



# Texas Cowgirl

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**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** They're made for each other, he just needs to prove it.

Pilot Nate Kershaw may be one of Whiskey River's biggest players, but from the moment he met cowgirl Damaris Walker, he was smitten. After sharing a searing kiss years ago, she made her feelings clear so Nate doesn't dare press for more than friendship. No other woman can win his heart, so when his beloved grandmother tells him her dearest wish is to see him settled down, Nate decides it's the perfect opportunity to convince Damaris they're meant to be.

After a devastating betrayal years ago, Damaris is still unable to trust or risk her heart—especially with a charming lady-killer like Nate. Against her common sense, she agrees to be Nate's fake girlfriend and finds herself falling for him harder than she did two years ago.

When Damaris learns Nate has been deceiving her about his true feelings, her fears and trust issues reignite. Will Nate be able to convince Damaris to overcome the pain of the past and take a risk on forever—with him?

**Total Pages (Source):** 75

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:55 am*

## Chapter One

Nate Kershaw walked into his apartment and fell on his bed fully clothed. Dead tired didn't begin to describe how he felt. He'd just returned to Whiskey River after flying a client to New Orleans and taking a couple of vacation days to have a good time with said client and his friends. Too good of a time. Since he never had more than a beer the night before he flew, he'd stayed an extra day but even partying while sober had taken it out of him. Damn, he was getting old.

When his phone rang with his mom's ringtone he groaned and considered not answering. But his mom usually had a good reason to call him, so he picked up.

"Hi, Mom."

"Nate, you need to go check on your grandmother."

"Does it have to be right now?" he asked her.

"Yes. She's not answering her phone and you know what that means."

His grandma was ninety-two and his mother tended to panic when her mother-in-law didn't answer her phone. Truthfully, it worried him too. Grandma had fallen last year and broken her arm. Thank God it hadn't been her hip. But Betty Kershaw was sharp as a tack, stubbornly independent, lived in her house by herself, and was involved in numerous activities in town. She might get irritated with Nate for checking up on her, but since he was the only family member who lived in the same town, she was used to it.

On his way Nate tried calling, but he couldn't get an answer either. So he was pretty concerned by the time he got to her house. Getting no response when he rang her doorbell and knocked on her door, he got out his key and let himself in. He didn't use his key often but kept it for emergencies. Which he was beginning to think this was. "Grandma," he shouted. "Are you here?"

No reply. It didn't take long to look through the house and out back and still see no sign of her or her dog Murphy. But her bedroom door was closed, which wasn't like her. He knocked and opened it. Grandma sat on the bed, sobbing into her pillow, with Murphy beside her looking distressed.

The sight destroyed him. He'd never, not once in his thirty-one years, seen his grandma cry. Not even when she broke her arm. She was the toughest woman he knew. Life hadn't always been easy for her, but she never complained. She just sucked it up and soldiered on. And lived her life to the fullest, determined to enjoy every day.

"My God, Grandma," he said rushing in. "What's wrong? Are you hurt? Did something terrible happen?"

She raised her head from the pillow and looked at him with tear-drenched eyes. She also looked every one of her ninety-two years. "Nate? What are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer your phone so Mom and I got worried. What's wrong?"

"I got some news from the doctor. You know, from the checkup I had day before yesterday?"

He remembered. He usually went with her but since the flight to New Orleans was already booked and Travis Sullivan, the other pilot at the Devil's Rock Airport, had another client, he couldn't get out of it. Grandma didn't want to cancel, so her

helper/driver had taken her. But Grandma wouldn't let Louise go in to see the doctor with her. She'd only let family go in with her, which meant Nate, unless one of his parents or siblings happened to be in town. "What did the doctor say?"

She reached for a tissue and dried her eyes, giving Murphy a pat after she did. "I'm not dying," she said with some asperity. "At least, not yet. But the doctor said I have AFib."

AFib? "You have atrial fibrillation? That's—" He started to say not good or even bad, but luckily stopped himself. "Did she say it was serious?" he asked instead. He'd seen the TV commercials. AFib could lead to a stroke. At Grandma's age that could be really bad.

"She put me on a whatchamacallit—some kind of thinner."

"A blood thinner?"

"That's it. She said that would help."

"Damn it, I knew I should have gone with you."

"Why? Do you think I didn't know what she was talking about?"

"No, but people do get confused. It helps to have someone else there. And you're obviously worried or you wouldn't have been crying."

"I'm not worried. I'm ninety-two. I could die any day now, even if I didn't have this AFib thing."

"You're not going to die, Grandma."

“Hopefully not anytime soon. But I will someday and that brings me to why I was crying.”

“If it wasn’t over the diagnosis then what was it?”

“You, Nathaniel James Kershaw.”

Okay, it was serious when she called him by his full name. “Me? Why were you crying about me? I’m fine.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:55 am*

“No, you’re not. You pretend that you are, but I know you. I want to see you happy.”

“I’m happy.” Basically, anyway. Except for a certain stubborn, hardheaded cowgirl he wanted, who refused to see him as more than a friend.

“Happy and settled down with a good woman.”

He sat beside her and sighed. “Grandma, we’ve been over this.” About a million times. If he couldn’t have the woman he wanted—which appeared to be the case, damn it—then there wasn’t a reason in the world he should settle down.

“I want to see you married before I die.”

“What?” Nate asked. “Did you say...” Surely he’d misunderstood.

“You heard me. Married. I want you to get married.”

“Grandma, I’m not even dating anyone seriously. You can’t expect me to get married. That’s ridiculous.”

“I didn’t mean right this minute. But it’s time you settled down.”

He shook his head. “Not happening, Grandma. Not even for you.”

Damned if she didn’t start crying again. “Don’t cry. Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean—I didn’t say I’d never get married.”

“You might as well have. What good will it do me if I’m dead before you ever make up your mind?” She reached for another tissue and dried her eyes. “You’ve dated a lot of women. I know you have. Can’t you see yourself falling in love with one of them?”

“No.” He was already in love with one of them and had been almost since the first time he’d seen her, at the Whiskey River rodeo over two years ago. She hadn’t been competing since it was a youth rodeo, but she’d been in charge of one of the events. Seeing her on one of her paints was something. Talk about a natural in the saddle. As a male he appreciated a beautiful woman riding a stunning black-and-white paint. He’d asked his buddy and fellow pilot Travis Sullivan if he knew who she was.

“Sure,” Travis had said. “That’s Damaris Walker. And before you ask, no, she’s not married.”

“Hallelujah. Introduce me.”

After the rodeo Travis had introduced them. Damaris was even prettier up close. Classic features—a mouth made for kissing, big, brown, beautiful eyes, and a tanned, healthy, flawless complexion. She wore a beige cowboy hat over her long, wavy, dark brown hair, and a tight T-shirt with a picture of a paint horse and the words ‘Walker Paints’ beneath it. She wore beige and brown leather chaps over blue jeans, scuffed cowboy boots obviously meant for hard work and not for show, and she had some kind of championship buckle on her belt. Damn, he hadn’t realized just how much of a turn-on chaps could be. Worn by the right woman, anyway.

He hadn’t really fallen in love at first sight, but he’d sure as hell fallen in lust. Everything went great until their third date. That was when Damaris put him squarely in the friend zone. And there he’d stayed. To top it off, she was always setting him up with other women. He’d go out with them but none of them lasted long. Because they weren’t Damaris.

“Nate, you have a funny look on your face. Are you sure there’s no one you’re interested in?”

“Grandma, you’ve just given me a great idea.”

“I hope it involves a woman.”

He stood and grinned at her. “Oh, it does. It definitely does.”

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Damaris Walker was no stranger to physical work, but it seemed to her that someone else should be around to muck out the stalls. But the teenager who normally helped them was out sick. Her brother Marshall had taken his wife off to see the bluebonnets that were gorgeous this time of year, and Chase, one of her other brothers who also worked the ranch, was busy taking Ella, his pregnant wife who was also their ranch manager, to the doctor.

Which left her to do the dirty work. Her brother Gabe was a metal artist who lived in his own house on the ranch with his wife, who was also pregnant. Damaris only asked for his help in an emergency. Meaning, guess who shoveled out horse shit?

Of course, anyone who owned horses and particularly someone who was partner in a business raising paints and bucking horses was used to mucking out stalls more than a time or two. But tonight was girls’ night out at Booze’s Bar and Grill, and if she was going to make it in time she’d have to hurry. Sometimes they went to Jalisco’s for margaritas, or they had mani-pedi girls’ night out at Rosario’s Salon. But Rosario was out of town tonight so they’d chosen one of their favorite hangouts. Booze’s—the locals’ place for food, drink, darts, pool, and gossip.

“Hey, Damaris. What’s up?”



Startled, since she hadn't heard anyone come up behind her, she turned around and frowned at her visitor. "You scared the hell out of me, Nate. You're lucky you didn't get a shovelful of horse shit thrown in your face."

Nate just grinned, stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the opposite stall. "Your reflexes are pretty quick, so I'd only get that shovelful if you were mad at me. You're not, are you?"

"Why would I be mad at you? Just because the last woman I set you up with told me you said you'd call her and you didn't?"

He shrugged. "It's only been a week. I've been busy."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Try three and you have no intention of calling her, do you?” Damn. Sometimes she wished Nate wasn’t such a pleasure to look at. Even after being friends with him for over two years she still had a gut-punch reaction to seeing him sometimes. Like now. His light brown hair was medium length. He didn’t go in for some of the more fashionable looks but kept a regular haircut, a little longer on the top than the sides. His eyes were hazel and changed color with his emotions or what he was wearing. Right now, he wore a sky-blue, short-sleeved T-shirt with Devil’s Rock Airport and their logo—the rock it was named for—imprinted on it. So his eyes were blue today, not quite like the sky but close. He was long and lean, wore jeans like he’d been born to wear them, and wore running shoes.

He was no cowboy, although she’d taken him riding before and he wasn’t bad, considering he didn’t manage it often. No, he was a private airplane pilot, and a successful one as far as she could tell.

God, he was cute. No, he was hot. Really hot. Unfortunately.

Sometimes she wished she hadn’t put him so firmly in the friend zone. She was human. She’d wondered more than once what it would be like to have Nate as a lover. But Nate was simply too tempting. He was a player, and Damaris didn’t date players. Damaris had been burned badly by a very tempting player. Hell, Warner had been a philanderer of the first order. At least Nate wasn’t that bad.

“I need a favor,” Nate said, ignoring her question.

“Sure.” She leaned on her shovel. “What is it?”

“I need you to be my girlfriend. And maybe my fiancée.”

She couldn't have heard him right. “You need what?”

“A girlfriend. Then a fiancée. Possibly.”

“And you want me? Are you crazy?”

“Not for real, so don't freak out. Just for a while. Until I can figure something out to satisfy her.”

She leaned her shovel against the wall and put her hands on her hips. “Nate, what in the hell are you talking about? And who is ‘her’?”

“Let's go sit down and I'll tell you.”

Thoroughly mystified, she followed him out of the barn to the bench that sat beneath the big live oak by the corral. It was a gorgeous April day, beneath a blue, cloudless sky. A little cool and not terribly humid, which was a bonus any time of year in central Texas. “Okay, talk,” she said as they took a seat.

“It's about Grandma.”

“Your grandma Kershaw?” She'd met her before. Several times, in fact. Enough to be really fond of her. Nate's grandmother was quite a character and beloved in the community.

“She's the only one I have. Of course, Grandma Kershaw.”

“What about her?”

“She wants me to get married. Before she dies.”

“Your grandma is dying? Oh, Nate, I’m so sorry.”

“She’s not dying. But she was just diagnosed with AFib and she’s freaking out.”

“That’s serious, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it can be controlled. It’s not likely she’s going to keel over any day. At least, I hope not. But she is ninety-two, so I guess she’s feeling old on top of this new diagnosis. She’s always been healthy as a horse.”

“She thinks she’s dying so she wants you to get married.”

“You got it. I tried to convince her she’s not dying but she keeps saying she’s ninety-two and at her age you can’t tell.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Which isn’t an unreasonable thought, unfortunately. She wouldn’t answer her phone so I went over there to see if she was okay.” His eyes met Damaris’s and she could see the worry in them. “She was crying, Damaris. I’ve never seen Grandma cry. Ever. And worse, she wasn’t crying about the diagnosis. She was crying about me.”

“But...she can’t expect you to just up and marry someone. She’s bound to know you aren’t serious about anyone. You never even go out with a woman more than once or twice.”

“That’s a slight exaggeration. But it’s one reason I thought of you. She knows you and really likes you. She knows we’ve been friends for a long time. It’s not much of a stretch to convince her we’re in love.”

“You realize this idea is completely insane, right? Besides, why me?”

He looked annoyed. “I just told you. Besides that, it wouldn’t be fair to anyone who might develop feelings for me.”

“I have feelings for you. I feel like you’ve lost your freaking mind.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Ha-ha. Come on, Damaris. Be my girlfriend. It’s not that much to ask.”

“You said fiancée, not just girlfriend.”

“I said maybe my fiancée. Whatever, it’s all for show so what difference does it make?”

Okay, she must be as crazy as he was. Because she was considering saying yes.

### Chapter Two

Nate could tell she was wavering. It wouldn’t take much to convince her to go along with him. He’d started to give his grandma another flat-out no, but then it had hit him. If he could convince Damaris to be his pretend girlfriend, and make it look real, maybe she’d have to acknowledge how good they were together. Maybe he could finally convince her that he was the right man for her.

“You said it’s all for show. Meaning we only have to convince your grandmother?”

“I thought about that. No, I think it would be better to pretend we’re for real. That way gossip wouldn’t get around to her. You know how Whiskey River is. Gossip spreads like weeds.”

“The saying is gossip spreads like wildfire.”

“Whatever. You can’t pee in Whiskey River without everyone knowing it.”

“Disgusting image but true. But how are you going to get out of it? I mean, you’re going to have to tell her eventually that we broke up. And if you tell her I’m your fiancée, which you keep saying might happen, then telling her we’re over will just disappoint her more.”

“I’ll worry about that later.”

“I don’t know, Nate. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why? Afraid you’ll fall for me?”

“Oh, that’s it, Mr. Egotistical. No, I’m not afraid of that.”

“Then what?”

“We’d be lying to your grandmother. And everyone else. Can I at least tell my family?”

“Hell, no. Your family is huge. Someone will spill it.”

“I can’t believe I’m even considering this.”

“But you are.” He’d gotten her with Grandma. Damaris loved his grandma. So he added another reason. “I told her no and she cried again. I have to tell you, Damaris, it shook me to the core.” Which was true.

“If I do this, and I’m not saying I will, then what do I have to do?”

“We have to act like we’re madly in love. Once we do that for a while, we’ll see how it’s going, but we might need to tell her we’re engaged.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Define madly in love."

"Well, you'll have to kiss me. A lot," he added, warming to his subject. "In public. Gotta have some PDA to get back to her."

"How much PDA?"

"Geez, Damaris. Kissing, hugging, holding hands. It's not like we're going to get it on in public."

"We sure as hell aren't."

"You don't have to say it like that. Am I that disgusting to you? It's not like we've never kissed before."

"That was a long time ago. A very long time ago."

It was. And he, for one, had never forgotten it. "Let's try it again. If you can't stand it, I'll have to tell her to forget it. I can't think of anyone else I could ask to do this."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You want to kiss me? As an experiment?”

“Yeah.” But it wouldn’t be an experiment to him. It would be something he’d been wanting to do again for years.

She shrugged. “I’m as crazy as you are. Okay.”

“You won’t regret it.”

“So you say. I have a feeling I—”

He stopped her mouth with his. He took it slow, and easy. Traced her lips with his tongue, then toyed with her, seeking out her tongue until she opened her mouth and kissed him back. He wanted more, but he knew better than to rush her. Leave her wanting. At least, he hoped she’d be wanting more. He sure as hell was. He pulled back and smiled at her. “Well?”

He couldn’t decipher her expression. “Come on, Damaris, it couldn’t have been that bad.”

“It wasn’t terrible.”

“Gee, thanks.”

She patted his cheek. “Cheer up. I’m sure it will get better with time.”

“Your enthusiasm overwhelms me. What do you say? Will you be my girl?” He held

out his hand. “Shake on it?”

Hesitantly, she put her hand in his. “I’ve lost my ever-lovin’ mind. It’s a deal. Don’t make me regret it.”

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Nate left not long after that. He said he had some ideas about how to go about this cockamamie idea of his and he’d see her soon. Of course, he didn’t call it a cockamamie idea, but it was.

I’m an idiot. I should never have kissed him. And I’ve set myself up for more. Worse, she couldn’t talk to anyone about it. Considering that, she decided it really was better she didn’t tell anyone the truth. She didn’t think her family would be terribly surprised. Jaclyn, who was Marshall’s wife and one of her best friends, was convinced there was more between her and Nate than simple friendship. But whenever Damaris denied it and insisted there never would be, her friend simply smiled in a way that made it clear she didn’t believe her.

There could have been more. But she’d put the brakes on quickly. Not because she didn’t like him but because she liked him way too much. And she’d been right to stop things before they started. Damn, that kiss today...it shouldn’t have been a big deal. But if it had gone on any longer, she wasn’t sure what she’d have done. Thrown her arms around him and kissed him back enthusiastically, probably.

Oh, get over yourself. He didn’t think anything of it, so neither would she. As for the future and PDAs, well, surely it couldn’t get too hot when they were in public. She’d just have to make sure they kept it public. God, why had she agreed to this?

Because she loved Grandma Kershaw for one thing. She reminded Damaris of her own grandmother whom she’d dearly loved. Grandma K, as she’d told Damaris to

call her, was a hoot. She loved horses and dogs and while she hadn't ridden since Damaris met her—after all, she was over ninety when they met—she'd clearly ridden a lot in the past.

Grandma K had a big, beautiful golden retriever who was the best-trained dog Damaris had ever known. Damaris bet Grandma K brushed Murphy daily. Her own dogs were lucky to get a bath when she bathed one of the horses, but then they owned a lot of dogs. They kept damn near every stray who got dumped on the property. Some of them Marshall found homes for, but Damaris admitted she was a sucker when it came to a stray dog. So sue her. What was an extra dog or two on a ranch?

She and Grandma K had bonded over horses and dogs when they first met. The older woman loved both but had to give up horses when she moved into town a number of years ago now. She still talked about them and wanted to know all about Damaris's horses. Grandma K had volunteered at the animal shelter for many years as well. Murphy was the latest in a long line of strays Grandma K had taken in and trained.

But back to Nate. He was a good guy, even if he couldn't settle on one woman. Though she set him up with every single woman she could find, she was always secretly relieved when it never worked out. Stupid, but there it was. Nate liked them. All of them. But never enough to be serious about any of them.

Which made her feel so conflicted. On the one hand she knew it would be best for both of them if Nate found someone he really cared about. On the other hand, sometimes she wished it could be her.

But it couldn't. She couldn't let it.

Well, at least she wouldn't need to worry about how to deal with Nate's eventual serious girlfriend for a while. Not since she was to be that girl. At least temporarily. And pretend. She hoped she didn't regret this. But she had a feeling she'd bitten off

way more than she should have.

She'd given Nate Kershaw free rein to kiss her—in public—and romance her as much as he liked. With no specific end date in sight.

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Nate showed up at the barn the next day, bright and early. He knew Damaris got up at the crack of dawn to take care of the animals. Not only horses, but dogs, cats and who knew what else. The Walkers had had a goat and a pig at one point though he thought they'd found homes for them. He had a flight, but it was a short one and didn't leave until eleven, so he was able to catch her early.

He tracked her down to the tack room where she was in the alcove that held food for the dogs and cats. "Hey."

She looked up from scooping food into bowls. A boatload of them, so it was probably for the dogs. Since the number of barn cats varied, she put out a few big bowls of kibble for them in the loft. "Hey. What are you doing here so bright and early?"

"I have a flight later, but I wanted to set some things in motion."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You mean for your ridiculous idea for us to be pretend dating or engaged?”

“Dating first.” Just so she didn’t renege, he reminded her, “You shook on it.”

“I know. I told you I lost my mind. Okay, what’s the plan?”

“Can you go to dinner and drinks tonight?”

“Yes. Where?”

“Booze’s, where else?”

“I was there last night.”

“Deal with it. Maximum exposure.”

“Nate, I’m just not sure this is going to work. No one will believe it.”

“Sure they will. But you can’t be standoffish. You have to act like you like me. A lot.”

“You’re one of my best friends. Of course I like you.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He’d moved closer to her while talking. Taking the bowl from her hand, he set it down. “I mean when I do this—” he took hold of one hand “—you don’t jerk your hand away like you’ve been scalded. And when I do this—” he leaned in and kissed her lightly “—you don’t flip out.”

“I think I can manage that,” she said dryly. “But I’m not into PDAs.”

“Tough. You’re going to have to be for this to work.”

“Can’t we just tell Grandma K we’re dating?”

“Eventually. I want her to hear the gossip. She gets her hair done on Fridays. That means if we go to Booze’s and do anything out of the ordinary for us tonight, she’ll hear all about it tomorrow at Rosario’s Salon.”

“I still don’t see why we have to be so sneaky.”

“Because I want Grandma to believe it. Come on, it can’t be that hard.”

She rolled a shoulder. “Whatever. I have things to do.”

Before she could protest, he kissed her again. A little longer than before. When he ended it, Damaris said, “You don’t need to keep kissing me when we’re alone.”

“We aren’t alone. I heard someone come in the barn. Probably one of your brothers or Ella.”

“Damaris,” Chase called as he walked into the tack room. “I’ve got to go—”

He halted when he saw the two of them. Nate was about to kiss her again when she slapped a hand on his chest and hissed, “Enough.”

“Spoilsport,” he answered with a laugh. “See you tonight. Seven o’clock.”

Well satisfied with the morning, he left the two of them staring after him. This is going to be fun.

## Chapter Three

“What’s going on with you and Nate?” Chase asked her.

“Nothing,” she said before she remembered she wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. For sure she couldn’t tell Chase since he had the biggest of big mouths. “He asked me to dinner tonight.”

“You mean like a date?”

Of course he was surprised. Damaris and Nate were just friends, and Chase knew it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Yes, a date. It’s no big deal,” she added.

“I thought you two were just friends? Although I have to say, I thought he was about to kiss you when I came in.”

“I don’t have time to hear you yammer questions at me.” She picked up as many dog bowls as she could carry. “Make yourself useful and bring the rest of the bowls.”

“Have you fed Johnny Cash?” He followed her to the front of the barn, in an area reserved for the dogs’ food.

Damaris had named a lot of the dogs and since she liked country-western music, not just the new but the classics, those were the names many of them bore. “Johnny and his special food are shut in the office until everyone else eats.”

They set down the bowls and after washing off her hands, Damaris put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. An assortment of dogs came running, barking and bowling each other over in their excitement.

“So you and Nate, huh? You’re actually ‘dating’?” He put the last word in air quotes.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Why are you so touchy about it? I like Nate. He’s a good guy.”

Everyone liked Nate. Especially women. “I’m not touchy. I’m busy.”



“If you say so.” Chase left her alone after that.

Not too long after he left, Ella—Chase’s wife and the ranch manager—showed up while Damaris was brushing Thunder. He was their newest stallion and Damaris had taken one look at him and fallen in love. She’d had to work to convince Marshall and Chase that they needed another stallion but once they figured out she wouldn’t give up until she got him, they gave in.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Ella said, picking up a brush.

