it. He owed her an apology. "I'm sorry. I should not have accused you of that."

"But you did. Save your apology for your grandmother. She's one of the most intelligent women I know. But tonight you made her out to be a woman who can be influenced easily by anything, especially name-dropping. Like I said, you should know your grandmother better than that."

Gavin didn't say anything. Probably because he knew she was right. His grandmother was as sharp as a tack. She'd told Layla so many stories of how he'd tried to pull one over on her...unsuccessfully. Maybe he should do what his grandmother had done and read Layla's report for himself.

"I should not have come here tonight," he finally said.

"No, you should not have, especially if you came to talk that kind of BS. I don't have time for it."

Layla's words seemed to irritate him. "You don't think I have a right to question why you're here?"

She didn't back down. In fact she took a step closer. "You have every right. But you already know why I'm here. If you don't agree with your grandmother or you want to question why I feel a dig on the Silver Spurs is warranted, I can understand that. But what you did Gavin is question my integrity. I take that personally."

"You have to admit the idea of buried treasure on my land is pretty far-fetched."

"Maybe to you but not to me. You're a SEAL. I'm sure there are times when you engage in covert operations where the facts lead you to believe your assignment will be successful...although logically it doesn't seem possible."

He frowned. "It's not the same."

"I think it is. I did my research on the life of Jesse James. Five years' worth. I studied his life, specifically that bank robbery in Tinsel. That's what led me here. If you took the time to read my research you would see it's all there. All I'm asking is for you to give me the same courtesy Ms. Melody did and take the time to read my work."

"I don't have to read a report to know what you're claiming isn't true."

In frustration, Layla blew out a breath and threw up her hands. "Why are you so stubborn?"

Instead of answering he gave her a careless shrug of his broad shoulders. "I'm not being stubborn. Just realistic."

He wasn't even trying to be reasonable. "So what do you want, Gavin? Since you believe that I've hoodwinked your grandmother and I'm a lunatic on the hunt for buried treasure, did you come here tonight to ask me to leave? To tell me to get off your property because you won't allow me and my team to dig?"

When he didn't say anything, but continued to stare down at her with those dark, penetrating eyes of his, she knew what she'd just said was true. "Fine. I'll leave in the morning."

She moved with the intention of walking around him to show him the door. He surprised her when he reached out and grabbed her arm. The moment he touched her it seemed every hormone in her body sizzled. She couldn't move away from him. His hand skimmed down her arm in a sensual caress.

"What do you think you're doing?" She heard the tension in her voice and felt her heart rate quicken. Their gazes held and something hot in the depths of his eyes held her hostage. She wanted to break eye contact and couldn't. How could any one man have so much sex appeal? Create such primal attraction?

Layla became angry with herself because of her reaction to him. The man standing in front of her had destroyed her plans. He'd placed her in a difficult position with the administration at the university and with her team. She'd have to cancel excavation and lose her funding. She might never get another chance to prove her theories. Yet at that moment all she could think about was how fully aware of him she was.

"What I'm doing is touching you," he answered moments later, as if he'd needed time to give her question some thought.

Well, she had news for him. He should keep his hands to himself. So why wasn't she telling him that? And why was there a throb inside her? One that had started in her stomach but was now going lower to the juncture of her thighs? And why, when she saw his head lowering, did she just stand there? When his lips touched hers and he wrapped her in his arms, she sank into him. The same way he was sinking into her mouth.

The kiss was making her forget everything, even the fact that he wanted to throw her off his ranch. The only thing she could concentrate on was how his tongue was moving around in her mouth, sending shivers up her spine until she heard herself moan.

But he was moaning as well, and then he deepened the kiss. She recognized this for what it was. Lust. And that usually led to sex. If that was his plan, he could take it elsewhere. She had no intention of getting involved, no matter how fleetingly, with a man who refused to take her work seriously.

She pulled her mouth free and took a step back. "Like I said. I'll be off your property in the morning." She then walked around him to the door.

Before opening it, she glanced back at him. He stood in the same spot, staring at her as if she was a puzzle he was trying to figure out. Seriously? Did he think she was that complicated? As far as she was concerned he was the problematic one.

He was the man who, with very little effort it seemed, could tempt her to lower her guard, to surrender to this need he created inside of her. A need she hadn't realized even existed. And it appeared he was dealing with his own need if the huge bulge pressing against the zipper of his jeans was anything to go by. There were just some things an aroused man couldn't hide.

"We need to keep sex out of this, Gavin." She'd had to say it, considering the strong sexual chemistry flowing between them. Chemistry both of them were fully aware of.

He stared at her for a long moment, saying nothing, but she saw the tightening of his jaw. Had her words hit a nerve? Had they made him realize that she wasn't as gullible as he thought?