“Thanks.”

Neither spoke for a few minutes, grooming Damaris’s blue roan paint in companionable silence.

“He really is a gorgeous horse,” Ella said. “I’m so glad you talked the guys into getting him.”

“I didn’t really give them a choice. He’s a great addition to our stable.”

“Yes, he is. Oh, I meant to tell you I had a call yesterday about his stud services. I’d only put it on the internet that morning. He said he’d call back about making an appointment to see him.”

“Great! That was quick,” Damaris said.

“I know. I’m not surprised. He’s not only gorgeous but his bloodline is excellent too.”

“He’s a sweetheart.”

“Speaking of that,” Ella said. “So, you and Nate, huh?”

“Chase has the biggest mouth. What did he do? Pull out his phone and call you the minute he left me?”

“Of course,” Ella said with a gurgle of laughter. “And then he texted the rest of the family.”

Damaris sighed. God knows how much of this she’d have to endure. Not only from family but also from everyone else in Whiskey River, once they heard. “Yes, I’m going on a date with Nate and no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” She was quiet a moment but then said, “But if you did want to talk about it can I just say that it’s great and about time.”

God save her. By two p.m. everyone in the family knew and had either called her or tracked her down to ask her about it. Even Gabe had come up to the barn. Her artist brother rarely emerged from his workshop when he had a new project going, so it was a big deal when he did. A big deal and annoying as hell.

To top it off, Cole and Jedidiah, her brother and sister who were rarely around, both called. You’d have thought she’d announced she was going on a date with royalty. Or getting married. God only knew what they’d do if she announced a pretend engagement.

Cole, her oldest brother who was always off tending to oil wells, didn’t say much, just asked if it was true and then surprised Damaris by saying, “Good. I like Nate. I’d rather you be with him than some of the idiots you’ve dated.”

“I don’t date idiots,” she said, incensed. “Not on purpose, anyway.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Cole just laughed and told her to take care.

Then her sister Jedidiah called. Jedidiah had left home at eighteen. She took a lot of computer courses at several community colleges while she worked her way around the country doing office work. At the moment she lived in California. Other than knowing her sister did something with computers, Damaris had no idea of her exact profession. Jedidiah was always very evasive about what she actually did.

Jedidiah was secretive about her own stuff, but she had a way of extracting all the information she wanted from others very quickly. Mostly by asking. Damaris thought it was in the look she gave a person, implying she could see right through them. She was glad they were on a regular phone call and not a video call. If Jedidiah saw her, she'd probably know something was up. "So, you and the hottie. About time."

"Why does everyone say that?"

Jedidiah laughed. "Because it's true? I've only met the guy a few times but as I recall, he is definitely hot."

"He is." Damn it. It hadn't been a problem in the past. Why was it now?

"I always thought he had the hots for you even though you swore you were just friends. Guess I was right, huh?"

It grated on her to admit Jedidiah was right, but what else could she do when she couldn't tell her the truth either? "Don't break your arm patting yourself on the back."

“Someone has to do it,” she retorted.

“When are you coming to visit?” Damaris asked, changing the subject. Hopefully this thing with Nate would be all worked out by then. Of course, she had no idea how. “I miss you.”

“Soon, I hope. But I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

The only respite Damaris had was when she took Thunder for a ride and managed to escape without anyone going with her.

Nate is going to owe me big-time.

\*

Booze’s Bar and Grill hadn’t changed a lot since the days of Booze Kelly, who’d opened it over a hundred years before. It looked a bit like an old-time saloon, which was reasonable since it had been built as a mercantile then changed to a saloon when Booze bought the building. Over the years, the building had seen many renovations, but the core remained the same.

Booze himself had installed the carved mahogany bar, made in Mexico from a single tree, and the intricate tile floor around the bar was laid at the same time. The flooring in the rest of the saloon was real hardwood and had been well taken care of over the years. Behind the bar was a long row of mirrors, and glass shelves holding liquor bottles, some from years past, up high and used as decoration, the ones on the lower shelves new and used daily by the bartenders.

Nate wasn’t usually a fanciful man, but sometimes when he walked into Booze’s he got a flash of what it must have been like back in the day—cigar smoke hanging heavy in the air along with the pungent smell of whiskey. At the bar cowboys and

ranchers drank and told tall tales, hoping to impress the ‘angels’ who came over from Miss Evangeline’s establishment a couple of doors down. Poker tables were scattered around the main room and card sharps and their gullible marks drank and played and drank some more.

In the present day, wood-topped tables and booths replaced poker tables and while cowboys still hung out at the bar, so did women, and there hadn’t been any ‘angels’ for a long time. Pool tables were upstairs, and the dart room was tucked away in a corner of the main floor. There were bi-monthly tournaments for both pool and darts but talk—some called it gossip—was the main thing that took place in one of the locals’ favorite hangouts.

He’d half expected Damaris to bail on him, but she answered the door when he knocked. When he saw her he almost swallowed his tongue. She wore a short-sleeved V-neck silky shirt with small flowers of every color scattered over the front of it. She’d tucked it into a short denim skirt and on her feet were—what else?—purple flowered cowboy boots that matched the blouse. She’d left her long brown hair down and it flowed over her shoulders and down her back in waves. He bet it felt every bit as soft and silky as it looked. His fingers itched to feel it, so he kept them firmly at his sides.

He could tell she wore makeup, which she didn’t usually, because her eyes were huge, dark brown, and smoky-looking. Some kind of glistening lipstick gave her lips a shine that made him want to taste her so bad he had to remind himself that to Damaris this was pretend. She’d kick his ass if he did what he wanted to. Which was devour her whole.

“You wanted to give people something to talk about.” She waved a hand at her outfit.

He couldn’t do anything but stare at her and hope he wasn’t drooling.

“What’s wrong?” Consternation flooded her face. “Is it too much? I do wear something besides jeans, you know.”

He found his voice. “Too much? Are you kidding? You look amazing.”

“Oh. Well, thanks. When you didn’t say anything, you had me worried.”

“I was struck dumb by your beauty.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny.”

He smiled but honest to God, he wasn’t joking.

“How did the new shocks work out?” she asked, getting into the car when he opened her door. Her skirt, already short, rode up a bit more.

Mercy, he thought as he shut her door and walked around to his side of the car and reminded himself to breathe. Damaris knew all about his car—a Le Mans blue 1969 convertible Corvette. She talked horses; he talked cars. Nate liked fast cars, fast planes, and—until Damaris—fast women. “Good,” he answered. “I think that fixed the problem, but you can tell me if it’s still bone-rattling.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“It isn’t so far but then you’re not driving very fast.”

“I’ll take you out to Devil’s Rock Raceway sometime and open her up. That’s Levi Chapman’s new venture.”

“Levi’s racetrack? I’d heard Levi Chapman was building a racetrack in Whiskey River. I didn’t know it was finished, though. You’ve never offered to take me there before.”

Levi, besides being a billionaire inventor and part owner of the airport, had recently built a private racetrack for his cars. Nate didn’t know how many cars Levi owned but it was a lot. The track was available for his friends to use at a discounted rate. But the regular rate was very reasonable for a private racetrack. Levi was nothing if not generous. Levi knew all about Nate’s car and had invited him to come out to the racetrack whenever he wanted.

“I was never supposed to be dating you before.” Not that he’d taken any other woman out there, but Damaris didn’t need to know that. “I’ll let you drive her.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “You’re going to let me drive Iris? No way.”

“Yes, way.” He’d named his car after Iris, the fleet-footed goddess who was a messenger of the Olympian gods.

“You never let me drive her before. What gives?”

“I thought you deserved a reward for helping me out.”

“I do but I never figured you’d let me drive your baby.”

“Do you want to or not?”

“Of course I want to. I can’t believe you’re going to let me drive Iris on the racetrack.”

“Not on the racetrack. But I’ll let you drive out there and back if you want.”

“You’re afraid I can’t handle her on the racetrack?”

He glanced at her and grinned. “If she was a horse, sure you could. But since she’s a car, and a very powerful one at that, nope.”

“Killjoy.”

“Take it or leave it, babe.”

“I’ll take it. Dude.”

He pulled into a parking space on the Square, across from Booze’s, and they got out.

“What’s the plan?” Damaris asked as they walked to the bar.

“What plan?”

“The plan for tonight. You know, to get the beauty salon talking.”

“I figured we’d wing it.”

“Wing it? Don’t you think we should have a plan of action?”



He stopped and looked at her, giving her a slow perusal from the top of her head to her feet, and then back up. Smiling slowly, he said, "I'm sure I'll think of something."

## Chapter Four

That's what worries me. She hadn't missed the way Nate had looked her over. In fact, it had sent a thrill of awareness up her spine. Damaris knew Nate had been attracted to her in the past, but she'd figured those days were long gone. He'd taken her friend-zoning him in stride. Maybe she'd been wrong. She shot him a considering glance, but he wasn't looking at her. He was staring at a woman walking toward them. A very beautiful woman who Damaris had set him up with just a few weeks ago. The woman he'd promised to call after their date. And hadn't.

Amaryllis Johnson. She'd perfected the sexy pout. It didn't appear to be working on Nate, however. Damaris tried to squelch the blast of relief that brought her. Of course he's not going to act interested in her, dummy. He's intent on pretending to be into you.

"Nate, I'm so glad I ran into you." With a frown she looked Damaris over. "Hello, Damaris."

"Hi, Amaryllis."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Turning back to Nate she said, “I’m invited to a wedding next weekend and I need a date. Want to be my plus-one?” She gave Nate a sultry smile, apparently sure he’d agree.

He draped an arm across Damaris’s shoulders. “Sorry, I can’t.”

“But you don’t even know what day it is.”

He looked at Damaris and smiled. “Damaris and I are dating.”

She looked from one to the other of them with her mouth open. “You and Damaris? Dating? Really?”

“Yep. Isn’t that right, darlin’?” He gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“Yes, sweet cheeks.”

Amaryllis looked disgusted. “Well, I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone.” She walked off in something of a snit.

“Sweet cheeks?” Nate asked her.

“It was all I could think of.”

Nate just shook his head and opened the door to the bar. He steered her toward a booth that while set apart was still visible to most of the bar. Damaris scooted in and Nate slid in next to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Sitting beside you.”

“Well, don’t. I feel stupid.”

“Why?”

“Because unless someone else is coming we look foolish.”

“Relax.” He kissed her on the nose. “There’s nothing wrong with two people wanting to sit next to each other. What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll have a beer. What are you having?”

“I’m flying tomorrow so a soft drink.”

He came back with the drinks and this time took the seat across from her. “Thanks,” she said, taking her beer. “Why aren’t you sitting next to me? You thought it was important a few minutes ago.”

“I decided,” he said, picking up her hand, “that I should sit here so I can gaze into your eyes and hold your hand.”

“Give me a break.” She tried to take back her hand, but he held on to it firmly. “You don’t do this with other women you date.”

“How do you know?”

“I know you.”

“Point taken. But you’re different. This is new for both of us. Remember? We’ve fallen madly in love after years of friendship, so I need to act differently than I normally do. And so do you.”

“I’m still not sure that anybody will buy that we’ve suddenly decided we’re in love.”

“What did your family say?”

She wasn’t going to tell him that several of them had said ‘about time’ or some variation of it. So she shrugged and changed the subject. “Let’s play pool.”

“Want to order dinner first?”

“Okay.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Nate signaled the waitress who came and took their order. As soon as she had, Nate said, “All right. Let’s go, but don’t think I’ve forgotten that you always beat the snot out of me.”

She smiled sweetly. “That’s the point.”

Playing pool put her in a good mood. She’d played a lot in college and still maintained a decent game. She was friends with Ariana Kelly and played occasionally on the Kellys’ fantastic antique pool table. And of course, she played at Booze’s almost every time she came in.

“You’ve been working on your game,” she said to Nate after they finished the first game. Damaris had still won, but she’d had to put more effort into it.

“I got tired of you kicking my ass. You can still beat me, but you have to admit I’ve gotten better.”

“You have. I bet our food is ready.”

They went back to their table and ate. After they finished Nate asked her if she wanted another beer, but she turned him down.

“Do you still want to see how Iris handles?”

“You mean how you handle her? But you’re not going back on your promise, are you? I still get to drive her, right?”

“When have I ever not kept a promise to you?”

Thinking back, she had to admit he had a point. “Okay, let’s go.”

On the way out he took her hand and she almost snatched it back before she remembered. “Don’t you think there’s been enough PDA?” she whispered.

“I’m holding your hand, Damaris. That’s hardly a public display of affection. Unlike this.” They stepped into the vestibule and he leaned down and kissed her. It didn’t last long and shouldn’t have been a big deal. It wasn’t a big deal...except that it made her want more.

“No one could even see that,” she complained as they walked to his car.

“Sure they could. If they were looking. We just want enough talk to get around so my grandma hears about us. Nothing too obvious.”

“Why kiss me if you don’t want to be too obvious?”

He opened her car door. He’d left the top down. No sense locking a convertible. Besides, this was Whiskey River. Very low crime rate unless you were in the heart of the Barrels.

“Why did I kiss you?” He smiled at her. “Because I like to.”

\*

He’d rendered Damaris speechless, which wasn’t easy to do. Satisfied, he put the car in gear and headed to the Walker ranch. She didn’t say anything, but she shot him a lot of sideways, suspicious glances.

There were a couple of roads near the ranch where he could open Iris up. “Ready?”

“Hit it,” she said.

Zero to sixty in 3.5 seconds. He’d taken the top down and Damaris’s hair whipped around her face. She laughed and dug in her purse, coming up with a band to pull her hair back. Too bad, because he really liked her hair loose. He slowed down a bit and asked, “What do you think?”

“Smooth as a baby’s bottom.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but she runs a lot smoother now. Had enough?”

“No, but if you’re taking me again soon I guess we can go.”

When they reached the ranch, he drove down to the cottage and parked. “How do you like living in the cottage?”

“I like it. I was kinda afraid I wouldn’t but it’s nice being on my own sometimes. Of course, I still eat most meals at the house so I’m not totally on my own,” she added with a laugh.

Nate got out and walked her to the door. “Do you want to come in?”

“Thanks, but I have an early flight tomorrow.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Okay. Well, thanks.” She turned to go inside.

“You’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

He tapped his lips. “A good-night kiss.”

“In your dreams.”

“You got that right.”

“You’re so funny. We don’t need to do that here.”

“Sure we do. There’s a light on in the barn and I’ve heard some banging. Someone is in there. Remember, your family needs to believe us too.”

“There is a light on but the banging could just be one of the horses kicking their stall.”

“How do you expect this to work if you question the necessity every time we kiss?”

“Oh, all right.” She put her arms around his neck and stepped closer. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“Such enthusiasm.” He kissed her, taking his time, teasing her mouth to open, slipping his tongue inside when she did. Keeping it light and easy. But with a hint of



sexier if she wanted it. Nate knew how to kiss a woman. He'd never had any complaints. But Damaris wasn't just any woman. She was the woman he'd wanted for a long time. The woman he'd waited for forever—that's what it seemed like anyway. The woman who was still intent on keeping him a friend and nothing more.

She sighed and he felt her body soften against his as her arms tightened around his neck. Her mouth opened more. Her tongue began to play with his. His cock started to harden and he knew if he didn't turn her loose she'd be in no doubt about what he wanted. He forced himself to end the kiss and take a step back.

Her eyes were blurry, dark brown, and beautiful. Her lips were slightly swollen and he wanted to sink his hands in her hair and kiss her again. Wanted to back her up against the door and put his hands all over her. But he didn't. Instead he turned her loose.

"I'll call you tomorrow after work. If you can get away, we'll go to the racetrack."

"Okay. I'll see you then."

He walked to his car, feeling her gaze on his back. Damn, he was supposed to be Mr. Cool and Collected. Instead, he was dangerously close to being Mr. Hot and Bothered.

## Chapter Five

Whoa. Damaris couldn't stop thinking about the kiss Nate had laid on her last night. Or rather, her reaction to it. She'd practically melted into a puddle at his feet. She should have known he'd be dangerous. Hell, she knew his reputation. What a fool she'd been to think herself immune to him.

It's just because you haven't had sex in years and you're finally thinking about it.

Hormones, that's all it is. You're a perfectly healthy young woman who hasn't been with a man since 'Warner the Bastard' ruined your life.

Not ruined, but he'd sure put a crimp in it. She hadn't had sex since she found out the truth about Warner.

She dated. In fact, she'd gone out with almost all the single men in and around Whiskey River. But she hadn't been intimate with any of them. Not because she'd lost her sex drive. She hadn't. Kissing Nate had proven that to her. But she didn't trust men, and furthermore, she didn't trust herself to choose the right man. Her judgment had been sorely lacking in the past.

Yet here she was about to go out with Nate again. Her instincts were screaming Watch out! but did that stop her? No, it didn't. Sure, she'd said she'd help him make Grandma K happy, but no one his grandma was likely to hear from would be at the racetrack. Still, he'd said she could drive his car and she intended to. Yes, horses were her passion, but she liked cars too. And she'd wanted to drive Nate's baby since he'd restored her enough to drive. He'd refused every time she asked. But she continued asking just in case he changed his mind. Then, as a bribe, he'd told her she could. But she'd take it. She wasn't above a good bribe.

She got through her work and told Marshall and Ella that she'd be gone for the afternoon. As she was getting dressed, trying to decide what was appropriate racetrack attire, she heard a knock at her door. "Come in," she called out, hoping it wasn't Nate since she wasn't ready.

"Damaris? Hey, it's Jaclyn." She poked her head inside the bedroom. "Are you busy?"

"No, just trying to find something to wear."

“Big date, huh?”

She didn’t answer that. “I’m going to the Devil’s Rock Raceway with Nate. He’s letting me drive his car on the way out there.”

“You mean a racetrack? I haven’t heard about that.” She came in all the way and sat on Damaris’s bed.

Since Jaclyn hadn’t been living in Whiskey River all that long, it didn’t surprise Damaris that she hadn’t heard all the news. “It’s Levi Chapman’s. You know, Whiskey River’s resident billionaire?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Wow. I’ve met his wife, Dana, but I haven’t met him yet. He has a racetrack?”

“Yes, a private one. Nate knows him pretty well from the airport.”

“Speaking of Nate, what’s going on with you two? Last we talked, you said you were just friends and you were pretty adamant about it. Now I hear you’re hot and heavy. What gives?” She stretched out across the bed and propped her head on her hand.

She opened her mouth to deny the hot and heavy comment but then stopped. Damaris knew Jaclyn could keep a secret. But if she let something slip to Marshall it would all be over. Marshall might keep his own stuff close to his vest but let him hear anything about a family member and the whole family would know it within half an hour.

“Neither of us was dating anyone and—” Hell, how to explain it? “—we kissed. And it just kind of happened.”

“Must have been some kiss.”

She smiled. “It was. We decided to see if we could be more than friends.”

“Like friends with benefits?”

“No, like dating.” Friends with benefits sounded good, though. But she and Nate hadn’t discussed that. Not yet, anyway. Damn Jaclyn. Now she’d be thinking about ‘benefits’ all day.

She pulled on a nice pair of jeans, put on a new western-style shirt in shades of blue,

and her favorite boots. Brown with carving on the leather, they were well broken in, but she kept them in good shape. She'd debated wearing running shoes but frankly her boots were more comfortable. She braided her hair in a single braid down her back, since Nate's car was a convertible and he usually drove it top down unless it was raining or too cold.

Damaris tried her best to get rid of Jaclyn before Nate picked her up but she was out of luck. Jaclyn followed her into the den, looking like she'd settled in for the duration. Since there was no doorbell Nate knocked and when she opened the door he took in the situation in a glance. Which she knew because of his smug smile. So she kissed him, intending to keep it brief and light but Nate had other ideas. He pulled her close and laid one on her designed to scramble her brains. Which it did.

His lips moved over hers firmly, knowingly. His tongue traced her lips until she opened her mouth and invited him in. She didn't even try not to respond. It would have been futile. She met his tongue with hers, danced with it, felt her body go lax as he pulled her closer. Dimly, she heard Jaclyn laugh and say, "I'll just sneak out now."

She couldn't even manage a goodbye.

\*

"What was that?" Damaris asked breathlessly when he finally turned her loose.

She wasn't as indifferent to him as she wanted him to think. That hadn't been a kiss between friends. Not even a kiss between friends pretending to be lovers. Damn, what would it feel like if she really let go? If he was allowed to make love to her like he wanted?

"That was a kiss."

“I know it was a kiss. What I mean is—damn it, never mind.” Hands on hips, she glared at him. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“What? Kissing you? Only the hell out of it.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think? You’re a beautiful woman. I can’t think of any man who wouldn’t enjoy kissing you.”

She gaped at him. “You’ve never said I was beautiful before.”

He looked at her sideways and shrugged. “You know it. You don’t need me to tell you that.”

“I thought you knew women. Every woman needs to hear she’s beautiful once in a while.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Come on, we need to get going.”

“I came this close—” Damaris held up her thumb and forefinger a scant inch apart “—to telling Jaclyn the truth about us.”

“You didn’t, did you?”

“No. I said I came close, not that I did it.”

“Good. Why didn’t you?”

“Because I thought about what you said about telling anyone, including my family, and then the truth would get around. And while I know Jaclyn can keep a secret, she’s

married to Marshall, who can't. If she let something slip to him it's all over but the crying."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I didn’t know Marshall had a big mouth. He’s always seemed pretty tight-lipped to me.”

“He doesn’t talk about his own stuff. But let him hear something about the family and everyone else in the family will know it in a heartbeat.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I kissed you then.” He opened the passenger-side door for her.

She didn’t get in but stood there. “You didn’t. I kissed you.”

“You’re right. Which is good. You need to show more spontaneous affection.”

She snorted, which made his mouth twitch, but he controlled the smile. She still didn’t get in. “You said I could drive.”

“Once we get out to the country you can.”

Grumbling, she got in.

When he opened the driver’s side door Damaris said, “I’m a good driver.”

“When you’re paying attention,” he agreed. But he’d seen Damaris drive when she was distracted and that was a scary prospect. “You can drive a stick shift, right?”

“Well, duh. I wouldn’t have asked to drive it if I couldn’t. And I do too pay attention.”



He simply raised an eyebrow.

“Most of the time,” she added. “That time wasn’t my fault. It was Dolly Parton’s.”

“So you claimed.” Damaris had run over a curb and crashed into a streetlight on the Square. Nate had happened to be around to witness it.

“If a hundred-pound dog jumped in your lap while you were driving, you’d have been distracted too.”

“You never did say why she did that.”

“Because she saw you. You know how she loves you. But I didn’t tell you because at the time you were being sweet and I didn’t want you to feel bad. So, see, it was your fault as well.”

“In that case I apologize for being on the Square when you were driving past with Dolly Parton in the car.” Having reached his destination he put the car in neutral, put on the parking brake, and got out. “Your turn,” he told Damaris. He knew she was a good driver, but he liked to razz her. Damaris had been driving since she was ten or eleven—tractors, pickups, riding lawn mowers. She’d pulled horse trailers, boats, and farm equipment. Pretty much anything that had wheels Damaris had driven at one time or another. At first he’d doubted her stories but when he saw what she could do pulling a double-wide horse trailer, with horses inside it, he became a believer.

Today, however, she was driving very slowly and carefully. “You can drive the speed limit, you know.”

“I know. I’m getting the feel of it. Once I get out on the highway I’ll drive faster.”

He tried to relax but Iris really was his baby, and he’d never let anyone else drive her.

Which just went to show you what a man would do to please a woman he was crazy for.

“Ready?” she asked, pulling onto the straightaway.

“I—” Whatever he’d been about to say was drowned out by the roar of the engine. She was up to speed in seconds. He could see the speedometer and knew she wasn’t going that fast but it seemed like it was faster when he wasn’t in the driver’s seat. Sure, he’d driven it at top speed on the racetrack but that was a whole ‘nuther story. He’d been driving, for one thing.

“This is great,” Damaris said. “What a cool car. Okay if I drive it to the racetrack?”

He’d told her earlier where the racetrack was. What could he say except “Sure.”

## Chapter Six

Damaris pulled into the parking lot at the track and put the car in neutral, turned it off and put on the parking brake. Turning to Nate she said, “That was so fun!”

Nate hadn’t said a word. In fact, he looked a little green around the gills. “Oh, come on, Nate. I wasn’t bad.”

“No, you were fine.” He let out a breath. “I wasn’t, though.”

“Apparently not. Hasn’t anyone else ever driven your car?”

He shook his head. “You’re the first.”

“Really? I’m honored. And I mean that—I’m not being a smart-ass.”

He seemed to have recovered. “There’s a first time for everything. Come on, I’ll show you around.” She followed him into one of the bays where a group of men were working on cars and some were just standing shooting the breeze. Or at least, that’s what it looked like.

“It’s a three-mile track, with lots of curves and some hills and valleys. So it’s challenging. There are going to be grandstands and a clubhouse, and if there was an actual race there’ll be food and drink for sale. But today just the racetrack personnel and whoever is driving are here.” He walked up to an older man who was wearing a ball cap with the name Devil’s Rock and a racecar logo on it.

“Pete, this is Damaris. Damaris, Pete runs the track.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking hands. He was probably in his late sixties or early seventies, lean and not very tall. “I thought I was hallucinating when I saw you weren’t driving Iris,” he said to Nate. “Then I saw you let a woman drive her. No offense, ma’am.”

“None taken. Nate told me no one else had driven Iris.”

“You must be pretty special.”

“She is,” Nate said. “I’m going to show her around. Okay if I drive in a bit?”

“Sure. Slow day today. Are you coming to the official opening day?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“You must come here often,” Damaris commented as they walked away. “Pete obviously knows you.”

He smiled. “Oh, the part about letting you drive? Yeah, he knows me. I’m one of the investors.”

“Really? Why do you call it Levi’s track?”

“First, because it was his idea to build it, second because he’s the main money behind it. There are several investors, but the track isn’t open to the public yet. In about three weeks it will be. Want to go to the opening with me?”

“Sure, if I don’t have to work. I’ve been feeling guilty. It seems like I’ve been leaving a lot to my brothers lately.”

“Haven’t you covered for them a lot?”

She shrugged. “Some. They’re both newlyweds, basically. And now Chase and Ella are having a baby.”

“You did it before that, too. Ever since I’ve known you you’ve been the one they turn to when they need a favor.”

“It’s reasonable,” she said, feeling defensive. “I’m not involved with anyone so I almost always say yes.”

“But you are involved with someone now. As far as they’re concerned anyway. So

you shouldn't feel guilty asking them for a favor or two."

She rubbed her neck and grimaced. "I don't like lying to my family."

"If they didn't talk too much you wouldn't need to."

He had a point. But she still didn't like it.

"Do you have time for me to make a couple of runs on the track?"

"Sure." She was curious to watch him. Even though her preferred method of travel was a horse or a tricked-out pickup, she did love a sports car. Watching someone drive at high speeds was something she hadn't seen outside of bits and pieces of auto races on the TV.

Nate took her to another one of the bays and brought his car in to access the track. While his pit crew checked out the car, he introduced Damaris to them, as well as a few other people who were hanging around. One of them was a woman who had either dated Nate or wanted to, judging from the sultry glances she continually cast him and the way she touched his arm constantly. In fact, Damaris noticed irritably, she all but rubbed her boobs on his arm. He didn't seem to notice, which made her both happy and annoyed. Happy that he was indifferent but annoyed that she cared about something that really wasn't any of her business.

On their way home she stewed about it. Sure, they were pretending to be dating. So, in order to keep that illusion, Nate shouldn't have some bimbo all over him. Maybe she should have said something to the bimbo. Something along the order of Hands off. He's mine.

"Is something wrong?" Nate asked as he drove back to the ranch.

“No, why?”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I don’t know. You seem annoyed. Or pissed or—” He shrugged without continuing.

“I’m not pissed. This thing between us would have to be for real for me to be angry. And it’s not, so I’m not.”

“Okay.” He sounded doubtful.

“But if we were for real, I would definitely be pissed.”

“What about?”

“Your girlfriend.”

He glanced at her then back to the road. “I thought you were my girlfriend.”

“Tell that to Gwen.”

“Gwen?” he asked like he’d never heard of her.

“Yes, Gwen. The woman who was fawning all over you and using your arm as her boob rest.”

\*

Nate turned his head to stare at her. What the hell? He pulled off the highway onto a dirt road and put the car in neutral, setting the parking brake. “Say that again.”

“You heard me.” She stuck her nose in the air and turned away from him.

“You’re jealous of Gwen?”

“Of course I’m not jealous,” she said, giving him a get real look. “But if you were my boyfriend for real, I’d have let her know to keep her hands—and boobs—to herself.”

He couldn’t help it. He grinned. “You are. You’re jealous.”

This time she gave him the stink eye. “I’m merely pointing out that if you want people to believe we’re together you’re going to have to discourage women like that.”

“I didn’t encourage her. That’s just the way Gwen is. Nobody thinks anything of it.”

Damaris snorted but she didn’t say anything else. He started to put the car in gear when she said, “You’ve dated a lot of women.”

“Yeah. You should know. You set me up with a lot of them.”

“You’ve gone to bed with a lot of women.”

“Some. Not as many as you seem to think. It’s not like I take every woman I go out with to bed.”

“Oh, really? That’s not what your reputation says.”

“Can’t believe everything you hear.” What was she getting at? “Why the sudden interest in my sex life?” Of course, she didn’t know it, but he hadn’t had a sex life in months. Not since he realized his feelings for Damaris were not going away.

“I don’t want people to think you’re playing me for a fool.”



“Why would they think that?”

“If you go around flirting with other women that’s what they’ll think.”

“I wasn’t flirting with her. If anything, she was flirting with me. But if it bothers you, maybe you should be a little more demonstrative.”

“Maybe I should. But I’m not rubbing my boobs on your arm.”

He choked, then laughed. “Sacrifices must be made.”

“Ha-ha. That ain’t happening.”

“Darn. I wouldn’t mind. Honest.”

“Can we quit talking about boobs?”

“We weren’t talking generic boobs. We were talking about your boobs.”

She stared at him open-mouthed for a moment. Then she burst out laughing and so did he. “This is the most ridiculous conversation,” Damaris said after she gained control of herself.

“I think you started it.”

“Yes, and I’m ending it. How about this? You try to discourage other women from er, flirting with you and I’ll try to be more demonstrative so they’ll know I’m—”

“Staking your claim?” he finished for her.

“So they’ll know I’m your girlfriend.”

“We could solve all this by becoming engaged.”

“Your grandma doesn’t even know we’re dating yet, does she?”

“Actually, she does. I stopped by after her beauty shop appointment and she asked me if it was true about you and me. I said we decided to be more than friends and see

what happens.”

“What did she say to that?”

“You don’t want to know.” Hell, he wished he hadn’t heard it. Coming from his grandmother, at least.

He put the car in gear and drove to the Walker ranch. “Do you want to come in and have a beer?” Damaris asked.

“Sure.” He wasn’t flying the next day so he figured why not?

Damaris got them both a beer and they sat on the couch to drink them. “I had fun today.”

“Good. I did too.”

“What did Grandma K say when you told her about us?”

He stopped with his beer halfway to his mouth. “You won’t quit asking until I tell you, will you?”

“What do you think?”

“Crap. She wanted to know if we were sleeping together. Which I told her was not her business. Damn, I’m sure I blushed. And that wasn’t all.”

“What else?”

“She said, ‘If you’re not you should be. How else are you going to convince the girl she can’t live without you?’”

## Chapter Seven

She took him riding the next day off he had. He'd been riding more and was getting better, if he did say so himself. Damaris didn't say much except to tell him what he was doing wrong, but he didn't let that worry him. In fact, he appreciated the help since Damaris had forgotten more about horses than he'd ever know. They ambled along the creek under an amazingly blue sky. Days like this made him want to be in the sky flying, but riding was a nice substitute. Riding with Damaris was even better.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like between us?"

Where had that come from? "It being—"

"Sex."

"Do I ever wonder what sex would be like between us? I'm a guy, Damaris. Of course I've thought about it. But I don't wonder. I know."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You can’t know because we haven’t done it.”

“Fantastic. If we made love it would be fantastic.”

She laughed. “You think that because men think all sex is great. Even bad sex.”

“Not true.” Maybe she had a point. Was bad sex better than no sex? How the hell was he supposed to know that considering he hadn’t had sex at all—bad or good—in months?

“This is making me crazy.”

“What is?”

“The fact that I can’t tell anyone what’s really going on.”

Man, she was jumping all over the place today. “Why do you need to tell someone?”

“I need to talk to another woman.”

“Can’t you talk without telling them?”

“No. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not female.”

“Try me. Maybe I can help.”

She halted her horse and glared at him. “It’s about you, you big galoot. I don’t know what to do about you.”

“Maybe you do need to talk to a woman. Because I can’t follow you at all.”

She tugged on her hair. “All this is making me...twitchy.”

He looked at her, totally confused now. “Twitchy?”

“Yes. Isn’t all this kissing getting to you?”

Light dawned. “I like kissing you.”

“I like it too. And that’s the problem.”

“I don’t see it as a problem. In fact, I think it’s a good thing.”

“We’re playing roles here. I’m not supposed to have sexual thoughts about you. You’re a friend.”

He grinned outright. “You have sexual thoughts about me?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? Oh, don’t look so smug. I’m a normal woman with normal urges. And I haven’t had sex in a long time.”

That little fact made him extremely happy. “There’s an easy answer to this.”

“What?”

“We become friends with benefits.”

“I’m not going to fall in love with you.”

We’ll see about that. “Who said anything about love? We’re talking about sex.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She looked like she was thinking about it. But then she shook her head. “It would be a mistake. It would screw up our friendship.”

And open them up to something even better. “I don’t see why.”

“Sex always complicates things.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

“And this would be why I need to talk to another woman.” She turned her horse back the way they’d come. “Come on. I need to get back.”

Damaris had admitted she thought about him sexually. Things were definitely looking up.

\*

Damaris stewed about her dilemma while she mucked out stalls. Naturally, she was the only one around to do it. Their teenage helper was at some school event. Her brothers were off somewhere with their wives. But it was mindless work, so she used the time to mull over her problems.

She kept a lot of things to herself. But when she had a problem, she talked to her friends about it. Jaclyn would be the obvious choice. She wouldn’t talk to Marshall if Damaris asked her not to. That didn’t mean she might not accidentally slip, though. Besides, she didn’t want to make Jaclyn keep secrets from her husband. Which also ruled out Chantel and Ella.



She'd thought about calling her mom but ruled that out pretty quickly. Not because she was afraid she'd tell anyone, but because she had a feeling her mother would think the whole thing was a bad idea. Honestly, she might be right.

She could talk to Ruthie. But their housekeeper adored Nate and Damaris didn't think Ruthie could look at her situation objectively. She'd be more likely to ask her—for the thousandth time—why in the world couldn't she see that Nate was perfect for her?

She walked into Cinnamon's stall to see her favoring one of her legs. She felt the mare's fetlock and found it hot. "Crap, that's not good." She'd thought the mare might be a little gimpy yesterday when she brought her in from the pasture, but she'd checked her over carefully and hadn't found anything. She called Hazel Forrester, her friend who ran an equine water therapy business, to see if she could bring the mare over.

"Of course," Hazel said. "Whenever you want. We're not busy at the moment."

Half an hour later she'd loaded Cinnamon into the trailer and driven out to Hazel's place. Hazel checked her out too. "I think she'd benefit from some cold salt water therapy. Do you know what she did or when she did it?"

"Not a clue as to what happened. She was okay yesterday when I brought her in but this morning she was like this. It must have come up overnight." She gestured at the mare. "I thought about calling Jason but I figured he'd just tell me she needed therapy."

"Let's see what we can do and then we'll call Jason if necessary." Hazel and Whiskey River's large animal vet, Jason Barrett, frequently referred clients to each other.

Hazel and Damaris put the mare onto the underwater treadmill and sat back to watch.

Wait a minute, Damaris said to herself. Hazel is the perfect person to talk to. She doesn't gossip, she keeps to herself and she's been a friend of mine since she moved here.

"Damaris, why are you looking at me so strangely? Do I have something in my teeth? Or on my face?"

"No, I was thinking I need a woman's point of view about something."

"Okay. I take it your sisters-in-law won't do?"

"No, it's a secret. And while they'll keep it quiet, my brothers all have big mouths."

Hazel laughed. "And you don't think they'll keep it from their husbands."

"They wouldn't purposely tell them. But I think it's easy to slip when you're sleeping with someone."

Hazel nodded. "True enough. Shoot."

Damaris drew in a breath. "I guess you've heard that Nate and I have been dating."

"Hasn't everyone?"

"I suppose," she said gloomily. "The thing is we're not really dating."

"What do you mean? Either you're dating him, or you aren't."

Damaris explained the situation, beginning with Nate asking for her to pretend to be dating him and why. "He was so worried. You know Nate's fairly macho, but he's putty for his grandma. And you know I love his grandma." She didn't talk about the

possible eventual fake engagement. For one thing, she wasn't sure they'd make it that long, or if they did, that they'd need to take it that far.

“I don't know Nate that well, but I've always thought you liked him more than you let on, which is why I never could figure out why you're always setting him up with some female. Including me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Distracted momentarily, Damaris asked, “You never did say anything about that date. But you two never went out again.”

“I would have. But he never called. He’s nice, he’s fun. Lord knows he’s hot. I think he had a good time, but when we got home he kissed me good night and that was that.”

That was news she shouldn’t have been happy to hear, but she was. She was a fool. A completely irrational fool about Nate. “That’s not his rep, though.”

“Well,” Hazel said a bit mischievously, “he is a really good kisser.”

“I know.”

Hazel grinned. “Maybe he’s changed. I haven’t heard about him being involved with anyone in quite a while.”

“You don’t need to be involved to sleep with someone,” Damaris said dryly.

“No, but I’ve heard some of the women he’s dated being disappointed that nothing happened on their date either.” She paused a moment and said, “And that little fact seems to please you.”

Might as well admit it, given what she wanted to talk to Hazel about. “Yes, damn it, it does.”

Hazel laughed. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“This would be my problem. Nate and I went out a couple of times when I first got to know him. I knew his reputation so I decided we should just be friends, which worked. Until now.” No need to bring up her past. That was something only Jaclyn knew about.

“Don’t you believe people can change?”

“Maybe, but they have to want to change. And I have a problem with players.”

“Don’t we all. But I assume you’re talking about Nate specifically.”

“Yeah. The problem is now that we’re ‘dating’ we’ve gotten...closer.”

“Define closer.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “We haven’t slept together.”

“But you’re thinking about it.”

“Yes. Damn it. I can’t stop thinking about it. We talked—very briefly—about being friends with benefits.”

“Is that what you want?”

Was it? “Yes. And no. What if I fall in love with him? What if it’s not just sex? For me, anyway.”

“Maybe it won’t be just sex for him either.”

“I doubt that.”

“You know him better than I do but people do change. He obviously trusts you, or he wouldn’t have asked you to help him. Did he say why he asked you?”

“He said his grandma knows me and knows we’ve been friends for a long time. And also that it wouldn’t be fair to ask someone who might fall for him.”

“Hmm. Would it be so bad if you did fall for him?”

“I don’t know. Probably. But the big problem is, I told him I have sexual thoughts about him, which is when he brought up the friends with benefits idea.”

Hazel tilted her head and looked at her quizzically. “Hell, Damaris, what did you expect him to do? Why did you tell him if you weren’t sure?”

“I don’t know. Because I’m an idiot?”

Hazel laughed. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s because you want Nate to convince you that the two of you having sex is a good idea.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“If that’s true, it makes me a chickenshit. Like I can’t take responsibility for what I want.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I think it’s just indicative of your uncertainty about the whole thing.”

Maybe. But she had a disgusted feeling she was simply being a wimp rather than a strong, independent woman.

### Chapter Eight

“Al Rogers wants to go to Lake Tahoe and I’m tied up,” Travis Sullivan told Nate. “Can you take him?”

Travis was one of the original owners of Devil’s Rock Airport. Levi Chapman was the billionaire and ideas man, Zack Bannister was the inspiration and had inherited the land, and Travis was the pilot and the most knowledgeable about flying and running an airport. The three old friends had gotten together and Devil’s Rock Airport was the result.

When Nate first came to town, he’d been Travis’s copilot. But as time went on and the business had grown, Nate had become one of the main pilots of the private charter company. He and Travis also taught flying lessons.

“When?”

“This afternoon. Are you free?”

“Yeah. My student canceled. Kind of last-minute, isn’t it?”

“Yes. You know Al. If we don’t take him, he’ll find someone else.” And they sure didn’t want to lose the man’s business. They wanted to keep him happy and coming back to their charter service.

“Is it just Al or is he bringing someone?”

“Come on, Nate. It’s Al.”

“True,” Nate said with a shrug. “So, his latest conquest. I hope this one isn’t jailbait.”

“The last one only looked like jailbait. She was legal.”

“True enough.” Al’s women always seemed happy to be with him. He sure as hell didn’t coerce any of them. But he had a new one every time he chartered the jet. He was the ultimate ladies’ man and Devil’s Rock charters had flown him—and his latest woman—all over the US, as well as to Mexico and Canada.

One time he’d asked Travis’s wife Tobi how the man attracted so many much younger women. In Nate’s opinion he wasn’t that good-looking but hell, he wasn’t female. Part of it was money, sure. But according to Tobi, who’d met him several times, it was his charm and attentiveness that was the attraction as much as money. “When he’s with a woman he makes her feel like she’s the only one in the world for him,” Tobi had said. “And she probably is. For that day at least.”

Nate’s copilot today was Gary O’Brien, who he flew with regularly. Al introduced his newest girlfriend. She looked a little older than the last one had, but Nate would’ve bet his plane that she was still shy of twenty-five.

Al always spent a little time before takeoff talking to the pilots. “I’ll let you in on a



secret,” Al confided. “I think Amanda’s ‘the one.’”

They both made appropriate noises but when he went back to his seat beside the young woman, his copilot, who’d never met Al before, said, “She’s a looker but she seems a little young for him. Do you think he’s serious about her?”

Nate laughed. “Sure. For the moment. She might even last a couple of days or even a week. But Al is the eternal bachelor.”

After they dropped off Al and his new girlfriend, Nate thought about Al’s lifestyle. It was one he totally understood. Hell, he’d been just like Al, albeit not as wealthy, for most of his adulthood. But that had changed once he got to know Damaris. What had started out as lust had morphed into friendship on Damaris’s insistence. And slowly friendship had deepened until Nate realized he was in love with Damaris and no other woman would do.

He didn’t want to wind up like Al. He was ready to settle down—something that would surprise most of his friends. He still had the rep for dating lots of women but never anyone seriously. Which was true, but only because he hadn’t convinced Damaris to give the two of them a chance. Would their pretend love affair lead to a real one? Who could say? But he sure as hell hoped so.

\*

Not long after their discussion about becoming friends with benefits, Nate and Damaris went to Booze’s to play pool. Nate was across the room, shooting the shit with one of the guys, when he glanced over at the pool tables looking for Damaris. She’d disappeared and he figured she’d gone downstairs to get a drink.

He went downstairs and saw her at the bar, talking to a dude that he could see from fifty feet away was wasted. He began to walk toward them just as the asshole put his

hand on her butt. He'd heard the expression seeing red before, but he'd never literally seen red until this moment. He was beside her in an instant.

Damaris said, "Stand down, Nate. I'm handling it." He didn't want to leave it to her, but he knew her well enough to know she could indeed handle herself. She'd grown up with four brothers, after all. Still, he was ready to jump in if necessary.

"Move your hand or you'll regret it," Damaris said.

"What are you going to do? Break it?"

She smiled. A smile Nate knew spelled trouble for the lech. "Maybe. If you don't move it, sure."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

He laughed. “A little thing like you? You couldn’t break a—”

She had him pinned with his arm and offending hand behind his back before he could finish his sentence. Nate smiled. “She wrangles horses for a living. You’re toast, buddy.”

The lecher started babbling, protesting he hadn’t meant anything, and Damaris wrenched his arm up more. “You need to learn manners. Do not ever put your hands on a woman, especially on her butt, unless she makes it clear she’s interested. Now, I’m really tired of you. You need to go away.” She let go of his arm and watched him slink away.

He muttered something rude and Nate started after him, but Damaris held him back with a hand on his arm. “Let it go, Nate.”

Nate hesitated but after a moment he shrugged. “If that’s the way you want it. Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

They decided to leave. He held her hand as they walked to his car and for once she didn’t complain. He wondered what she was thinking. Wondered if she’d ever change her mind about him. They were in the shadows, in a parking space near the church, which was closed for the evening. “Thanks for the help,” she said as he opened her door.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You would have. But you trusted me to handle it and I appreciate that.”

They drove back to the ranch and he stopped at the cottage. He got out to walk her to the door. Again for a change, she didn't object.

"Why do men do things like that?"

He looked down at her. "Because they're assholes?"

She laughed. "That's a given. But what makes them think they can get away with it?"

"Because sometimes they do. Also because when they're drunk their stupidity takes over."

"I can't see you doing that even if you were drunk."

"Thanks, I think."

"You're smoother than that."

"Smoother than groping a woman when I don't even know her? Damn right I am."

"I wasn't insulting you."

"Weren't you?"

"No, I just wondered what you'd do if we were dating for real and weren't pretending to be dating."

"If I wanted to put my hands on a woman's ass, I'd make damn sure she wanted them there."

"How would you make sure?"

She was playing with fire and he was certain she knew it. “First, I’d put my arms around her.” He took her in his arms, but held her loosely. “Then, if she didn’t object, I’d kiss her.” He lowered his head and claimed her mouth. Damn, she tasted good. She didn’t hesitate but kissed him back, her tongue playing with his, her body melting close. He raised his head and stared into her eyes.

“Again,” she said, her voice husky and inviting.

He kissed her again, sliding his lips over hers, tracing the seam with his tongue, licking into her mouth until the kiss turned hotter, wilder. He wanted her. So damn much. Wanted to sink his hands into her hair, drink her in, touch every part of her, slide inside her and lose himself in her.

But something stopped him. He didn’t want just a roll in the sheets with Damaris. He wanted something lasting. When they made love, he wanted it to mean something. He wanted it to be special, not just ‘benefits.’ She had to want him as much as he wanted her. Him. Not just for sex. And he didn’t think she was there. Wasn’t sure she ever would be.