When he began walking toward her, her heartbeat quickened with every step he took. Never had she felt such a strong primal attraction to any man. Even his walk, his muscled thighs flexing erotically with every step, tripped her pulse. It had her drowning in the sexual vibes pouring off him.

When he came to a stop in front of her, he grabbed her hand to keep her from opening the door. Immediately, like before, they became attuned to each other. Why was there such a strong physical attraction between them? No man had ever made her forget about work. But she struggled to remember that work was the reason she was here. That and nothing else.

"Don't know about you but I can't keep sex out of it, Layla. I think you know why. Whether we like it or not, there's a strong sensual pull between us. I felt it the moment I set eyes on you this morning, and if you say you didn't feel it as well, then you would be lying. You might pretend otherwise, but you want me as much as I want you."

No matter what he said, she would deny it. She hadn't come to the ranch for this. She had come to Cornerstone, Missouri, to do a job—to prove her theory and move up in her career—*not* to have an affair with a navy SEAL who could overtake her senses. A man who was proving, whether she wanted him to or not, that she had sexual needs she'd ignored for too long. But regardless of that proof, under no circumstances would she sleep with him. Doing so would be a very bad idea. It would be a mistake that could cost her all she'd worked for up to this point. Besides, hadn't he all but told her to get off his land?

Instead of a straight-out denial, she said, "What I want is to be allowed to do my job. I need to do that dig, Gavin."

His gaze hardened. “Why? To prove me wrong?”

“More than proving you wrong, I need to prove to myself and my peers that I am right. There’s a difference, but I don’t expect you to understand.”

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Yes, he understood the difference. Hadn’t he felt the need to prove that he was his own man? To prove that being a SEAL hadn’t been about his grandfather’s and father’s legacies but about establishing a legacy of his own? The first Gavin Blake had been handpicked to be part of the first special operations unit that became known as the SEALs. And Gavin’s father, Gavin Blake Jr, had died a war hero after rescuing his team members and others who’d been held hostage during Desert Storm.

For years, he’d thought being Gavin Blake III was a curse more than a blessing. You couldn’t share the name of bigger-than-life SEAL predecessors without some people believing you should be invincible. It had taken years to prove to others, as well as to himself, that he was his own man. Free to make his own mistakes. Now he cherished the memories of the heroes his grandfather and father had been and he was proud to carry their names and to continue the family legacy of being a SEAL. In the end, he’d realized becoming his own man hadn’t been about proving anything to others but proving it to himself.

A part of him wanted to believe that Layla’s issues were hers alone. They were her business to deal with and not his. But for some reason he couldn’t let her go. His curiosity pushed him to say, “Don’t leave the Silver Spurs just yet, Layla.”

He saw that his words surprised her. Gave her pause. “Why? You ridiculed my years of research, accused me of manipulating your family and told me not to dig on your land. Why should I stay?”

“To convince me that you’re right.”

He could tell from her expression she thought what he’d said didn’t make sense. “I can’t do that unless you give me permission to excavate, Gavin. That’s the only way I can prove anything.”

Gavin was totally captivated by Layla Harris—by her passion for her work, and this passion between them. Why? He wasn’t sure. She was beautiful but he’d been around beautiful women before. She was built—with lush curves, a nice backside and very attractive features—but all those were just physical attributes. Deep down, he believed there was more to Layla Harris than just her beauty, more than her intelligence. There was something inside of her she refused to let surface. And it was something he wanted to uncover.

One thing for certain, he honestly wasn’t ready for her to leave the Silver Spurs. But she was right. Why should she stay if he wouldn’t allow her to dig on his property? He gritted his teeth at the thought of any woman making him feel so needy that he’d allow her to dig up the south pasture, his special place. But he quickly remembered he’d gone six months without sex, which had a way of crippling a man’s senses.

“It’s late,” he heard himself say. “Let’s talk more tomorrow.”

“Will talking tomorrow change anything, Gavin?”

All he knew for certain was that he couldn’t think straight being this close to her. But the last thing he wanted was to wake up tomorrow and find her gone. “It might,” he said. “I’m not making any promises, Layla. All I can say is that right now I’m exhausted and can’t think straight.” He would let her think his muddled mind was due to exhaustion and not the degree of desire he had for her.

“Will you read my research?”

He wouldn’t lie about that. “No. You can go over the important aspects of your work when we meet tomorrow.”

She stared at him for a long moment as if weighing his words. Finally, she said, “Alright. I’ll stay until we can talk.”

Relief poured through his body, quickly followed by frustration and annoyance. No woman could tie him in knots like Layla seemed capable of doing. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When he’d first arrived, her hair had been neatly pulled back. Had he mussed up her hair when he’d kissed her? Maybe that was why the loose curls now teasing her forehead were a total turn-on.

“Good night, Gavin.”

That was his cue to go. “Good night.” He opened the door and stepped out into the cold Missouri night.