He lifted his mouth, then set her away from him. Turned his back and fought for control. It wasn’t easy. It was damn near impossible. What was wrong with him anyway? Damaris was willing. That was clear. She’d changed her mind. He finally had the chance to do what he’d been longing to do for months. Years. This had been his plan. Get her into bed so he could convince her he was the right guy for her. And now that she was open to going to bed with him, he was having second thoughts.

I must be nuts.

“Nate? What’s wrong? Why did you stop?”

He turned around. She looked bewildered. He couldn’t blame her. “Because we were

about to reach the point of no return. Or at least the point where it was going to be harder than hell to stop.”

“I don’t want to stop.”

“And I don’t want to be an itch you scratch.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Isn’t it?”

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “No, and it’s insulting to both of us.”

Insulting? Maybe so, but true. “The other day you said being friends with benefits would be a mistake. I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

“That’s very noble of you but who are you to say I’ll regret it? For God’s sake, you’re the one who suggested it in the first place. I’m perfectly capable of deciding who I do or don’t want to have sex with.”

There it was. Damaris wanted to have sex. Nate wanted to make love. God, he was a fool. Part of him was chanting, take what you can get. But the other part of him knew he shouldn’t. “I’m going out of town tomorrow for a few days. Work-related. I’ll call you when I get back.” Then he left before he lost his resolve and had mind-blowing sex with her after all.

### Chapter Nine

Three days later Damaris was still trying to figure out what had happened with Nate. He didn’t want her to regret having sex with him. Bullshit. When she knew for a fact

he'd nailed at least half the women in Whiskey River and the surrounding county, why not her?

Then she remembered her conversation with Hazel and according to her friend, it had been months since she'd heard about Nate being intimate with anyone. After her date with Nate, Hazel had talked to their friend Siobhan Murphy, one of the bartenders at Booze's, who knew all the gossip. Siobhan had reassured her that her date with Nate had been par for the course. Her friend hadn't heard anyone admit to being with Nate for more than one date in months. Not only that, but they'd all been evenings that didn't end with sex. And Siobhan heard everything.

So what was up with Nate? Had he really been celibate that long? And why was that her business if he had been? Or hadn't for that matter?

She needed to go to the feed store and decided to stop by Booze's for a quick lunch while she was out. No, it wasn't on the way to the feed store, but so what? She could spend time getting lunch. She even offered to bring Ella something back, but Ella had plans for lunch with Chase.

Damaris went to Booze's after her other errand, so the lunch crowd had mostly dispersed. Since she was alone, Damaris sat at the bar. Siobhan saw her and waved, then came over as soon as she finished with her customer. "Hey, stranger. I haven't seen you at girls' night out lately. Busy with someone I know?"

"Stop smirking. If you're talking about Nate, no. I was there time before last but you weren't. Last week I was covering for my brother."

"That sucks. Don't they know girls' night out is not to be messed with?"

"You'd think, but they don't."



Siobhan slid a coaster in front of her. “What’ll you have?”

“A burger, fries, and a Diet Dr Pepper.”

Siobhan left to put in her order and a few minutes later brought her drink to her. “I’m really glad you and Nate have gotten together. He used to be such a big flirt.”

“He still is.”

“True, but it’s only been flirting for the past several months. Believe me, I’ve heard the complaints. I always thought he had the hots for you. I’m glad you two are giving it a shot.”

“What made you think Nate had the hots for me?”

Siobhan shrugged. “I guess it was the way he looked at you sometimes. At first, I thought I might be imagining it. I mean, everyone knows you two have been friends for a long time. But after I saw that same expression several times, I knew it was for real.”

“What kind of expression?” If that was true, why hadn’t she ever noticed it? Siobhan must have been reading more into it than was there.

“Wistful, maybe. It’s hard to explain. But you know how sometimes you see a person looking at someone and you think ‘he’s got it bad’? That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Huh. He never seemed that way to me.” When Siobhan looked at her strangely, she realized her goof. “I mean, before we decided to date.”

Siobhan laughed. “For a minute there I wondered.” She left to get Damaris’s food.

Idiot, she chided herself. You almost blew that one.

As she was leaving to go back to the ranch, her phone rang. Nate's ringtone. "Hi."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Hi. I just got back in town. But Grandma called while I was gone and she wants you and me to come to lunch on Saturday. Can you get free?”

“She wants to hear more about us dating?”

“That she does. Can you go?”

“I’ll see what I can do. How was your trip?”

“It was okay.”

Was it her imagination or had he hesitated? “Are you sure?”

“It was fine. Let me know if you can do Saturday. If not let’s pick another day. Grandma wants to see you again. Since we’re dating now, she says it’s the perfect excuse to get you to come over.”

“That’s sweet, but you know I’d have gone to see her if I’d realized she wanted me to.”

“You’re the sweet one.”

That shocked her. “You’ve never called me sweet before.”

“Sure I have. You can be very sweet—to horses, dogs, and old ladies. I gotta go. See you Saturday.”

Damaris didn't see Nate again until he picked her up Saturday to go to his grandma's. She'd thought a lot about what had happened between them. Or rather, what hadn't happened. Why had Nate said they could be friends with benefits and then totally shut her down when she would have agreed to it? It made her curious, but it also hurt her pride. Nate wasn't immune to her. She knew what it felt like when a man was turned on and he'd definitely been hot that last kiss they'd had before he backed out.

The more she thought about it, why shouldn't they have fun if they were going to pretend to be together? What was the harm in a casual sexual relationship with a man who was a friend? One who she trusted as much as she trusted any man besides her brothers.

But she trusted him as a friend. Could she trust him as a lover as well?

When it was over—and it would be over eventually—and the sexual desire had burned itself out, they could go back to being friends. Platonic friends. That was doable, wasn't it?

\*

Nate wasn't quite sure how today would go. After he picked up Damaris, he stopped for takeout fried chicken from the Diner. His grandmother loved fried chicken, but she said she didn't want to eat out. She said she'd rather stay home where they could talk, and she might actually hear them. Something which Nate admitted was hard to do in the noisy restaurant.

He also admitted to being nervous about pulling off this thing. Grandma was very sharp. He didn't doubt she could spot a fake a mile away. Since it was anything but fake on his part, he hoped that would be enough to fool her. "What are you going to say if she starts asking about how we started dating after being friends for so long?" Nate asked Damaris.

“I told you the first four times you asked me.”

“Tell me again.”

He wasn't looking at her, but he could feel her roll her eyes. “I'm going to tell her you asked me to be your pretend girlfriend.”

“Very funny. What are you really going to say?”

“That you asked me out on a real date and took me to the nicest restaurant around, which is Blue where, by the way, you owe me that dinner. We had such a good time we went on another date and pretty soon we were seeing each other all the time. Exclusively.”

He nodded. “That should satisfy her for now.” He hoped. Once at his grandmother's he parked the Corvette in her driveway and went around to open Damaris's door, but she was already getting out. For a change she wore a skirt—a short, snazzy red number—and a sleeveless black-and-white polka-dot top. She also wore heels rather than boots, which was unusual for her. He almost drooled when he saw one long, bare leg and then the other emerge from the car. And the rest of her was pretty damn mouthwatering too.

He'd accuse her of trying to kill him, but she probably had no idea of her effect on him. Or how resolved he was not to make love to her until he believed it would be more than sex to her as well. She'd have a hard time believing it since as far as she knew he was still the same guy who slept with nearly every woman he went out with. For a while he had, first because that was what he had done for a long time, but later because he was trying to burn Damaris out of his system. It hadn't worked.

Oh, he'd definitely enjoyed himself. And he hadn't stopped dating. He'd just stopped sleeping with them. The woman he wanted was Damaris. If he couldn't have her, he

didn't want anyone. Something he'd never thought would happen to him. But then, Damaris wasn't like any other woman he'd ever known.

She was beautiful, but so were a lot of women he'd dated. She was smart, with a tongue that could flay a man alive if she wanted to. But she also had a huge heart. For her family. For her friends. For animals of all kinds. He knew who found most of the abandoned dogs on the ranch and kept them. And who nursed the kittens whose mother had gone missing. Who'd fed them at all hours and forced her brothers to help. All of the Walkers were crazy about animals, but Damaris carried it to the extreme. She and Grandma had bonded over their love of animals.

Grandma answered the door wreathed in smiles. Nate hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Grandma, you remember Damaris, don't you?"

"Of course. Hello, dear. I'm so glad you came." She held out her hands and Damaris took them.

"Thank you so much for inviting me, Mrs. Kershaw."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Now Damaris. The last time we were together you called me Grandma K.”

“Yes, ma’am. Grandma K.”

“Good. Now why don’t you and I go sit in the other room while Nate sets the table. You don’t mind eating in the kitchen, do you?”

“Wherever you want to eat is fine with me.”

“Nate, you know where everything is. And no paper plates, either.” To Damaris she said, “He doesn’t like to clean up and always tries to use paper plates. Sometimes I let him.”

Damaris shot him a ‘uh-oh, should I be worried?’ look over her shoulder as she left the room.

Honestly, who could tell with Grandma?

\*

To Damaris’s relief, Grandma K started off asking her about her horses. Grandma K had been a barrel racer back in the day. In fact, she’d only quit riding in her late eighties when she moved into town after her ranch became too much for her to handle on her own.

“Did I hear you have a new stud?”

“Yes, his name is Thunder. He’s a grullo paint. Let me show you some pictures.” She took out her phone and found the latest photos of the horses, showing them to Grandma K.

“He’s a beauty. I had a blue roan years ago and your Thunder reminds me of him. He wasn’t a paint, though. Wish I still rode but the family would have a fit.” She eyed Damaris. “I don’t suppose you’d—”

“No way, Grandma K. Nate would kill me. But I’ll ask him to bring you out to visit. Would that be all right?”

“Better than nothing, I suppose. Speaking of Nate, why don’t I see any pictures of you two? Or at least of Nate? I’ve seen a few men, but I’m guessing they’re your brothers since you resemble each other.”

Crap. She should have thought of that. Luckily she had some from a few weeks before when she’d asked Nate to take her to the annual Hill Country Horse Breeders Association dinner and dance. “Here’s one of us at the horse breeders dinner.” Grandma knew all about the dinner since she’d been instrumental in the founding of the association. Besides barrel racing Grandma K had raised cutting horses for a while, along with taking part in a variety of other ventures.

Damaris found the picture and turned the phone so Grandma K could see it. Damaris had gone with Nate since Marshall and Chase were both taking their wives and had hassled her about going solo. She didn’t want to go with any of the men they found to take her, so she’d asked Nate to take her, and he’d agreed. The photo was one someone had snapped and sent to her, of the two of them dancing and laughing. They looked happy, and totally relaxed with each other.

Grandma K looked at it for quite a while until Damaris began to grow uneasy. “You look like you’re having fun. You make a nice couple,” she finally said, handing the



phone back to Damaris.

Damaris scrolled through and found a couple of Nate. One of him riding, which made Grandma laugh, and another of him leaning against his car waiting for her to go somewhere. She couldn't remember where, but she remembered the picture. "You can tell he loves that car like it's his baby," Damaris said.

Grandma K laughed. "He surely does. I wonder what he'd choose if he had to pick between that car and his airplane."

"I don't know. I'll have to ask him."

"Hey, you two. The table is set," Nate called from the other room.

Thank God. Before she put up her phone, Damaris looked at the first photo surreptitiously, wondering what Grandma K had seen that was so fascinating. She didn't find it.

## Chapter Ten

After lunch Grandma took Nate aside when Damaris went to the bathroom. "I thought you and Damaris were dating?"

"We are. Why?"

"Damaris showed me a picture of you two at the horse breeders dinner. She found a couple more, but it seems like there should have been more. You're totally in love with that girl. Now as for Damaris, I'm not so sure about her."

Neither was he, so he said nothing.

“Have you slept with her yet?”

“Grandma! What the hell?” Why had he thought Grandma would back off when he’d told her that wasn’t her business? When had she ever backed off from something she wanted to know?

She waved a hand. “Oh, don’t be such a prude. I haven’t gotten to my age without being aware of what goes on between a man and a woman. Answer the question.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

His face heated. Good God, he was blushing. Sex was not something he wanted to discuss with his grandma, of all people. “I can’t believe you’d ask me about that.” Or that she’d called him a prude. That was a new one.

Grandma nodded decisively. “So you haven’t. Well, you’d better get to it.”

Get to it? “We’re taking it slow. And this is not something you and I need to discuss,” he added repressively.

Of course, she ignored him. “Slow is one thing. The two of you are glacial. For Pete’s sake, you’ve known the girl for years, besides being in love with her. What are you waiting for?”

Thank God Damaris entered the room just then. Looking from one to the other, she raised her eyebrow at Nate, who shrugged. “I’m so sorry, Grandma K, but I really have to get back home. Thank you so much for having me.”

Grandma hugged her. “Come on back anytime. With or without this one,” she said, jerking a thumb at Nate.

Nate leaned down to give her a kiss and said, “Behave, Grandma.”

“What’s that? You know my hearing isn’t good.”

Nate gave her a reproofing look. “Wear your hearing aids.”

“Can’t. Dropped ’em in the potty.”

That was at least the third pair she'd lost lately. He suspected she did it on purpose because she didn't like them. Dropping them in the toilet was a new one. But he only said, "Order some new ones. I'll take you to pick them up once they come in."

"You're a sweet boy," she said, and patted his cheek.

Once they got in the car Damaris asked, "What was going on with you two?"

"She was lecturing me about my love life. And you."

Damaris stared at him, then laughed. "She's upset because she thinks we're having sex?"

"If only. No. The opposite."

"That's right. She told you before you should do it so I'd know I couldn't live without you."

"Right. According to her, I need to 'get to it.' I told her we were taking it slow. At which point she said, 'Slow is one thing. Glacial is another.' Or words to that effect."

Damaris let out a peal of laughter. Nate scowled. "I'm glad you think it's funny. You didn't have to be queried about your sex life by your ninety-two-year-old grandma."

Gasping for breath, Damaris managed to say, "I wish I'd seen your face."

"I blushed. I haven't blushed since... Hell, I can't remember the last time I blushed."

She patted his knee, then leaned across the console and kissed his cheek. "Poor baby. Let Damaris make it all better."

The thought of Damaris ‘making it all better’ blasted him into overdrive. He pulled off the road, put the car in neutral, pulled up the parking brake, and grabbed her. “Don’t tempt me, Damaris.” Then he kissed the hell out of her.

\*

Surprise held her perfectly still. At first. His lips were warm, firm, and very knowledgeable. This was a totally different kiss than any he’d given her in the past. And she’d thought those were good. But this one made her head spin and her blood heat.

She didn’t even try to resist. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Their tongues met, danced with each other, exploring each other’s mouths. She groaned and moved closer. She felt his hand on her breast but instead of calling a halt—which was what she should do—she pressed her breast further into his hand. His thumb circled her nipple, which, already at attention, hardened into an aching point.

She wanted his hands on her, on her bare flesh. She wanted to put her hands on him, to feel his body against hers, pressing her into a bed. To feel the warm, welcome weight of a man again. Not just any man’s weight but Nate’s.

She was drowning in lust, tingling all over when he finally lifted his mouth from hers and dropped his arms to disentangle himself. Bereft, she stared at him. He reached to release the parking brake but she clamped her hand on his forearm. “Don’t you dare.”

“Don’t I dare what?”

“Don’t you dare drive off without a word, like nothing happened. What the hell was that?”

“That was a kiss. Did you enjoy it?”

It had been a bit more than a simple kiss, but she didn’t call him on it. “Of course I did. You have to know you’re good at kissing.”

“Thank you.” He put his hand on the brake again.

This time she slapped it. “Stop that.”

“I thought we were finished.”

“Hell, no, we’re not finished. Why did you kiss me like that?” Not to mention feeling her up.

For a moment he looked at her speculatively. “I’m not a eunuch, Damaris.”

“I’m aware.”

“You were teasing me. So I responded. It’s not a big deal.”

She opened her mouth to deny that notion but thought better of it. Maybe it hadn’t been a big deal to him. Maybe what had felt like a forest fire to her had felt like a warm breeze to him. God, that was humiliating. “Fine. We’ll just forget it, then.”

“Will we?” He didn’t wait for an answer but released the brake, put the car in gear, and pulled back on the road.

\*

Damaris barely talked to Nate for the next few days. Every time she did talk to him, he only had a couple of minutes because of a flight, or a student, or something else he had to do. She suspected part of it was because he didn't want to discuss the elephant in the room—that sizzling kiss they'd shared and its implications.

Several days after their visit to Grandma K, Damaris returned from a ride to find Nate waiting for her. "Hi," she said, dismounting. "Come talk to me while I cool down Daisy." Cinnamon was much better but Damaris hadn't ridden her again yet. Daisy was one of their older quarter horses who adored Damaris, so she tried to ride her at least once a week if possible. She removed the saddle and Nate took it from her.

"I know where it goes." He took the saddle to the tack room and came back. "I can't stay long. I have a student this afternoon."

"If you're pressed for time you could call, you know. Like you've been doing since we went to Grandma K's." She led Daisy out of the barn and walked her around. Nate followed.

"I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"Do I need a reason? I like to see you."

And she liked to see him. Too much sometimes. Damn it. "But you do have a reason, don't you? You didn't just come out here to shoot the breeze."

He shrugged. "Levi and Dana are having a party this Saturday. Do you want to go?"

“What kind of party?”

“Just a party. There’ll be music, food, and drinks. Levi’s got a pool table and a swimming pool. They’ll either order takeout or Muriel, their housekeeper, will make something since neither Dana nor Levi can cook for shit.”

“It sounds fun but I’m not wearing a bathing suit.”

“That’s okay. No suit required.”

“What?”

He laughed. “Just kidding. You don’t have to swim. But we’ll be outside a lot so you might want to wear shorts.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“I’m sure there’ll be poker. There usually is.”

“I thought those poker nights were always men only.”



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

He grinned. “Sometimes. But his wife Dana likes to play, and she kicks ass at the poker table. Besides, it’s a party that starts in the afternoon, not a poker night with the guys.”

“I didn’t know Dana played poker. But I guess it’s not something we talk about a lot at our girls’ night out.”

“Do you play?”

Damaris debated stringing him along but decided to tell the truth. “I have four brothers. What do you think?”

“That would be a yes.”

She nodded. “Since I was little.”

“Good, then maybe you can give Dana a run for her money.”

“It’s hard to believe we’ve never talked about poker before.”

“There are a lot of things we’ve never talked about before.” His voice had dropped, and he stared at her mouth.

She started to tingle, damn it. How did he do that with just a few words and a gleam in his eyes? “I’ll have to make sure someone will be around to take care of the horses. Although it’s not my weekend so I’m sure someone will be.” She led Daisy into the barn and tied her to a tie ring so she could brush her.

“If it’s not your weekend why do you have to make sure someone will be around? Shouldn’t whoever is working the weekend take care of that?”

He had her there. Why was she worried? “You’re right. So, I guess I’ll see you Saturday.” She started to turn away to pick up the brush, but Nate put a hand on her arm. “What?”

His mouth curved up and he slipped his arms around her waist, bent his head and kissed her. She tried to resist. Honest she did, but it was no use. Damn, the man really knew how to kiss. As kisses went, this one was just about perfect. He didn’t touch her anywhere but at her waist and with his mouth on hers, and he didn’t let up until she was tingling all over.

“There’s no one around,” she said, and dammit, her voice was husky.

Nate grinned. “Yeah, I know. I’ll see you Saturday,” he said and left.

“Oh, my God,” she said aloud. “He’s trying to seduce me. And it’s totally working.”

## Chapter Eleven

Nate picked up Damaris Saturday afternoon. She wore a sleeveless pink T-shirt with the Walker Paints logo on it, a pair of white shorts, and sandals. He’d seen Damaris in shorts before so why couldn’t he peel his eyes away from her legs? Damn, she wasn’t that tall but her legs went on forever in those shorts.

“What’s wrong? I thought you said to wear shorts?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” He finally managed to tear his gaze away and start the car. “I think you’ll know a lot of the women and some of the men.” Hell, she’d probably dated half the men. That was the problem with living in a small town. Not only did

everyone know each other, most of them had dated each other as well.

He tried not to think about kissing Damaris again, but it was pointless. In fact, ever since that day in his car he'd thought of very little else. The kiss in her barn hadn't helped a bit to take his mind off Damaris, either. He'd thought about kissing her and more.

When they arrived, he rang the doorbell and a feminine voice came from the speaker. "Hello, Nate. Go on in."

"Thanks, Minerva."

"I guess he has one of those doorbells where you can see and talk to whoever is there. Who's Minerva?"

"Levi has his own version of that doorbell. Minerva is his digital personal assistant."

"His digital—Oh, that's right. He's an inventor, isn't he?"

"Right. He started his fortune with a pipe fitting for oil wells that he dreamed up when he was working as a roughneck on an oil rig."

"I haven't met Levi. I know Dana from girls' night out, but not well. I've never been to their house."

"Come on, they'll be in the game room and backyard."

They followed the noise to a huge room with what seemed like a hundred people milling about. Several people called out a greeting to Nate, but he only waved and took her to meet Levi and see Dana first. They greeted her and introduced her to several others, including Levi's brother and his wife, Asher and Jessie Chapman, who

lived in Last Stand, not far down the road from Whiskey River. Asher's service dog, Maggie, was also with them and Asher introduced her to Damaris while Nate greeted her, rubbing her head.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You’re Walker Paints,” Jessie said upon being introduced.

“I am,” Damaris said, obviously pleased. “Although I can’t take all the credit. It’s a family-run business and my brothers and I run it together. And you rescue mustangs and raise Spanish mustangs.”

Jessie laughed. “I sure do. Come on, let’s go get something to eat and drink and we can talk horses.”

Nate was left standing there with Asher and Maggie. His gaze followed Damaris until she was out of sight. All he could think about was how soon he could kiss her again.

“Yo, Nate,” Asher said. “What do you think?”

“About what?”

Asher laughed. “I asked if you could take me to New Mexico to place a dog with a veteran.”

Asher was a veteran who ran a nonprofit that put together shelter animals and veterans. Many of the vets had fallen through the cracks, not qualifying for a service animal but who often needed a companion at the least. Although the animals were primarily companions, many of them had a bit of training as service animals. Asher’s own dog was a stray he’d adopted and who he’d trained as a service dog, although she wasn’t certified.

“Sorry. I didn’t hear you. Just let me know when and I’ll arrange it.”

“Thanks. You were too busy watching Damaris leave. At least, it better have been Damaris you were watching and not my wife.”

“Don’t worry, it was.” Not that Jessie wasn’t something to look at, but Nate was so stuck on Damaris that he couldn’t really focus on anyone else. “The women looked like they were going to get along.”

“I imagine so. Girls and their horses.”

“Amen, brother.”

\*

Jessie and Damaris talked for quite a while about horses, dogs, men, ranching, and various other topics. After some time Asher and Nate came over and dragged them away, but not before they’d exchanged phone numbers and a promise to get together soon.

“You really hit it off with Jessie,” Nate said. “I figured you would.”

“Yes, she’s great. I guess you know both she and Asher pretty well since Asher is Levi’s brother.”

“Yeah. I also fly Asher and some of his dogs to different cities to match them with other veterans. Most of the people he matches the dogs with live in Texas, but if it’s very far we fly them free of charge.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s nice of Levi. He takes care of the costs. Just his way of helping out his brother’s nonprofit.”

“You know all the Devil’s Rock Airport owners well, don’t you?” She knew Travis Sullivan, but she didn’t know the other two Devil’s Rock owners, Zack Bannister and Levi Chapman.

“Sure. Travis brought me in since he needed a copilot and not too long after that I became permanent. Haven’t I told you this stuff before?”

“I don’t think so. I knew you came here because you knew Travis but we’ve never talked that much about your work. I mean, I realize you fly airplanes, both jets and smaller planes, and that you teach flying students. But I don’t know any details.” She should. They’d been friends for how long? And she barely knew anything about his work.

She knew he loved flying, but anyone who’d talked to Nate for five minutes could figure that out. He liked cold beer, hot salsa, and pretty women. Again, that wasn’t a secret. She knew he had family in Corpus Christi, Texas. His mom and dad lived there. He had a brother and sister who lived elsewhere. He was the oldest. And she knew some other random things about him. But she was beginning to realize that there was a lot more to Nate than she knew.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“I just realized there’s a lot I don’t know about you.”

“Not really.” He spread his hands wide. “What you see is what you get.”

“I don’t think so. I think there’s a lot beneath the surface that you don’t talk about. At least, not to me.”

“Ask me anything. But why don’t we save it until later? Right now I have something to show you.” He took her hand and led her outside saying ‘later’ to anyone who got

in their way.

“Where are we going?”



“You’ll see.”

He wouldn’t say anything else. He took her through the yard beyond the fence and down a trail to a pasture. Maybe the Chapmans had horses and Nate wanted her to see them.

They weren’t horses. They were miniature donkeys. “Oh, my God,” she said when she saw them. “How cute are they?”

Nate laughed. “I thought you’d like them. The brown and white spotted one is Lady and the other one is Buster. Levi gave them to Dana right before he proposed.”

The donkeys had come to the fence the minute they saw them and were demanding to be petted. Charmed, Damaris complied. “That sounds like a story. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard of miniature donkeys as an engagement present.” She pet both the donkeys, crooning to them as Nate looked on, smiling.

“Ask Dana for the whole story. You’ll like it.”

After she finished playing with the donkeys, she thanked Nate. “That was fun.”

“Good.” He put his arms around her and pulled her close. “I had an ulterior motive bringing you down here.”

Her senses went on high alert. “Nate—”

“Damaris.” He kissed her.

His lips were warm and firm. He tasted like...peppermints? She could have moved, should have moved, but she didn't. Instead she drank in the kiss, the touch of their tongues, the thrill that shot through her as he explored her mouth leisurely. As his hands stroked slowly up and down her back. Reveled in the feel of his body, her breasts pillowed against his hard chest. When the kiss finally ended she stared into his eyes and said the first thing that popped into her head.

“Why do you taste like peppermints?”

Nate laughed and turned her loose. “That was not what I expected you to say. I had some peppermints at the house before we came down here.”

“You need to stop kissing me like that. There was no one to see.”

“We both know that kiss wasn't for show.” He took her hand and started back to the house.

“Nate, are you trying to seduce me?”

He continued walking and kept hold of her hand, but turned to look at her. “What would you do if I said yes?”

Damaris stopped, yanked her hand away and put her hands on her hips. “Are you freaking kidding me? I'd tell you to make up your damn mind. Last time we talked about this, you said us being friends with benefits would be a mistake.”

“I changed my mind. I think the benefits are worth the risk.”

“You think having sex is worth risking our friendship.”

“We're not going to lose our friendship.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Yes, I can. But until you believe it, nothing’s going to happen. So don’t worry about it. We’ll just take it as it comes.”

“And you’ll quit trying to seduce me?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

## Chapter Twelve

Nate wasn’t dissatisfied with the way things were going with Damaris. Of course, he wasn’t satisfied either. Still, Levi’s party had been encouraging. Damaris hadn’t totally flipped out when he’d all but admitted to trying to seduce her. But he hadn’t been with her since then so he couldn’t be sure what she’d decided afterward. At least she hadn’t called and said the whole charade was off.

He’d been working almost nonstop since the party but he finally had a day off. He was about to call Damaris to see if he could talk her into going for a ride. He figured he’d have better success getting her to ride horses than anything else. Before he could, though, his phone rang. Grandma’s ringtone. He snatched it up.

“Grandma, are you okay?” She didn’t call often so when she did, he always worried something bad had happened.

“I’m fine. Can’t I call my grandson?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Yes, but usually something’s wrong or you need something.”

“Nothing’s wrong. But I want to talk to you. Can you come see me?”

“Of course.” Riding would have to wait. He got in his car and drove to his grandmother’s house. A short while later Grandma let him in.

“Hi, Grandma,” he said, hugging her. “What do you need?”

“I have a favor to ask you.” She led him to her living room, and they sat on her couch.

“Okay. What is it?”

“My cousin Tillie—you remember her, don’t you?”

No, not a clue. “Uh—”

Not waiting for his answer, she went on. “Tillie is my cousin on my mother’s side. My aunt’s daughter. We haven’t seen each other in...danged if I can remember how long.”

She went on, first trying to decide how long since she’d seen Tillie, then describing the exact relationship and talking about what she and Tillie had done when they were young, who Tillie had married, when he’d died, and God only knew what other things. Nate waited patiently, possible only because he’d tuned out the exhaustive reminiscing. He knew she’d get to the point eventually but sometimes she did tend to

go off into way more detail than she needed to.

“But that’s neither here nor there,” she said finally, which was his cue to pay attention. “Tillie lives in San Diego and her granddaughter is getting married this weekend. She wants me to come visit her for a few days and go to the wedding.”

“Oh, okay. You want me to fly you there.”

“No! Of course not! Why, I wouldn’t ask you to do that. Why would you think I’d ask a favor like that?”

“Because I’m a pilot? It’s not a big deal, Grandma. I’d be happy to do it.”

“No, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Exasperated, he said, “If you don’t want me to fly you then what do you need?”

“I can’t find the number to call to make a reservation. Besides, I’m not sure about what airport or anything. And you know I don’t use that inter whatever web stuff. I just need a little help organizing this thing.”

Good God, no. She didn’t have a computer, but she had a smartphone. As far as he knew, she only used the telephone function. It struck terror in his heart trying to imagine if she somehow got on the web and tried to make a reservation. He didn’t think she could manage it, but if she did the results could be catastrophic. He remembered a friend’s story about his elderly father ordering thirty-seven copies of the same book. Besides that, his ninety-two-year-old grandma traveling alone on a commercial airline? Having to change planes, go through security, and deal with all the people at the airport? Sure, they could arrange for help. The airlines did it all the time for adults and kids who needed more assistance. But knowing Grandma, she’d turn down any help. Besides, there was no reason to. No way in hell would he let her

go it alone.

“I’ll take you. You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” she said stubbornly.

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. And don’t argue. You are not flying commercial. That’s ridiculous when I can take you.” He didn’t add that his mother would have a shit fit. He’d hold that in reserve.

She studied him, frowning. “I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re my grandmother. You’re not imposing.”

“Then I’ll pay you. I have plenty of money.”

“You are not paying.”

“Oh, yes I am.”

“Look, we’ll argue about money later.” Like never. “When do you want to leave?”

“The wedding is a week from Saturday. So how about we leave next Thursday?”

“All right. I’ll arrange it.”

“Why don’t you ask Damaris to come with you? Stay a few days until it’s time for me to go home.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I hear there are some romantic hotels there.” When he hesitated, she added, “If you ask me, that girl needs romancing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Damaris and him, alone in San Diego, no horses, no clients, nothing to do but relax and have fun. Perfect opportunity to grow closer to her. “If I can get the time off to stay a few days I’ll ask her.”

“That’s my boy.”

Sure, he could ask her. Whether she’d go was a different matter.

\*

Damaris was in the barn, saddling her mare Cinnamon when she heard Nate’s voice calling her. Damn it, why did her stomach do that little tumble when she heard his voice or thought about him? When she thought about what had—and hadn’t—happened that day in the car. Or at Levi’s party. Or any of several other times she’d wondered where they were going. To bed together, was her almost inevitable conclusion.

“Hi. What’s up?”

Nate wore a short-sleeved T-shirt, one of about a hundred he had of various colors, all with the Devil’s Rock Airport logo stamped on them. He wore jeans instead of shorts and boots rather than tennis shoes. He looked like a cowboy, and very at home on the ranch, which amused her since he’d never been on a horse until he met her. But he’d been around enough that he was almost as good as one of the hands when she needed help. And his riding had improved by light-years over time. He was a quick learner, not only with the horses, but with anything else he attempted. He was athletic enough and smart enough to do anything he wanted.

“I have the afternoon off and wondered if you wanted to go riding.” He looked at Cinnamon and added, “I haven’t been in a long time.”

“Sure. I’ll get Whimsy and you go get the tack.”

They worked together, brushing and saddling the young gelding. “Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

“Yeah, but it can wait.”

She shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

He didn’t say much until they were some distance from the barn, on one of her favorite trails.

“I’m going to fly Grandma to San Diego.”

She looked over at him, thinking he looked natural on horseback. “Oh, I didn’t realize your grandma traveled. Seems like a lot of people her age don’t.”

“Usually, she doesn’t. She hasn’t gone anywhere in a long time. But she has a cousin she hasn’t seen in years who lives in San Diego and she invited Grandma to her granddaughter’s wedding and to stay for a few days.”

“She’ll be a lot more comfortable flying with you than trying to go on a commercial airline. It will sure be easier on her than commercial.”

He smiled. “I kind of had to browbeat her to let me take her. She asked me for help making a reservation on one of the airlines. She didn’t know what airport to ask for either. Can you imagine her in a busy airport assuming she did manage to make a reservation? Because you know she wouldn’t ask for or even allow extra help. She’s



still very capable but flying commercial when I can take her? My mother would have a stroke.”

“You wouldn’t let her do that either.”

“You’re right about that. It took me a while to convince her, though. I’m going to take a few days off. Want to come with us? Grandma will stay with her cousin so we could stay in a hotel. We could sightsee or go to the beach or whatever. There’s a lot to do in San Diego.”

“I don’t want to horn in on your time with Grandma K. But it sounds like fun.” And very tempting.

“Grandma told me to ask you. Her exact words were, ‘You need to romance that girl. Bring her with us.’”

She could hear Grandma K saying that. Unfortunately, it made her wonder what it would be like to have Nate have free rein to ‘romance’ her. “That’s sweet but I don’t know if I can get away. When is it?”

“Weekend after this one. We’d leave next Thursday and come back Monday.”

“I’d have to get one or both of my brothers to take care of the horses and everything for me. For four-plus days. That’s a lot.”

“Damaris, I know for a fact you’ve covered for both of them more times than I can count.”

“Well...that’s true.”

“You deserve a break. When’s the last time you took a vacation?”

Never? Not that she'd admit it. "I've been leaving the ranch a lot more lately than I usually do."

"They still owe you. I know how many invitations you've either turned down or backed out of because you had to take care of the horses and the ranch."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She shrugged. “I’m a rancher. I raise horses. It comes with the territory.” But he was right. The guys did owe her. She’d never been to California.

She’d gone to school at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas, and she’d been to a number of other places in Texas, but her visits to other states had been limited to states near Texas and Florida, and mostly had to do with horses or the ranch. So getting to go to California would be a treat.

And what about you and Nate? Together for five days. And four nights. Just the two of you.

Friends with benefits? He admitted—almost—that he was trying to seduce you.

You’re asking for trouble.

Probably. But I don’t care.

“Finished arguing with yourself?”

“How did you know that was what I was doing?”

“Easy. All I had to do was look at your face. Should I or shouldn’t I? was written all over it.

“I was thinking, not arguing with myself,” she said loftily. “I’ll ask them.”

“Good. Let me know what they say.”

“About the hotel—”

“Don’t worry. You’ll have your own room.”

She barely stopped herself from saying, What if I don’t want my own room? Just as well she didn’t say it, though. The two of them becoming lovers was something she still had mixed feelings about. She wanted to. But there was a reason she’d friend-zoned Nate in the first place.

Nate Kershaw would be far too easy to fall in love with. And the last time she’d fallen in love with a player had been enough to last a lifetime. But even as she thought that, she admitted that while Nate might not have settled down, and who knew if or when he would, she could guarantee he wouldn’t be as bad as Warner Jarrett. No one could be.

When are you going to admit you want Nate?

She had no answer to that question. Because admission or no admission, she wanted him.

## Chapter Thirteen

The flight from Whiskey River to San Diego only took a couple of hours. Damaris enjoyed Grandma K’s first trip on a private plane almost as much as she did. Damaris had flown in Nate’s trainer, which was the two-seater he took students up in. He’d even offered to teach her to fly but there was no way she could have fit that in with her responsibilities on the ranch. This was the first time, however, that Damaris had flown in a private jet.

Nate had asked another pilot who was thinking about joining the Devil’s Rock Airport crew to fly with them there and back. When Damaris had asked what the man

was going to do while waiting to return he'd laughed at her. "It's San Diego. I'm sure he'll find something to do."

Grandma K was as excited as a kid at the state fair. She'd flown before but not in a long while, and private plane travel was a whole 'nuther ball game than traveling commercial. It was a while before she quit looking out the window long enough to pay attention to Damaris.

Grandma K looked at least ten years younger than her actual age. Her hair was a beautiful silvery gray, cut short and layered. When Damaris complimented her on her hair, she laughed. "I told Rosario not to give me an old lady cut."

"It's not. It's very cute and stylish."

"Thank you, dear."

Grandma K didn't act her age either, being very spry and upright. And sharp. "My boy's always wanted to be a pilot. We had a small private airport not too far from where he grew up. He used to haunt that place any time he could get away. Even stowed away on a flight one time."

Damaris could envision a young Nate doing something like that. "That sounds just like him. Did he get in trouble?"

"They made him clean the hangar but he was happy as a pig in slop as long as it had something to do with planes."

"Nate hasn't talked a lot about his family. I know his parents live in Corpus Christi, and that he has a brother and a sister, both younger than him, and they live in Texas. Kali owns a craft store and lives in San Antonio and Liam is a musician who lives in Austin. But that's about it." She should know more. As it was, she'd had to reach to

remember his siblings' names. Hell, she'd known Nate for how long now? It wasn't as if they'd never talked about family before. Was it?

Grandma K was looking at her strangely. "He never said anything else?"

"About his family? No, why?"

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I just wondered—never mind that.” She laughed. “I started to ask what you two did talk about, but I reckon you young people aren’t too worried about conversation.”

Unsure what to say she fell back on “Um.”

Grandma K laughed again. “Don’t mind me, Damaris. I’m just happy you two are finally together.”

Luckily, she went on to talk of other things, but Damaris couldn’t stop thinking about how little she knew about Nate’s family and his past. She decided she was going to change that.

It took a while to get Grandma K settled with her cousin Tillie, but by lunchtime they waved goodbye and drove off in the car Nate had rented. “Was your grandmother wild when she was young?”

“She’s never come right out and said it, but I suspect she was. Why?”

“Some of the things she said made me wonder. Like the way she said ‘don’t do anything I wouldn’t do’ and she and Tillie cracked up.”

“People usually do laugh when they say that.”

“I guess. That reminds me, we were talking about your family and I admitted I didn’t know a lot. I realized you and I have never talked much about your family—well, other than Grandma K. I felt like a jerk. You know all about my family.”

“They live in Whiskey River and you live on the ranch with a good portion of them. It would be weird if I didn’t know them.”

“Still, I should know more. Tell me about your family. What do your mom and dad do? I know what Kali and Liam do.”

“My mother’s a doctor and my dad is in real estate.”

“Is your dad commercial or residential?”

“Commercial.”

“None of you wanted to go into real estate?”

“Nope.”

Good God, it was like pulling teeth to get him to talk. But she persevered. “What kind of doctor is your mom?”

“She’s an OB/GYN.”

“But none of you kids wanted to go into medicine?”

A shadow crossed his face and for a moment he looked sad. She wondered why, but before she could ask Nate changed the subject.

“Can’t we talk about something more interesting? Like what we’re going to do this afternoon?”

“Can we go to Coronado Island? I want to see that hotel. The Hotel del Coronado, I think it’s called.”



“Sure. Do you want to drive or take the ferry? We can look around until we want to check in at the hotel. We have reservations for a sunset tour of San Diego harbor late this afternoon.”

“The ferry sounds fun. But I still want to hear about your family.”

\*

A little exasperated, Nate looked at Damaris. “There’s nothing particularly interesting about my family.” Nothing he wanted to talk about, anyway. “Why do you want to talk about them?”

“Because it dawned on me, I know almost nothing about them. If we were really involved, I think I would.”

There was only one thing ‘interesting’ about his family and he never talked about it to outsiders. And hardly ever to other family members. It hurt too much. But Damaris was right. He’d have told her if they were truly involved. Maybe. Grandma wouldn’t bring it up, so why open that wound?

Damaris put her hand on his arm and squeezed gently. “I’m sorry. Obviously there’s something you don’t want to talk about. Just forget I said anything.”

He tried but he wasn’t entirely successful.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

The ferry ride was nice. He'd been on it several times, but he enjoyed watching Damaris. It was a beautiful, clear day and the San Diego skyline was cool and easily visible from across the bay. They took in the Hotel del Coronado, a Queen-Anne-style masterpiece that was built in 1888. They walked along the beach part of the Strand, eating a little junk food they'd bought earlier along the way. It was nice and relaxing, but he still couldn't get his brother out of his head.

Maybe if he told her about Jeremy he could move on. As they walked along the beach he started talking. "I had an older brother. His name was Jeremy."

"Had? He's—"

"Dead. Yeah. He died when he was twenty-three. I was twenty."

"Oh, God, Nate. I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"No, you wouldn't. I don't talk about it. Don't think about it if I can help it."

"I'm so sorry I made you think about him."

He shrugged. "Not your fault. It wasn't drugs. At least, not drugs he was doing. He was in medical school. He wanted to be a doctor, like Mom. He lived in the student ghetto. He planned on moving but that was all he could afford, and he wouldn't take money from our parents."

"What happened?"

He looked into her eyes, soft with compassion. “He was shot and killed during a robbery.”

“How horrible. Did they catch the man who did it?”

“Yeah. About a week later the bastard robbed someone else but that time he was the one who got shot. The cops found a lot of stolen merchandise at his apartment. Some of it was Jeremy’s.”

She put her hand in his as they walked. Squeezed it. “Do you want to talk about it some more?”

No, but he had to. Once started he couldn’t stop. “One minute he was there, like he’d been all my life. And then he was just...gone. I was a mess for a long time. Got into a lot of trouble. Drinking. Women. Not drugs, fortunately. I figured if you could die that easily and senselessly then what was the point?”

“I’m so so sorry.” She squeezed his hand again. “You obviously came to terms with it. Or you’d never have become a pilot.”

“Eventually. Grandma kicked my ass. She said Jeremy wouldn’t want me to act the fool and throw away my future. And that my parents had lost one son and didn’t deserve to lose another. So I straightened up.” He smiled. “Well, mostly.”

“Meaning you continued to drown yourself in women.”

She said it matter-of-factly rather than accusingly, but he sensed something—disapproval, maybe?—in her tone.

“I wouldn’t say drowned myself.”

“Hmph.”

“You think you have me all figured out, don’t you?”

“Don’t I?”

“Not anywhere close.” Changing the subject, he said, “We should get back to San Diego and check in at our hotel. We don’t want to be late for the sunset cruise.”

\*

Damaris’s first sunset cruise—first cruise ever, actually—was amazing. It was also very romantic. She wondered if Nate had known it would be and if so, had he had an ulterior motive when he arranged it? Oh, hell, maybe he’d just thought it would be fun.

They weren’t the only people on the cruise, but she and Nate were one of only three couples, plus the crew. The other couples were friendly enough, but it was clear they were more interested in their own partners than anyone else.

First, drinks and appetizers were served while one of the crew pointed out landmarks and other interesting sites. They also saw dolphins, birds, and even some seals. As sunset drew nearer she and Nate stood on the deck, sipping champagne and watching the gorgeous array of colors over San Diego. “Nate, are you romancing me?”

Instead of answering right away he kissed her. She sighed and let him take charge, responding when his tongue lightly touched hers. It was the perfect kiss. Sweet and sensual, tempting and exciting. One thing it wasn’t was a kiss between two people who were simply friends.

Ending the kiss, he looked down into her eyes. “Would it be so terrible if I said yes?”

Would it? “No, but—” She hesitated, unsure what to say. If she were wise, she’d back off, or at least lighten the mood. But she was tired of being sensible.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Sensible? Call it what it is, Damaris. You're afraid. Afraid to open yourself up to the possibility that you and Nate could have more.

His sincerity, so clear in his eyes, turning dark green now with—"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you...want me."

"But I do want you, Damaris. I always have."

Stunned, she gazed at him but before she could formulate a response they were called to dinner.

Each couple had their own table out on the deck, where in the darkening night the San Diego skyline was lit up. There were three courses. A spinach and bacon salad, salmon in a buttery wine sauce with wild rice and green beans almondine, and a choice of desserts. Nate had crème brûlée, while she had chocolate lava cake.

They didn't talk about anything of consequence during dinner. But Nate had given Damaris a lot of room for thought since they'd started their pretend relationship. Especially that day. That he'd opened up to her about his brother's death was a turning point in their relationship. She realized that though she'd known Nate for a few years now, she only knew what he'd chosen to tell her about, and that had hardly scratched the surface.

She hadn't known he flew Asher Chapman and his shelter animals to veterans. Wherever they needed to go, free of charge, volunteering his services as well. She'd only learned of that at the Chapmans' party. During the plane ride to San Diego, Grandma K had told her what Nate did for her as well. While she'd known Nate looked in on Grandma K often, she hadn't realized how often, or that he went with her to her doctor's appointments whenever he could. Grandma's recent diagnosis had been a surprise to him because he'd been working when she had that appointment. After Grandma K told her that she understood better why he was so determined to make her happy. To the extent he convinced Damaris to have a fake relationship with him.

Now that relationship was in danger of becoming all too real. "But I do want you, Damaris. I always have." She'd known Nate had been attracted to her, but honestly she'd figured he'd gotten over it. Until they started this pretend relationship stuff and since then she'd realized he hadn't, and even worse, neither had she. She'd deliberately ignored the pangs of what could only be called jealousy when he'd dated other women. Hell, she'd even gone so far as setting him up with beautiful women, all because she was afraid she could fall for him.

Nate had said he wanted her. Not that he loved her. If she slept with him, she'd want more. Was she ready to take a chance that he might want more too? What if he didn't? What if he was fine with a friends-with-benefits relationship? Could she be okay with that or should she hold out for the real thing? And if they did get involved beyond sex, could she trust him to be faithful? To not lie to her?

It would be safer all around to remain friends. But that was getting harder and harder to do.

## Chapter Fourteen

Make that impossible to resist. Somehow Nate had reawakened her sexual desire,

which had been dormant for years. Oh, she'd been attracted to men she'd gone out with. But never enough to get past her fear of making the wrong choice. Yes, Warner Jarrett had been one mistake but that hadn't been simply a mistake. It had been a flipping disaster.

But she knew Nate. Knew him well. They'd been friends for a long time. And all this pretending was getting to her. She even forgot at times that the whole thing was fake, intended to make his grandmother happy. Like tonight, on the sunset cruise. The whole night had been romantic...and real.

Of course, he hadn't mentioned how he planned to handle their inevitable breakup. But in the meantime, he treated her like a real girlfriend. Like a woman he was romancing. If the sunset cruise hadn't been about romance, then what had it been about? Yes, it had been beautiful. Also romantic as hell. And when Nate had kissed her on the cruise she'd forgotten everything but what it felt like to be in his arms. Wanting more.

So was she going to lie in bed in the adjoining room to his and continue to be frustrated or was she going to do something about it? If she wasn't then why had she stopped by the hotel gift shop and bought a box of condoms? Nate almost certainly had some but she wanted these to be especially for her, not some random woman he might sleep with.

Of course she hadn't packed anything sexy to sleep in. To be fair, she didn't have anything sexy. She slept in T-shirts and shorts in the summer, or in the winter, T-shirts and flannel pants. It couldn't be helped. Besides, she didn't plan to be wearing them for long.

She went into her bathroom and brushed her teeth and hair. Looked at herself critically in the mirror. This was as good as she got. She took some condoms out of the box and put them in her pocket.



She opened her adjoining door and knocked on his. Surely he wasn't asleep, she thought when he didn't answer.

A moment later Nate opened his door. His chest was bare, but he'd pulled on the jeans he'd worn earlier, though they weren't buttoned. Clearly he'd been in bed, if not asleep. "What's wrong?"

Whoa. She'd seen Nate without a shirt before. She'd noticed he was ripped but damn, tonight he was worth drooling over. "Nothing. I couldn't sleep so I wondered if you were still up."

"Yes. I was reading."

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

"Come on in." She walked through the door and he waved at the overstuffed chair beside the bed. "Do you want the chair or the bed?"

"Why can't we both sit on the bed?"

He looked at her then, his gaze traveling slowly from her head, to her braless chest, then a long, leisurely sweep down her bare legs to her toes then back up again. "Not a good idea."

"Why? Are you afraid I can't keep my hands off you?"

He laughed and shook his head. "No. But I know damn well I won't be able to keep my hands off of you."

That did it. Her stomach flipped over and heat suffused her body. The way he was looking at her spoke truth to his words.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I don’t want you to keep your hands to yourself.” In case he didn’t understand, she closed the distance between them, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

For a moment he stood stock-still. A groan broke from him and his arms came around her and crushed her against his chest. They kissed frantically, lips and teeth and tongues colliding. He reached beneath her shirt and palmed her breasts. This time she groaned.

“I’m not going to ask if you’re sure. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t.”

“Good. I won’t either.”

He laughed, pulled off her shirt over her head, and tossed it aside. His eyes darkened from hazel to green as he looked at her. “Damn, you’re pretty, Damaris.”

Oddly, she didn’t feel self-conscious. Considering how long it had been since she’d taken off her clothes in front of a man, she’d thought she would be. But Nate’s frank appreciation made her feel wanted and admired.

Damaris put her hands on his chest. His skin was soft, his muscles hard. He moved one hand to angle her face up for another kiss. He kissed her deeply, his tongue sweeping into her mouth and tangling with hers. They tumbled to the bed together, Damaris on her back with Nate on top of her. One of his legs was wedged between her thighs and she squirmed against it, wanting more.

He trailed kisses along her jaw, to her neck, to her collarbone. Then he stopped and gazed at her breasts until she wondered if there was something wrong with them. She

looked down. Nope. Same old boobs. “Nate? What’s wrong?”

He raised his gaze to hers. “Nothing. Not one thing.” He licked her nipple, swirled his tongue around the areola, then sucked her nipple into his mouth. The throbbing between her legs intensified and she pressed against his leg again. He raised his head, murmured, “Perfect,” and moved to her other breast.

She almost came just from him sucking her nipples. She put her hands in his hair, holding him close, though he hadn’t moved from her breasts. He removed his leg from between hers and she whimpered. “Don’t leave.”

Nate chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m not about to. Just...exploring.” He slipped a hand beneath her shorts, stroking her through her panties. When he slipped a finger inside her, she groaned, raised her hips and tightened around him, her hands clutching his shoulders. He plunged his finger in and out, added another and did it again. And again, rubbing her clit when he did.

Damaris raised her hips, meeting him stroke for stroke. Clenching her muscles, she felt everything in her tighten, and she crested and exploded, crying out his name as she came.

\*

Wow. Still holding Damaris, Nate waited until she opened her eyes. “I have to go get a condom.”

“No you don’t,” she said huskily.

“Yes, I do. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time and I’m clean, but we don’t need you to get pregnant. Unless...are you on the pill?”

“No. Look in my pocket.”

He stuck his hand in her shorts’ pocket and pulled out a strip of condoms. Smiling, he asked, “When did you get these?”

“I bought them at the gift shop earlier today. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have them.”

“You’re a very smart woman.” He kissed her, then pushed her shorts and panties down her legs. There was something so incredibly beautiful about a naked woman. Especially a woman he’d wanted for years. The woman he’d wanted for years.

“Nate? Take off your jeans.”

By the time he stood, shucked his jeans, and crawled back in bed, Damaris had one of the condom packets in her hand. She’d opened it but she looked at it like she’d never seen one before. Like she didn’t know what to do with it. Well, he sure as hell did. He took it from her and covered himself, then settled between her legs with his cock at her entrance.

He kissed her and began to enter her. “God, you’re tight,” he groaned. She made a sound but it wasn’t of pleasure. He looked at her and could tell by her expression he was hurting her. So he rolled over until she was on top. “You set the pace.”

He could control himself. Barely. Because the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. He let her take her time, taking him inside inch by inch, until he was finally fully seated inside of her. He cupped her breasts, rolled her nipples, and kissed her. She moaned, but this time it sounded like pleasure. She lifted herself up, then sank down on him. Tentative at first but growing bolder with each stroke.

He had to move. Grasping her hips, he pushed up into her as she came down. Faster.

Harder. But he still held back. He reached between them to fondle her and felt her muscles contract, heard her cry out as he spilled inside her endlessly and came with a harsh groan.

Damaris collapsed on top of him. He was almost asleep when she rolled to the side and went to the bathroom. He got rid of the condom and waited for her. When she came out she wore her T-shirt. Which he thought was a damn shame. He held out a hand and she took it but hesitated before doing anything else.

“I’m, uh, I, um, don’t know what to do.”

He looked at her quizzically. “How about you get back in bed and let me hold you?”

Her concerned expression cleared, and she did as he said, her back to his front. They stayed that way for a while, content and satiated for the moment.

“Damaris?”

“Hmm.”

“Are you, I mean were you a virgin?”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “No. Why?”

Now how did he answer that without making her think something was wrong? Because it sure as hell hadn’t been. “You were so tight. I just wondered.” Not that he’d been with a virgin other than his first time, but that was so long ago he’d almost forgotten.

She sighed and turned over to face him. “It’s been a long time.”

“How long?” he asked before realizing he needed to shut the hell up. “Never mind. Not my business.”

“Eight years.”

He stared at her, bereft of words. Eight years? That was... She’d been in college eight years ago. And she hadn’t made love since? Not with anyone? “I’m glad it was me you broke that streak with.”

She smiled and kissed him. “I am too.” After a moment she said, “What about—” She broke off and shook her head. “No, never mind.”

“What about me?”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Yes, you were. It’s okay. Eight, no almost nine months.”

She stared at him with her mouth open. “You’re kidding. You really haven’t had sex in nine months?”

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“Well, Damaris,” he said, pulling her close and smiling at her. “That would be because of you.” He kissed her and waited for her to freak out.

She didn’t quite freak out. But she did sit up in bed and look like she was about to run. “Be-because of me? You don’t—I can’t—”

“Before you blow a gasket, do you remember when we first met?”

“Yes.”

“And I tried my best to get you into bed and you shut me down?”

“Yes.”

“You just wanted to be friends, so that was that. But I never stopped wanting you.”

“Why?”

“Have you looked at yourself in the mirror?” Her brown hair was wild and tumbled, flowing over her shoulders and down her back. Her brown eyes were dark and

mysterious-looking. Her lips were red and puffy from his kisses. Her nipples showed through her thin shirt and he wanted to caress them again. How could she not realize how gorgeous she was?

“Yes, and I’ve also seen the women you go out with. Hell, I set you up with a lot of them.”

Dramatically, he put his hand over his heart. “What can I say? The heart wants what it wants.”

Her eyes narrowed and she glared at him. Then she picked up a pillow and started hitting him with it. “You are so not funny!”

He laughed, trying to dodge the pillow. She kept it up until he grabbed the pillow out of her hand and tossed it aside. Then he pushed her back on the bed and kissed her. And continued to kiss her until he felt her body soften and she wrapped her arms around him. “No fair.”

“What’s no fair?”

“You. You’re no fair at all. You know you’re a really good kisser.”



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Thank you, ma’am.” He pushed her shirt up and helped her take it off. “I have other talents too.” He nuzzled her breast, licked her nipple and blew on it.

“What kind of talents?”

“I’ll have to show you.”

Later, once they’d made love again and Nate had convinced Damaris that she should sleep with him in his bed and she didn’t need to put any clothes back on, he thought about the night. Damn. He’d known he was in love with her before this. Now he was absolutely, totally, crazy in love with her.

He’d wanted her since they met. He could admit to her that he wanted her, but not that he loved her. If he admitted he’d been in love with her for almost as long as he’d known her she’d bail so quick his head would spin around like the girl’s in the Exorcist.

But things were definitely looking up.

\*

Damaris and Nate made love a lot during the night. Had sex, she corrected herself. But it didn’t feel like just sex. It felt like...maybe not love but definitely more than just sex. If she thought about it too hard she could freak out. So she tried her best to simply enjoy the time.

The next morning they went to the San Diego Zoo. Nate had a whole list of things to

do and had given her a choice of what their first stop would be that day. “I haven’t been to the zoo in forever,” she told Nate. “What’s your favorite exhibit?”

“The big cats,” he answered promptly. “What’s yours?”

“I can’t make up my mind. I like the lions and tigers, of course. And the zebra and antelope. The birds. Elephants. The reptiles not so much.” To her, snakes meant something her horses shied from. Most of the snakes she saw were innocuous but there were definitely rattlers on the ranch.

“Gotta agree with you there. What about the monkeys?”

“I like them too. But I read somewhere that an orangutan can tear off a man’s arm and beat him with it. I have to admit, that kind of cooled my admiration of them.”

“Gee, thanks for the visual. Note, no orangutans.”

It had been so long since Damaris had done something different from her usual activities. Horses, girls’ night out, Booze’s, on occasion Baron’s Steakhouse, all in Whiskey River. Sometimes she went to Austin to buy something for the ranch, and sometimes she drove other places to pick up a horse or take a horse somewhere. So San Diego with its wealth of things to do was a new experience. One she found she liked very much.

Nate kissed her in front of the elephants. And at the big cat exhibit. He would have kissed her at the monkey exhibit but the chimps chose that moment to fling poo at them so they left quickly. Kind of spoiled the mood.

They ate lunch at a tiny place they’d heard was a locals’ favorite, then in the afternoon they went on a kayak tour of the La Jolla sea caves. Damaris was a little hesitant since she’d never been kayaking before, but they were in a double kayak and

Nate clearly had experience. He told Damaris he'd done a tour of the sea caves a number of years ago, but they hadn't seen much wildlife for some reason.

That wasn't the case this time. They were also able to go into the caves, which Nate said didn't always happen. Sometimes the conditions didn't allow it. They saw leopard sharks, sea lions, a couple of dolphin, as well as pelicans and several other birds.

"That was fun," she said when they finished the tour. "What are we going to do next?"

"Have dinner," Nate said. "There's a nice restaurant near our hotel. Then, if you want, we can check out the night life."

"Let's eat dinner and then decide." Damaris was much more accustomed to going to bed early and getting up at the crack of dawn. She wasn't sure she could stay awake long enough to go dancing. Especially since neither of them had gotten much sleep the night before.

And she suspected they wouldn't get much sleep tonight either.

## Chapter Fifteen

Damaris wasn't sure what Nate had planned for their last night in San Diego. Each time she asked him he distracted her by kissing her and soon they were making love again and she'd completely forgotten her question.

Early that evening, Damaris stood outside Nate's room on the balcony. There was a gorgeous bayfront view, made even better by the fact that they were on the twenty-third floor of the hotel. The wind was blowing, gently for a change, and there was a salty tang to the air.

Damaris had been to the ocean before. The Gulf of Mexico in both Texas and Florida. But she'd never seen the Pacific until this trip. She'd never taken a sunset cruise, or gone whale watching, or kayaking or many of the things they'd done. One afternoon they'd rented bikes and ridden them around Coronado Island. Sure, she'd ridden bikes before but never in such picturesque surroundings and not for many years.

All in all, though, she felt guilty, knowing Nate must have spent a fortune on the trip, but when she asked him to split the cost with her, he'd flatly refused.

"No way in hell," he told her. "I invited you. I pay."

She'd protested but he'd kissed her and soon they were making love again. So, she brought it up when they were at the beach that afternoon, where he couldn't totally distract her. They were lying side by side on their beach towels when she said, "You need to let me pay for my part of this vacation."

"What is with you? I asked you to come with me. This was my idea and I know you had to call in favors to have your responsibilities at the ranch covered. So let me do this."

“Do you do this sort of thing for all the women you date?”

“No.”

“Then why me?”

He reached for her hand and smiled at her. “Because you’re special.”

She worried when he said things like that. Their relationship was supposed to be casual. Pretend, not real. Friends with benefits, nothing else. But if she were honest with herself, she’d admit that she felt more for Nate than simple friendship. And it wasn’t all about the sex either.

She liked Nate. She always had. He got her. He understood what was important to her and why. Whenever her work had to take precedence he was good with it. He never made her feel bad if she missed something they were supposed to do. Maybe because his own work wasn’t nine to five either. Flights came up all the time when he wasn’t expecting it, so he’d learned to roll with it. Which was probably why he was so understanding when she had to cancel.

Although the sex was amazing, and she didn’t think that was only because she hadn’t had sex in years until she’d taken the leap with Nate. Rather than think too hard she put it out of her mind, like she’d been doing since...oh, hell, almost from the first of this new pretend relationship. But especially since they’d come to San Diego.

She consoled herself by admitting this had been the ultimate in romantic getaways. What woman wouldn’t be a bit starry-eyed after everything that had happened in the

last few days? It didn't mean anything. It couldn't mean anything.

Nate slipped his arms around her waist from behind. "What's going on in that beautiful head? You look concerned. Is something wrong?"

"No. I was just thinking how romantic this trip has been."

"You say that like it's a problem. What's wrong with romance?"

"Nothing. Except it's for show. Or it's supposed to be."

He was silent for a long time. "What if it isn't?"

She turned around to look at him. Searched his face for clues to what he was feeling.

"We agreed this whole thing was pretend, for your grandma's sake."

"I know."

"Have you changed your mind?" Why was she asking him when she didn't really want to know the answer?

"Have you?"

A part of her wanted to say yes. But another part, the one that remembered the past, the one that didn't trust herself to fall for the right man, said no. Positively no.

Before she could answer, since she didn't know what to say, Nate said, "Never mind. It's time for dinner."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

“Nope. It’s a surprise.”

He’d reserved a table at CeeCee’s. The restaurant was gorgeous. It sat on stilts on the beachfront and hosted a terrific view of the San Diego skyline and the bay. The table settings were elegant with fine white tablecloths, beautiful china, and sparkling crystal. Each table held beautiful hibiscus blooms in varying colors. The table they were escorted to overlooked the bay and its flower was a beautiful white center blending to a deep pink on the edges.

She ordered a glass of white wine, but Nate stuck with water. “I’m flying tomorrow.”

“Speaking of that,” she said as she sipped her wine, “tell me some stories about your flights. You know, the people, the places you’ve been. That sort of thing.” They’d talked about his travels, but never in great detail. Another thing she felt guilty about. That wasn’t why she’d asked him, though. She really wanted to know more.

“Places I’ve been? I’ve been to every US state. Mexico, Canada, parts of South America. The Caribbean. Parts of Europe. I worked for a large private airline for a while and that’s where I did a lot of my travel outside the US.”

“Are there places you haven’t been that you’d still like to go to?”

“Sure. Scandinavia, Greenland. Australia and New Zealand. I haven’t been to the Far East either.”

“Do you think you’ll ever go?”

“Maybe. Depends on a lot of things, I guess.”

Their waitress brought their appetizers—marinated crab claws—and after that their salads—mixed greens with candied pecans and a Gorgonzola vinaigrette dressing.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“What about the people?” Damaris asked when they finished the salads. “You’ve talked about some of them before but there are bound to be more interesting clients.”

“Some. There was the Elephant Man. Before you ask, no he wasn’t big but he brought along a trunk for a three-day trip. Just for him. And it weighed a ton, like he’d packed it full of rocks.”

“Did you ever find out what was in it?”

“Nope. For all I know it could have been rocks.” She laughed and he continued. “We also flew the Black Widow several times, but not lately.”

“I have a feeling I know where she got her name.”

“Yep. She’s had at least three husbands, and they all kicked the bucket not long after they married her.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“Gorgeous. If you get involved with her you’d better not mind dying.”

“Maybe their deaths were coincidence.”

“Maybe, but you have to admit it’s suspicious. Especially since they all died from kind of unusual causes.”

“Like what?”



“Well, the first one ate something he was allergic to and died from anaphylactic shock. The second one died in a mountain climbing accident. The last one fell out of a tree and died.”

“Why was he up in a tree?”

“I have no idea, but it sounds like at the least she’s bad luck.”

Their entrées arrived. Nate had the surf and turf and Damaris had the sea bass. After they’d both eaten some she put down her fork and drank some wine.

“Were you tempted? By the Black Widow lady? Before you knew about her, I mean.”

“No. Not even a little.”

“Why? Wasn’t that back when you were dating a lot of women?”

He paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Why the sudden curiosity?”

“You brought it up. But I was just wondering what type of woman attracts you. I mean, you’ve never stuck with any of the ones I set you up with.”

He laughed. “What type of woman attracts me? What kind of question is that? I’m looking at her.”

\*

Damaris opted to go back to the hotel rather than look for nightlife, which suited Nate just fine. He couldn’t think of anything he wanted more than to make love to Damaris. And this was their last opportunity before they went home and resumed all their responsibilities.

“It’s back to the real world tomorrow,” Damaris said, kicking off her high-heeled sandals. Even though they’d both been sleeping in the same room they’d kept both of them. She sat on the couch in her room and rubbed one of her feet, then the other. “I remember now why I never wear heels. They hurt.”

“Some of your cowboy boots have pretty high heels.”

“Not the same thing. I’m used to them.”

He sat beside her and pulled her feet into his lap. “Let me.”

She groaned and closed her eyes as he began to massage her feet. “You have such magic hands.”

“I’m good at massaging other things too.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. “I know.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You look beautiful tonight.” She wore a short red and white sundress with skinny straps, with a V-neckline that showed off her cleavage. Her skin had a golden tan from the time they’d spent in the sun, her hair was a luscious brown and fell to her shoulders and over her breasts in beautiful waves. Her eyes were dark brown and mysterious.

“Thank you. But you already said that.”

“Can’t be said too often.” He abandoned her feet and ran his hands gently over her calves. She looked and felt soft, but he knew how strong she was. As a woman who performed a lot of hard, physical labor, she was a lot tougher than she looked. But right now she was soft and giving and he couldn’t wait to slip inside that welcoming sweetness.

She laughed softly and moved her feet, then leaned in to kiss him. He cupped her breasts through the fabric of her dress and they both groaned. She unbuttoned his shirt and helped him slide it off over his shoulders. Then she turned her back to him.

“Unzip me.”

He did so, kissing her nape as he slowly pulled it down. Then he slipped the straps off her shoulders and pulled the dress down to uncover her breasts.

She turned around and he caught his breath as her breasts spilled free of the dress. “Your breasts are amazing.” They were high and full, with pink nipples that tightened as he looked at them. He licked one and then the other, swirling his tongue around the second one and sucking it into his mouth and releasing it, only to do it again.

Damaris's head fell back and she murmured her pleasure as he continued to cup her breasts, sucking one nipple and rolling the other in his fingers.

As he sucked her nipples, he slid his hand down between her legs and slipped a finger inside her. She sighed and raised her hips, clenching her muscles around his finger. He withdrew and pushed two fingers inside her, pumping them in and out slowly.

"Nate," she said, panting. "You're driving me crazy."

"Other way around," he murmured. He worked his way down her body, laying kisses along her skin, down to the delta of curls.

"What are you—what are you doing?" she gasped when he replaced his fingers with his mouth.

Looking up, he smiled at her. "Guess."

She gasped as he got busy. "Oh, my God."

She unraveled, coming with a scream. He couldn't wait any longer. He put on a condom and plunged inside her, pumping hard. She was soft, wet, and swollen, tightening around him while he thrust in and pulled out. She wrapped her legs around his waist and met him stroke for stroke, until the tension built and he exploded inside her with a shout.

He didn't want to squash her, so, still inside her, he rolled to his back, taking her with him. "That was amazing," she said after some time.

"You're amazing."

Was he dreaming to think Damaris had started to relax, was beginning to trust him, to

realize how good the two of them were together? He hadn't come right out and told her he loved her, but he'd implied it in a hundred different ways. It would take someone a lot more oblivious than Damaris not to realize how he felt.

## Chapter Sixteen

"There's something different about you," Hazel said.

Hazel had called that morning, wanting to meet at Booze's for lunch. They'd snagged a booth in the corner, had their drinks and were waiting for their food.

"Why do you say that?" She sipped iced tea, eyeing the sugar and trying to decide if she really needed sugar or just wanted it. To hell with it, she thought, grabbing a couple of sugar packets, opening them, and dumping them into her tea.

"I don't know. I just—" Her eyes widened and she stabbed her finger at Damaris. "You had sex!"

Damaris felt her face warm. Silly, but there it was. "What? Do I have it tattooed on my forehead?"

"I knew it! Did it happen when you went to San Diego?"

Damaris couldn't help smiling. San Diego. Every night. Every day. Every amazing, wonderful night. And almost every night since.

"Tell me all," Hazel demanded. "I need to live vicariously through you since absolutely nothing is happening to me."

"And whose fault is that?"

“Don’t try to distract me. Tell. Was it romantic? Was it wonderful? Is Nate a good lover?”

“Hazel!”

“Oh, come on. I’m not asking for details. Unless you want to give them,” she added with a cheeky grin.

“Yes, yes, and yes. And that’s all the details you’re getting.”

“Spoilsport.”

“There’s a problem, though.”

Hazel cocked her head, waiting for her to go on.

“I think I’m developing feelings for him. You know, more than just sexual feelings.”

“You mean you’re falling for him?”

Damaris nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“It’s about damn time. How does Nate feel?”

“I’m not sure.” But she was. She was afraid he was falling in love with her. Or thought he was, anyway. “But I’m afraid he wants more than friendship.” Oh, hell, she was more afraid she wanted more. She thought about Nate telling her he hadn’t had sex in months. Which jibed with what Hazel had heard.

“Why afraid? He sounds like a sweetheart. I really liked him when we went out. I’d have gone again in a heartbeat.”

“He’s great. But the sex is new. I don’t know whether it’s just the newness that’s making it so...” Unbelievable? Amazing? Addictive? She settled on, “So exciting or if it’s going to wear off. But the thing is...” How to put this? She did not want to go

into her whole history. God, she'd been trying to forget it since it happened. "I had a bad—no, a disastrous relationship a long time ago. And ever since then I've had a hard time trusting any man. Other than my family, of course."

"You trusted Nate enough to sleep with him."

"I know. And obviously, I do trust him to some extent. I've always been attracted to him. I mean, look at the man. And he's been a good friend." Lately she'd realized, though, that while Nate listened to her problems and offered advice when he thought it would help, he rarely talked about his problems. He had to have some, didn't he?

"Which is why you set him up with other women. Oh, that makes perfect sense," Hazel said dryly.

"I did that so I wouldn't be tempted. Nate is exactly the type of man I don't want to fall for and I can see myself doing it." Especially now that they'd slept together. She was an idiot.

"What type of man is that?"

"A player. Nate's a player. You know he is."

"Maybe. But maybe he just hasn't met the woman he can fall for. Or he hadn't until you."

"If that's true, then why did he wait so long to do anything about it? And then only by chance. The whole thing with his grandma just came up out of the blue."

"You'll have to ask him that question. But it doesn't sound like pure chance to me."

He'd planned it? She thought about that. Having talked to Grandma K, and knowing



her, she didn't think his grandma's desire to see Nate happy with a nice woman was manufactured. Nate was the one who'd come up with the fake girlfriend/fiancée idea, however. But he'd been truly shaken that his grandmother had behaved so out of character.

Grandma K was all in, however. She seemed to think Damaris was the perfect woman for her grandson, but then Grandma didn't know Damaris's history. Neither did Nate.

"By the way, he doesn't know that I told you the truth."

"Why? Are you afraid he'll flip out?"

"No, but he really doesn't want it to get back to his grandmother. Which is why I can't tell anyone in my family."

"Well, I won't tell him. Not that I see him much anyway." She looked toward the entrance. "Don't look now," Hazel said. "Guess who just walked in."

"Nate." She sat with her back to the door but she turned around at Hazel's words. She couldn't help smiling at him. He was smiling too as he reached their table.

"Hi, Damaris." He nodded to Hazel. "Hi, Hazel. Mind if I join you?"

Damaris scooted over and he sat beside her. "Should we flag down the waitress?"

"No need. I'm just here to pick up an order for the guys at the airport."

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I thought y’all were adding a small restaurant?”

“We want to, but it hasn’t happened yet. We’re in talks with someone. In the meantime we either scrounge, bring something from home, or come into town.”

The waitress came by and Nate told her he had a takeout order. “I’ll go get it,” she said. “It’s so good to see you, Nate.”

He simply smiled and turned back to Damaris. “Travis and I have a flight this afternoon but it’s a short one. Will you be around tonight?”

“Yes, it’s my night to take care of things.”

“Okay. I’ll come see you later.” He kissed her and got up. “Good to see you, Hazel.”

“Bye, Nate.”

It was ridiculous but at the thought of seeing Nate that night Damaris’s heart gave a happy little skip. “What?” she asked, seeing Hazel staring at her.

Hazel shook her head. “I don’t know exactly what you two have going on but I can guaran-damn-tee you it’s not fake.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. You two are totally besotted with each other.”

Damaris laughed. “That’s an exaggeration.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” Damaris said firmly. But she was very much afraid Hazel was right.

\*

Several days after they returned from San Diego, Nate picked up food from the Diner and took it to his grandma’s house. She let him in and sat at the kitchen table while he set it the way she liked it. He sat down and started to eat.

“Damaris couldn’t come?”

He noticed that, as usual, she was picking at her food. Sure, she was small and elderly, but everyone had to eat more than two bites, right? “No, she’s working. Since the trip to San Diego she’s been working a lot.”

“Tell her hello and that we missed her.”

“I will.”

“I talked to your mother today.”

He looked up from his plate. “Good. I know she’s been worried about you.”

“No need to worry about me. But I can’t say the same about you. Why doesn’t your mama know anything about you and Damaris?”

Because he didn’t want to answer forty questions. And now he’d have to because Grandma had undoubtedly told her all about them. “Because I don’t tell her about

every woman I date.”

“But Damaris isn’t just any woman, is she? You’re in love with her.”

He set his fork down. “What are you getting at, Grandma?”

“You and Damaris are serious about each other.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.” He wouldn’t mind being serious, but Damaris was a whole ‘nuther matter.

“You guess so or you are?”

“We are.” Possibly. If he could talk her into it.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I have something for you.” She got up and went to her bedroom. It took a while since she didn’t move fast so he finished his lunch while he waited. She came back holding a small jewelry box in one gnarled hand.

Uh-oh.

She opened the box and inside lay a beautiful diamond. “This was the diamond your grandpa gave me to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary. I wore it on a chain but you can have the setting changed and make a ring with it. I want you to have it.”

“I can’t take that, Grandma. It’s too special to you.”

“Of course it is. That’s why I want you to have it. It would mean a lot to me. You haven’t picked out a ring yet, have you?”

Picked out a ring? Oh, shit. He was in trouble now. “I haven’t asked her to marry me, Grandma. We’re not there yet.” And if Damaris had her way they might never be there.

“But you’re going to. You’re head over heels in love with her.”

He didn’t deny it. What was the point?

“I was worried about Damaris at first but after the trip to San Diego I could tell she’s as crazy about you as you are about her.”

Was she? He knew she liked the sex. Hell, so did he. But while he definitely wanted

more he wasn't at all sure about Damaris. "Grandma, I appreciate you wanting to give me this diamond but—"

"Let me do this for you, Nate. Your grandpa would have loved to know it went to you. And that you're going to give it to the woman you love."

Crap. What could he say? So he hedged as best he could. "I don't know when I'm going to ask her. It has to be the right time and now isn't it."

Grandma was all smiles. "That's my boy! Don't wait too long. I'm not getting any younger, you know."

Great. Now he had to talk Damaris into a fake engagement. Hell, maybe he should just wait and ask her for real. Except he couldn't go from 'friends with benefits' to 'I'm madly in love with you' without some kind of buildup or explanation. Still, she had to at least suspect he was in love with her.

And he had mentioned getting engaged early on. But they hadn't talked about it more than a vague maybe.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Hey, Nate," Travis Sullivan said, walking into the office in the hangar. "I need a copilot to take a client to Florida. Are you up for it?"

"Depends. When is it?"

"Tomorrow. We should be back by evening."

Nate pulled his phone out of his pocket and called up the calendar. "I've got a student tomorrow afternoon. Let me see if I can move her. I'll let you know after I've

contacted her.”

Nate was able to change the lesson so the next day he and Travis flew Kiki Harmon to Tampa. They’d flown Kiki a number of times to a number of places. She was a wealthy—very wealthy—widow who liked to travel and collect husbands. Unlike the Black Widow, she divorced them. She also enjoyed flirting and this time she’d set her sights on Nate. He didn’t mind the flirting. He wasn’t sure Kiki knew how to operate around a man if she wasn’t flirting with him. She used to flirt with Travis a lot but since he’d married she’d lost interest.

Since they were refueling in Tampa, they had a little extra time before the trip back. Instead of leaving immediately, Kiki cornered Nate. Travis saw her coming and muttered, “You’re on your own,” and left him before Nate even knew what was going on.

Kiki was a nice lady. God knows she was beautiful. But even if he hadn’t been in love with Damaris he’d have thought twice before getting involved with Kiki Harmon. He didn’t think he had enough money to tempt her, into marriage at least, but it had always been his policy to steer clear of entanglements with wealthy widows. At least Kiki’s husbands hadn’t died but he still preferred to steer clear of women like her.

“Oh, Nate, since you’re waiting why don’t you come to lunch with me? We can grab an Uber and there’s a lovely little place not too far from here.” She’d immediately latched on to his arm and was smiling at him seductively. “You don’t have to leave right away, do you?”

“Uh,” was all he could manage.

Kiki laughed and put her arms around his neck, bringing her body flush against his. “You are just adorable when you’re flustered.” She kissed his cheek and whispered in

his ear, “And my apartment is only five minutes from the restaurant.”

“Kiki, I’m engaged.”

Busy planting kisses along his jawline, she murmured, “And your point would be?”

He took her arms and unwound them from around his neck. “The point is, I’m engaged. So thanks, but I can’t.”

Kiki pouted. Somehow she made that look sexy instead of petulant. “Why do I always choose the ones who are faithful?”



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

He had no answer to that, so he only said, “Sorry.”

“Oh, well. Maybe that will be over by the next time I see you.”

Not a chance. Even if this thing with Damaris ended badly, he wasn’t touching that one.

“That’s a mighty disappointed woman we left in Tampa,” Travis said on their way home. “I remember the days when you nailed every pretty woman who gave you half a chance. And that was way more than half. From the looks of it, that was a full-blown invitation to party. But you’re reformed now.”

Nate rolled his eyes. “You’re exaggerating. I wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, you were.”

“Whatever. I haven’t done that in a long time.” Not since he’d fallen in love with Damaris. Damn, he’d almost told her he loved her a dozen times in the last two weeks. And he had a feeling—no, make that he knew—she wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Speaking of Damaris—”

“I wasn’t.”

Travis continued as if Nate hadn’t interrupted him. “I knew you had the hots for her, but I didn’t think you were ever going to do anything about it. Then, poof, out of the blue you two are dating.”

“It wasn’t out of the blue. And what do you mean, you knew I had the hots for Damaris?”

“It was pretty damn obvious. Maybe it’s the fact that whenever you talked about her you’d get a look in your eyes I recognize.”

“Oh, yeah?” A lame response but he couldn’t think of a better one.

“Yeah. Remember, I’m a married man.”

“Duh. What does that have to do with anything?”

“I recognize the signs. So when are you going to pop the question?”

Was he kidding? “Who said I was going to pop the question?”

“Aren’t you? You’ve been in love with her for years; now you’ve finally started dating. You’re not going to chicken out now, are you?”

Travis was one of his best friends. He was the one who’d brought Nate to Whiskey River. The one who’d made him part of the airport. Also the one who, apparently, knew how he felt about Damaris.

“I’m not. We’re not dating. Not really. The whole thing’s a fake.”

Travis stared at him. “The hell you say.”

“Yep.” Nate went on to tell him the story about his grandma’s dearest wish and his plan to make her happy.

“You are shitting me,” Travis said when Nate finished. “You asked Damaris to be

your pretend girlfriend? Why? Why didn't you just tell her the truth?"

"Because I knew she'd freak out if she knew it was for real."

"Why would she? It's obvious she likes you."

"Yeah, she likes me. Enough to set me up with any pretty woman she can find."

"But she hasn't done that for a while, has she?"

"No," he admitted.

"Okay, good. You just got back from San Diego. You mean to tell me you didn't close the deal the whole time you were there with her?"

Nate shrugged. "That's beside the point. She's still convinced we're just friends—with benefits."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“How are you going to convince her you want more?”

“I’m going to ask her to be my fiancée.”

“Your fiancée? Wait a minute. For real?”

“I wish. But no. Just to convince Grandma. She gave me a diamond to give Damaris. I didn’t know how to get out of it.”

“Are you nuts? What the hell good is that going to do? Just tell Damaris the truth, man.”

“I can’t. At least, not now. I’m pretty sure—no, make that I know something happened in her past that was bad enough to make her super wary of getting involved with anyone. So I’m just going to ease her into it.”

Travis shook his head. “Good luck. I hope it doesn’t blow up in your face.”

“Yeah. I do too.” But knowing his luck it probably would.

\*

Nate called Damaris from the airport when he and Travis returned from their flight. “Hey, are we still seeing each other tonight?”

“Yes. I finished up early. Want me to come to you? I don’t even have to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow.” Meaning she could stay the night. She thought he might

get tired of always coming to her place.

“Sounds great. Lucy’s Pizza is on the way home. Why don’t I pick up dinner? Meat lovers, right?”

“Ick, no.” Surely he knew what she liked by now.

Nate laughed. “Just kidding. Pepperoni it is.”

“I’ll bring the beer and meet you there.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

Damaris was waiting for him when he got home. He’d told her the garage door code long before and he always left the door to the garage unlocked. After work she’d showered and changed into a black tank top and a short skirt with geometric patterns in different colors. On her feet she wore a pair of ankle-high red cowboy boots that matched the red in the skirt.

She was bent over looking in his refrigerator for something to make a salad out of—with no luck—when she heard the back door open.

“Now that’s a pretty sight.”

She laughed and turned around. “You are so easy. Hi. How was your flight?”

“Good,” he said, placing the pizza box on the table and coming forward to pull her into his arms and lay a kiss on her that sizzled. “But not as good as that.”

She’d wrapped her arms around his neck when he kissed her. She drew back and sniffed. “Are you wearing a new aftershave?”

“No, why?”

“It smells like...” She sniffed again. “It smells like perfume.” She looked at his shirt collar and saw a smudge of what could only be lipstick. “What the hell is this?” She jerked herself out of his arms and glared at him.

“What is what?”

“You smell like a whore and there’s lipstick on your collar.”

He had the nerve to smile. “That’s a little harsh, isn’t it?”

“Not funny, Nate. You—you—bastard!” Even though they were temporary friends with benefits that didn’t mean she was okay with him seeing other women. Not when they were supposedly together. Not to mention actually sleeping together.

“Calm down, Damaris. First of all, I wasn’t with a woman.”

“Right.”

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Not in the way you think, anyway. Remember the Black Widow story I told you about when we were in San Diego?”

“Yes. But you said you hadn’t flown her in a while.”

“We haven’t, but today we flew another woman who’s been married a number of times. She’s between husbands and wanted me to stay in Florida for a couple of days. When I said no, she tried to convince me.”

“By crawling all over you and kissing you?”

“Well, yeah.” He shrugged. “Damaris, I told her I was engaged. Ask Travis if you don’t believe me.”

She didn’t doubt Travis would lie for Nate but Tobi, Travis’s wife, was Damaris’s friend and she wouldn’t. Damaris wanted to believe him. She did believe him. It had just taken her by surprise. Not to mention it would be pretty pitiful if she couldn’t even keep her fake boyfriend faithful. Even aside from that, though, she was... Well, hell. She was hurt. “Were you tempted?”

“God, no. Besides, I wouldn’t do that to you.” He waited while she thought about it. “Come here.”

She shook her head decisively. “Not until you change clothes. And shower.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that bad.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

“Okay, okay. I’m going.” When he reached the hallway that led to his bedroom and master bath, he turned around. “Damaris? You know I wouldn’t do that to you, don’t you?”

“I hope you wouldn’t. But I don’t know the rules for a temporary, fake relationship. Or a friends-with-benefits one.”

“I don’t either, but I’m sure fooling around with other people isn’t okay. Besides, I wouldn’t hurt you like that. And finally, why in the hell would I want her when I’m with you?” He disappeared down the hallway.

Damn it, now she felt stupid. But infidelity, whether in a fake relationship or a real one, was one of her hot-button issues. One she should probably explain to Nate. Oh, not the whole, sordid story. But enough for him to know why she’d reacted so strongly. If they’d had a real relationship... But they didn’t. And more and more often she really regretted that.

## Chapter Eighteen

Now that had been interesting. Nate stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He didn’t think he smelled that much but if it would make Damaris happy he’d shower. Hell, he’d do whatever she wanted to make her happy.

He thought her reaction had been a bit extreme. If they’d really been together instead of pretending, then of course, it made perfect sense. Still, they were sleeping together and while they’d mentioned being exclusive, it had been barely a mention. And that had been back before they were even having sex. Still, he thought their conversation about how long each had been celibate before their first time together was a pretty damn good indication that they would be. Exclusive, that is.



Besides, she should know that regardless of gossip, he was a one-woman man while it lasted.

He thought about what he'd have done if he believed Damaris had been with another man. Killed the guy? No, but he'd sure as shit have beaten the hell out of him, or tried. He couldn't see Damaris cheating, though. She was one of the most honest people he'd ever known. Sometimes a damn sight too honest, he thought, remembering some of the things she'd called him on.

But what if her response meant more than that? What if she really was starting to fall for him? That was always his plan, after all.

Wishful thinking, more likely.

The shower door opened and Damaris—a beautiful, naked Damaris—stepped inside. She slipped her arms around his waist and said, “I’m sorry. But I thought we were exclusive and it made me a little crazy when I thought...well, you know what I thought.”

“Let me set your mind at rest. We are definitely exclusive.” He kissed her, rubbed his lips over hers and slid his tongue inside her mouth. God, he could drown in her. Her taste, the feel of her in his arms, so soft and tempting. Soft, with steel underneath. “I—” Holy shit, he'd nearly told her he loved her. Again. “I want to talk to you about something but right now I can't think of anything other than making love to you.”

“What a coincidence. That's what I was thinking about too.”

They kissed again. He was hard, had been hard since she stepped inside the shower naked. This time wouldn't be slow and easy. He wanted her too much. “I'll be right back.”

“If you’re going to get a condom, we don’t need one.”

WTH? “Why don’t we need one?”

“I went to see Tobi and she put in an IUD for me.”

Tobi Sullivan was a doctor at the urgent care clinic in town. He hadn’t realized she did that sort of thing, but then, why would he? “I’ve never had sex without a condom.”

“Good. I haven’t either. Make love to me, Nate.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

He boosted her up and she wrapped her legs around him and kissed him, long, wet and deep. Her breasts pressed against his chest, her sex rubbed up and down on his cock, which had gotten even harder. “I can’t wait any longer.”

“Then don’t.”

Grasping her hips, he drove inside her. She gasped and cried out, pressed against the tiles, her arms holding him tight, her body gloving him. They stayed like that for a long moment, gazing into each other’s eyes. When he could wait no longer he pulled out and thrust back inside her. Did it again, and again, the crescendo building each time. He drove inside her a final time, felt her coming apart, heard her cry and exploded endlessly, deep inside her.

“Damaris,” he said, long moments later when he could talk.

“Hmm.” She was draped bonelessly on him, her arms clasped loosely around his neck, her body still supported by his hands on her butt.

It seemed like the perfect time to confess his feelings. That hadn’t been only about sex. There had been a much deeper, emotional aspect to it. She’d felt it as much as he had. Or was he deluding himself because that’s what he wanted to believe?

“Nate? What is it?”

“Nothing. Just Damaris.”

Be patient, he told himself. The only thing that will happen if you rush her is you’ll

get shot down that much faster.

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After they got out of the shower they dried off and Damaris asked, “Can I borrow one of your T-shirts?”

He looked at her and grinned. “If you must.”

“Unlike you I don’t like to go around naked.” She wasn’t entirely comfortable naked, unless she had a reason. She didn’t think she was overly modest but eating naked wasn’t something she enjoyed. Nate, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind a bit.

“Which is really a shame.” He opened a drawer, pulled out a shirt and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” It was soft and well washed with—what else—a Devil’s Rock Airport logo on the front. She pulled it on. Sans underwear, which made Nate grin again. “I’m starving. Let’s go eat that pizza.”

Once in the kitchen Damaris asked, “Should we reheat it?”

“Only if you want to. I’m good either way.”

“Room temperature it is.”

Nate got a couple of beers out of the refrigerator and they dug in. After they’d both eaten several pieces, he said, “No wonder you flipped out when you thought I’d cheated on you. You’d just gotten the IUD so we wouldn’t have to use a condom.”

She raised her gaze to look at him. “That was one reason. I got it for convenience,

plus they're very dependable, according to Tobi." She needed to tell him something about her past, even if she didn't give all the horrible details. "Anyway, remember I told you I hadn't had sex since college?"

"I remember."

"My boyfriend cheated on me. That's why we broke up."

"Damn. I wondered if something like that had happened. He was an idiot."

"Thanks. He was worse than that. He was a total slime. I got tested for everything after that and I was fine. But I've had a hard time trusting people about sex ever since."

"Obviously that's why you waited eight years to try again. But you trusted me. Why?"

"You told me before we made love the first time that you'd been tested. We used a condom every time. I didn't...I told you I thought we were exclusive, and I didn't believe you'd cheat on me, especially considering this was your idea and you wouldn't want Grandma K to hear rumors."

"True, but it's not the only reason. Or even the most important."

"We've known each other for a long time. I thought I knew you and that you wouldn't do that to me. So, when I thought I'd made another mistake, I didn't handle it well." To say the least. But it had really hurt when she thought she'd done it again. Made another stupid mistake and trusted the wrong person. And the thought that it was Nate who betrayed her trust had hurt even more.

"I'm sorry, Damaris. I know you think I'm a player, but I've always been a one-

woman man while it lasted.”

“I know. At least, that’s what I always thought.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You were right. Besides, I don’t want anyone but you.”

“I’m glad.” They sounded like they were truly involved, not just having fun. It scared her. Just not enough to make her stop. Besides, she was probably imagining the look in his eyes. So sincere, so...loving. Oh, damn, what is happening?

“I’ll be right back,” he said and left the room.

When he came back he was wearing his jeans, though he was still bare-chested. And what a nice chest it was. Ripped but not overly so. Washboard abs. Beautiful, tanned skin. She looked away before she started to drool.

Nate pulled something out of his pocket. “Hold out your hand.”

Mystified, she did so.

He put something in it and closed her hand around it.

“What—” She opened her hand. In her palm lay a beautiful diamond, in a setting made to wear on a chain. “What is this?”

“A diamond.”

“I know that. I mean what’s it for?”

“Your engagement ring.”

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Damaris stared at it for a long, long moment. Then she closed her fingers around it and said, “No. No, no, no. We aren’t—You said—What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Well, there was his answer. Sure enough, she’d flipped out at the thought of anything real between them. He sighed. “Relax. Grandma gave it to me to give to you.”

“Relax? Are you kidding? You let her think we were going to get married? We didn’t agree to that.”

“Basically we did. I mentioned it at first, when I asked you to be my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend. You said girlfriend, not fiancée.”

“I said girlfriend and maybe fiancée at some point.”

“That’s quibbling. But it doesn’t matter. I’ve thought about it and I don’t believe it’s a good idea. Pretending to be dating is one thing. But if we lie about being engaged? That will just make everything that much harder.”

“What was I supposed to do? She said Grandpa had given it to her on their fiftieth wedding anniversary and she wanted me to have it to give to you for your engagement ring.”

“You should have said no.”

“And break her heart? I can’t do that.” That was why he’d started all this in the first place. Of course, it wasn’t the only reason but obviously he couldn’t tell Damaris that right now.



“What were you planning to do when it came time to tell her we’d broken up? You never did say.”

“I hadn’t figured that out.” He put his arms around her and pulled her close. “Besides, why do we have to break up?”

She stared at him. “Because that’s what we agreed on.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t change our minds. We’re good together. We enjoy being with each other. The sex is great.” She frowned but she didn’t deny it. “You trust me. If you didn’t you wouldn’t have gotten an IUD, would you?”

“No.”

“I’m not saying we have to get married, but we don’t have to break up either.”

She sighed. “At some point we’re going to have to tell Grandma K the truth. You know this can’t last forever.”

Why not? He wanted to ask, but it was clearly too soon. Too soon for Damaris, at any rate. He kissed her jaw. Whispered in her ear, “Since we’re not breaking up right now, there’s no reason to worry about it.”

“We’re going to—”

He cut her off by kissing her mouth. When he lifted his mouth she started again.

“We need—”

He kissed her again and continued to kiss her, sliding his tongue into her mouth, until she responded, her body softening, meeting his tongue with hers as he deepened the kiss. Damn, kissing Damaris was like a fantasy come true, and when she threw herself into it as she was doing now, he could hardly think.

“No fair,” she said, her voice husky. “I can’t think when you kiss me like that.”

Nate smiled. “Me neither. That’s the point.” He scooped her up in his arms and started walking toward the bedroom.

“We still need to talk about this.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Nate.”

“Okay,” he repeated, tossing her onto the middle of the bed and following her down. “Later.” The T-shirt had ridden up, exposing her to his gaze. The fact that she wore no panties guaranteed that’s where his gaze zeroed in. He cupped her between her thighs, smiling when she drew in a breath. He stroked her with his fingers, then followed with his mouth.

Damaris gave a strangled groan and put her hands in his hair. “Now I really can’t think.”

“Who needs to think?” Nate asked.

“Good point,” she said as he got back to business.

## Chapter Nineteen

Damaris went with Nate to his next lunch date with Grandma K. Normally she let Nate see Grandma K on his own but occasionally Damaris made what was essentially a command appearance. Not that Grandma K acted like it was a command. No, in this matter she was quite sensitive and always tried to make certain Damaris didn’t feel forced to visit her. Damaris wished she could say the same for other things Grandma K didn’t feel called for subtlety. She maintained that at her age, she had no time to be subtle.

“Next Wednesday would have been your grandpa’s and my seventy-second anniversary,” Grandma K announced as they were eating lunch—pizza Nate had picked up from Lucy’s Pizza. “I miss that man something fierce.”

“When did you lose him, Grandma K?” Damaris asked.

“A little over ten years ago. We had a long, wonderful life together.” She took a bite of pizza and added, “Before long I’ll be with him again.”

“You’re not going to die anytime soon, Grandma,” Nate said. “You need to quit thinking like that.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I have a few things I want to see before I go.” She raised an eyebrow at her grandson.

Uh-oh. Talk about a speaking look.

“What have you been up to, Damaris? I haven’t seen you since we got back from California.”

“I know. I’ve been working a lot. I owed my brothers for taking care of my chores and responsibilities while I was gone.”

“That’s good but I hope you haven’t been too busy to see Nate.”

“She hasn’t,” Nate said. “I make sure of that.” He sent her a suggestive glance that thankfully, only she could see.

She narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t respond otherwise. He began picking up the dirty dishes, carrying them to the sink to rinse them and put them in the dishwasher.

“And a good thing, too,” Grandma K said, nodding her approval. “You know, Damaris, you are exactly the kind of woman I hoped my boy would end up with.”

Damaris didn’t know what to say so she fell back on, “Oh.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” the older lady said with a laugh. “You’re smart, you’re independent, you’re a hard worker. You take your obligations seriously. And you’re pretty as a picture. I can see why my Nate is over the moon about you.”

“You’re embarrassing her, Grandma,” Nate said, sparing her from having to answer.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Pshaw. Just telling the truth.” Noticing Nate had finished the dishes, she continued. “Now you two go on. I’m sure you have better things to do than listen to an old woman blather.”

“You don’t blather. We love seeing you, but I do need to get back to the ranch. Marshall and I have an appointment this afternoon with a possible buyer for one of the colts.”

Damaris hugged Grandma K and when Nate bent to kiss her cheek she said something to him that Damaris couldn’t hear.

“Should I stop at the barn or the cottage?” Nate asked on their way out the door.

“Cottage. I need to change clothes before the appointment.” She’d worn a dress to Grandma K’s and that wasn’t the sort of thing she liked to wear around the horses. Who knew what might need to be done, and heels and a dress would not be fun to work in.

“What did Grandma K say to you before we left?” she asked as they pulled up to the cottage. She’d been dying to know but Nate hadn’t said a word. In fact, he’d talked about his student training schedule all the way to the ranch.

He parked the car then went around to her side to open her door. “I can get my own door, you know.”

“I know. But I’m a good Southern boy so you let me do it.”

She walked into the cottage with Nate following her. “All right, since you haven’t answered, I’ll ask again. What did Grandma K say to you right before we left? Don’t give me the runaround, either.”

He frowned, but he answered. “She said she wasn’t getting any younger and when the heck was I going to ask you to marry me.”

\*

Damaris frowned. “I guess that’s no surprise considering her diamond she gave you to give to me. Did you tell her you weren’t going to ask me to marry you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve been over this before. Just recently in fact. I’m not going to break her heart.”

“You are so frustrating. You have to tell her we’re not that serious.”

“No.”

She heaved a sigh. “We can’t go on forever like this, Nate.”

He stared at her, wanting to shake her. No, he wanted to kiss her until she forgot all about coming clean. “We’ll think of something.”

She pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I don’t have time to argue right now. The buyer will be here in ten minutes and I want to change. We’ll talk about this later.”

“Whatever you say.” Maybe it was time to finally have it out. He felt like they’d been

circling around the problem. Which wouldn't be a problem at all if Damaris would admit she wanted more than sex from their relationship. Nate kissed her, a little longer and more intense than a simple goodbye. Turning her loose, he said, "Want to get some dinner tonight?"

"Maybe. Depends on what's happening here. I'll call you."

Nate had a new client call for a flight that afternoon so he didn't manage to see Damaris that evening. Which was just as well since he was tired of arguing about marriage, engagements, breaking up, and whatever else Damaris decided to argue about.

One thing he knew for sure. He did not want to break up with Damaris. Ever since they'd started this pretending to be together business he'd only fallen deeper in love with her. He hadn't thought enough about what would happen if Damaris didn't fall in love with him too. Or worse, if she did but refused to admit it. Oh, he'd started to think about it a hundred times. He'd just managed to push it out of his mind every time it came up.

Tell her the truth? That he'd been in love with her from the first time he saw her? Maybe he hadn't recognized it at first but eventually he'd figured it out. The fact that no other women held his interest for more than a date or two after he and Damaris became friends. He sure as hell knew how he felt now. As for Damaris, though, if she hadn't fallen in love with him after everything that had happened, he couldn't imagine what else would make a difference. But what other brilliant ideas did he have?

Exactly. None.

\*

Late that evening after he returned from his flight Nate went to Booze's. He'd called Damaris from the airport to let her know he was back. But with her getting up before dawn, it was way too late to see her. He took a seat at the bar and ordered a beer from Siobhan Murphy, the cute, sassy, redheaded bartender he'd known since he first came to town. He'd flirted with her and asked her to go out with him early on, but while she was happy to flirt with him that was as far as she'd take it. So he'd settled for flirting and friendship, which seemed to suit both of them.

Siobhan set his beer in front of him. "Why so down, Nate?"

Surprised, he glanced up at her. Hell, she was a bartender. She probably had a sixth sense for sniffing out dejected people. Even so, he didn't think he'd been so obvious. He started to deny it then decided what the hell. "Women."



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Siobhan smiled. “Oh. Trouble in paradise?”

He snorted, sipped beer and looked at her. “Got it in one.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really. It’s no big deal.”

“I’ve known you for a long time now. I’ve seen you with just about every woman in town. Including me. So don’t pretend this isn’t a big deal.” When he didn’t answer she continued. “You’re a nice guy, Nate. You deserve to be happy.”

A nice guy. He didn’t feel like a nice guy. He wanted to grab Damaris and kiss the hell out of her, make love to her until she came screaming and fell apart in his arms. Oh, wait. He’d already done that and she still denied they were anything more than friends with benefits. “Don’t you have other customers to see to?”

She glanced around. It was late and even Booze’s was winding down. There was one customer at the far end of the bar and he had a full glass of beer. “Nope. Give it up, Nate. You are one hundred percent in love with Damaris Walker. And notwithstanding that you two are supposedly dating and crazy for each other, she isn’t cooperating.”

Shit. “Why do you think that?”

“That you two are faking it?” He nodded. “Your grandma was in here talking about how happy she was that her Nate had finally found the woman for him.”

“So? That doesn’t make us fake.” He took another drink, wondering what had given them away.

“No, but the fact that Grandma K is happy, and you’re obviously not does. Why are you so bummed? It’s been months since you’ve shown more than a perfunctory interest in anyone besides Damaris. You barely even flirt anymore. And all that happened long before you and Damaris ‘got together,’” she said, putting air quotes around the last two words.

Since she had figured most of it out anyway, he found himself telling her the whole stupid story. Finishing up, he said, “I thought if we pretended to be dating, she’d figure out that we’re good together. And Grandma really does want to see me married or at least involved with someone, so it seemed like a win-win.”

“Maybe it is. She’s way more relaxed around you now than she was when you first started. She acts like she did before you started dating. But there’s a difference. She’s not holding you at arm’s length like she was at first.”

Because they had a physical relationship now. But sex wasn’t enough. Not for him. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“That I’m in love with her? Hell, no. She’ll flip out and then run as fast as she can away from me.” He drank more beer.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Pretty much. I gave her a diamond and told her it was for her engagement ring. She about had a stroke.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want it to be fake. Maybe, like you, she wants something real.”

“I don’t think so. She doesn’t trust me. As a friend, yes. But as a lover? A long-term, serious lover? No.” He finished his beer and Siobhan left to refill his mug and take care of the other customer.

She returned with his beer and a question. “Why doesn’t she trust you? I mean, sure, you’re a flirt but you’re not a womanizer or anything.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You’re welcome. Believe me, Nate, I see all kinds in here. At heart you’re a good guy.”

“You might be sure of that but Damaris isn’t. Some guy in her past did her wrong. But that’s all I know. She told me that bare fact but she won’t talk about it otherwise.”

“I don’t think you’re going to get anywhere until you know exactly what happened in her past.”

“Probably not,” he said grimly. But how to convince her to tell him?

“Well, there’s your answer. Tell her how you really feel and if she flips out make her tell you why.”

Make her? “You obviously haven’t tried to make Damaris do something she doesn’t want to do. The woman is bound and determined to keep her past to herself.” A lot of it anyway.

Siobhan patted his hand. “My money’s on you, Nate.”

“You know what they say. A fool and her money are soon parted.”

### Chapter Twenty

Damaris didn't see Nate again for several days. One thing or another kept interfering. Her work. His work. Both. She hated to admit it but she missed him. Not just the sex, either, though she did miss that. But she'd grown accustomed to seeing him more often, and to spending the night with him at one of their places. To waking up with him. To being—God help her—part of a couple.

That scared the hell out of her. Surely she wasn't falling for him. That would be a disaster. Nate wasn't the settling-down type. Except...he'd been different since they started their pretend dating. Especially since they started sleeping together. And if it was real...Nate and she were exclusive now, but that was only for a finite amount of time. Could she ever let go of her fear enough to have a real relationship with Nate? With any man?

She met Nate in town for Mexican food at Jalisco's. After eating they went to his apartment. The Wildcat Tower was, as he put it, above his pay grade. He lived in an apartment complex called the Big Tree. It had taken its name from a huge old oak tree that had graced the entrance. The tree was long gone but the name had stuck. They were decent apartments. Not as nice as the Wildcat Tower on the Square and not as bad as the Texan, on the edge of the Barrels. Nate's apartment was on the third floor and had a nice view of the woods to the east of town.

She knew they needed to talk. For one thing, there was that honkin' big diamond to discuss. But she'd missed him, and wanted him, and he obviously felt the same. The moment they stepped into his apartment he had her backed up against the door, kissing her until she could hardly breathe. They fumbled with each other's clothes,

shedding them quickly. He lifted her up and she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and hung on for dear life as he thrust inside her.

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her intensely, pinning her with his gaze as surely as he was with his body. He drove into her, over and over, his gaze locked with hers until he came with a shout and she followed immediately, sensations spiraling through her on wave after wave. After a long moment, with her still wrapped around him, Nate carried her into his bedroom, placed her on his bed and lay down beside her.

Oh, God. I'm...I'm basking in a postcoital glow. What is going on with me? "We need to talk."

"Hmm. Okay, so talk." Nate lay beside her, one arm behind his head, naked and totally relaxed.

"You have to get dressed."

He cracked open an eye. "Why?"

"Because we need to talk," she repeated.

"Okay. But why get dressed? We're just going to wind up back in bed."

"I can't think clearly when you're naked."

He sat up and grinned. "Ditto." But he got up and pulled a T-shirt out of his drawer and tossed it to her. He grabbed his boxers off the floor and pulled them on. Sitting back down on the bed beside her, he asked, "What are we talking about?"

At least he'd put something on, even though he was still showing a lot of distracting

skin. However, now that she was dressed, she felt more in control. “Grandma K wants us to get engaged.”

“She does. But that shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“It’s not a surprise but it’s a dilemma. What are we going to tell her?”

“We could tell her we’re engaged.”

“And then what? Won’t that just make it harder when we decide to end it?”

“Why do we have to end it?”

“I don’t understand. It has to end sometime.”

“Not if we really get engaged.”

Her stupid heart tumbled. But he was bound to be just yanking her chain. “Very funny, Nate.”

“I’m not joking.” He held one of her hands. “Marry me, Damaris.”

\*

It wasn’t the way he’d planned it. He hadn’t planned on bringing up the subject of marriage until much later. He’d wanted to put it off as long as possible to give Damaris more time to get used to the idea. But Grandma had given him the perfect opportunity, and he couldn’t resist any longer. Of course, the fact that Damaris looked horrified didn’t help.

“You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack. Let’s get married.”

“This is crazy. Just because we have good sex—”

“Great sex,” he interrupted.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

Ignoring his interjection she went on determinedly. “Good sex and getting along are not enough reason to get married. I mean, this relationship isn’t even for real.”

“It feels real to me. When I hold you in my arms and make love to you it couldn’t be more real. When you fall apart and scream my name when you come it sure as hell feels real.”

She flushed. “That’s sex, not love. We’re not in love. We’re friends with benefits.”

She got out of bed and went to the living room and began gathering her clothes. Running, because he’d hit a nerve? Or was he just deluding himself thinking he meant something to her? He’d followed her and watched her yanking on her shorts.

“Is that all this thing between us is to you? Sex and nothing else?”

“No, it’s friendship too,” she said, sounding a little desperate. “Where is my bra?”

He picked up her bra where it had landed under the coffee table and handed it to her. “Running away, Damaris?” he asked grimly.

“I’m getting dressed.”

“I can see that. So you can leave more quickly?” She didn’t answer. Why was she so stubborn? “If you’re honest, you’ll admit that there’s more between us than simple friendship.”

“There is,” she flung at him. “We’re friends who have sex.”

“I love you, Damaris. I’ve been in love with you since I met you.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. Deal with it.” He was tired. Tired of not telling her how he felt. Tired of having to be so careful not to spook her. Tired of pretending to be fine with the way things were when he wanted nothing more than to make everything about the two of them real.

“You feel something for me, Damaris. It might not be love, but it’s something more than ‘I have an itch and I want you to scratch it.’”

“Of course I have feelings for you. I’ve never denied that. And I’ve certainly never considered you as someone to ‘scratch my itch.’ That’s insulting to both of us.”

“I’ll tell you what’s insulting. What’s insulting is you denying there’s anything more than friendship between us.” Damn it, would she never admit her feelings? Or was he just assigning her feelings he wanted her to have? What if he was wrong and she didn’t? But he wasn’t wrong. He knew it even if Damaris wouldn’t admit it. “If that’s all you feel for me then why did you make love with me? You waited eight years. Why me?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” She’d managed to get dressed and looked like she was ready for flight.

“That’s too damn bad. I do want to talk about it.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“How do you know that when you’ve never even tried? I told you I loved you. That I have for a long time. I think that deserves some kind of response. I love you too, or

go to hell. Or you could give me the real reason why you're so damn petrified of falling in love."

"I did tell you."

\*

Maybe she did owe him an explanation. But he owed her one too. "You love me? You're in love with me?"

"That's what I said." Rather than any kind of loving expression, he had that stubborn look on his face.

"So you've been lying to me about your feelings for me for how long? Months? Years?"

"I haven't lied. Not really."

"Oh, yes, you have. You tricked me. You said this was going to be temporary and you agreed we were just friends. And now you say you've been in love with me since—"

"Since we met. Now you know I'm in love with you and you're freaking out. Tell me something, Damaris. What would you have done if I'd told you I've been in love with you almost from the moment we met?"

"First, I'd have laughed in your face. Don't forget, I know your rep."

"God, I'm so sick of you talking about my reputation. You're the one who kept pushing women on me. Sure, I slept with some of them. At first. Before I realized they weren't what I wanted. They weren't who I wanted."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“You’re saying you’re not a love ’em and leave ’em kind of guy? That you don’t date a woman for a few times and then forget her?”

“I’m saying I used to be that kind of guy. Before I met you.”

“So all those women you dated were just you trying to get over me?”

“Pretty much. After you friend-zoned me, anyway. At first I thought I’d get over it. I was fine with being friends and continuing to date other women. But I figured out it wasn’t working. I didn’t want other women. I wanted you.”

“The whole thing was a con. Me pretending to be your girlfriend was a scam. Was I supposed to fall in love with you?” She could tell she was really pissing him off. His jaw looked as hard as cement and his hazel eyes were flinty gray.

“Yeah. That was the plan. I thought if I could get you to spend time with me in a pretend relationship you’d realize that there’s no reason we can’t be in a real relationship.”

“No reason except you lied to me.”

“Not really. I just didn’t tell you.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie.”

“Damn it, Damaris, what the hell was I supposed to do? If I’d told you earlier that I was in love with you, you’d have run.”

“Maybe. But we’ll never know, will we?”

“Be honest, Damaris. Admit you’d have run away as fast as your boots would take you.”

That might be true but she sure as hell wasn’t going to admit it. She crossed her arms over her chest, raised her chin and glared at him.

“Either you care about me,” Nate said, “or you’re a better actress than I ever thought you were.”

“I’ve never denied I care about you. You’re one of my best friends. Of course I care about you.”

“And that’s all you’ll admit to. Oh, wait. You’ll admit you’re hot for me but that’s just sex, right? So obviously, sex isn’t the problem. What is? What are you so damn afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid. And the fact that you lied to me is what makes me not trust you. Because it was a lie no matter how you try to explain it away. This whole pretend to be dating thing was just a ploy to get close to me. If you can lie about one thing you can lie about others. I don’t want to make another mistake.”

“A mistake like the mysterious man from your past? The one who cheated on you?”

“It was a little more than simple cheating.” That was the understatement of the century. Try destroyed her faith in men and in her ability to judge a man.

“If you’re honest, you’ll admit you’d never have become friends with me if you thought I was in love with you.”

Nate was right about that. But she had good reason. “He lied to me too.”

“And there it is. The mystery man from your past. He must have done a hell of a number on you. Don’t you think it’s time you told me about him?”

He was right. She had to tell him. And once she did...he’d understand why they were over. “His name was Warner. Warner Jarrett. But I knew him as Weldon Jenson.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

He’d given her a fake name? He was a liar. Well, that helped explain her feelings about lying. They both sat down, one on each end of the couch.

“You know I’ve gone out with a lot of guys,” Damaris began. “Not lately, but I’ve dated most of the guys around here.”

“I know.” Of course he knew. Every time he’d heard she’d dated someone he’d been jealous. Did she like the guy? How much did she like the guy? Enough to...at that point he’d made himself quit thinking about it. It did no good to imagine Damaris with other men. That just made him crazy.

Until he finally made love to her and she’d told him she hadn’t had sex in eight years. “And this guy, the guy with the fake name, was why you wouldn’t get involved with anyone. Why you hadn’t made love in years.”

“Bingo. Oh, it was a killer. Jaclyn is the only person who knows about it. And now you.”

“Let me get this straight. One guy cheated and you can never trust anyone again? Isn’t that a bit of an overreaction?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She shrugged. “Call it whatever you want. I was burned. Badly. He was older. A man, not a college boy. And he was gorgeous and I loved him madly. I knew he was a flirt but he always made me feel like I was the only one he loved. I never questioned him. Any red flags—and there were a bunch—I ignored. God, I was so naive.”

“What happened?”

“He died.”

“I’m sorry, Damaris.”

“Don’t be. I hope he’s roasting in hell.” She got up and paced the room. “It was unexpected. He had a heart condition he knew about but he lived like nothing was wrong. It caught up with him. So he died.”

Nate waited. At least this explanation had taken away some of the more grisly scenarios he’d imagined. But what could be so devastating? Obviously, it must have something to do with the phony name.

“He was a business mogul. His company—the one he owned—sold containers. He traveled all over the country for the job. I usually heard from him once or even twice a week if I didn’t see him. But I hadn’t talked to him for a while. Just when I was really getting worried the story hit the news. I saw his picture. But instead of Weldon Jensen the news articles said his name was Warner Jarrett.

“His company sold shipping containers. He’d made a fortune doing it. A reporter

managed to find out that along with two wives and two families, he had God knows how many girlfriends. So many identities you had to wonder how he kept them all straight. All that was splashed all over the news. And the tabloids, of course.”

“It must have hurt even worse to find out the way you did.”

“I think it would have been just as bad however I found out. I went to the funeral. I don’t know why. I think maybe in the back of my mind I hoped it wasn’t him. Hoped there’d been some mistake. I couldn’t get in. It was closed to the public. But there were a lot of people waiting outside the funeral home for the service to be over. Mostly his women. I talked to some of them. Enough to know it really was him and that they were as shocked as I’d been. But the thing that really got to me—” She broke off and dashed away tears. “I haven’t cried over this bastard since it happened.”

“You’ve never told anyone but Jaclyn, though. Not even your family?”

She gave a humorless laugh. “Are you kidding? You know my brothers. They’d have wrapped me in cotton and never let me out of their sight. They’d have pitied me, and I couldn’t have stood that.” She sat on the couch.

No, he couldn’t see his tough cowgirl putting up with being an object of pity. Damaris was far too strong for that. “What was it that really got to you?”

“His kids. Four of them. Two with each wife. All of them were there, along with both widows. I was shocked that both were there, but the two women had obviously come to some kind of understanding. But the children looked so...so lost and bewildered. Like they couldn’t believe this man they’d loved was gone, and they couldn’t understand what was happening. The bastard was not only gone, but he’d betrayed all of them every single day.”

“How in the hell did he get away with all that?”



“I’ve asked myself that question a thousand times. He traveled a lot. I thought he was working. I’m sure we all thought that. You know, he was doing whatever a business mogul does. He was damn good-looking, charming, and like I said, he had an ability to make you think you were the only woman in the world for him.”

Moving closer to her, he covered one of her hands with his. “I’m so damn sorry, Damaris. Sorry you had to go through it all again too. I guess it’s no surprise this made you not trust men.”

“To say the least.” She pulled her hand away. “I have a problem with players. But I admit, Chase was a player until he met Ella, and they’re really happy now. Ella’s not about to put up with an unfaithful man, either.”

“You’re telling me this because you still think I’m a player.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No, and you should damn well know that. I never lied to a woman. Otherwise why set me up with your friends? They always knew where I was coming from and that we were exclusive as long as we were together.”

“Which was never for long.”

So much for understanding. She was determined to think the worst of him. He shrugged. “Yeah, so? There’s a big difference between not settling down and being a freaking bigamist and a serial cheater like that scum was.”

\*

“Of course there’s a difference,” Damaris said impatiently. “You aren’t a terrible person like he was. I thought—I thought if you found the right woman you’d settle

down. I thought it would be better for both of us if you found someone else to settle down with. But that isn't the point."

"Gee, thanks," he drawled, sarcasm dripping from his words. "So what is the point?"

"The point is you lied to me. How can I trust anything about the two of us when I know everything about our relationship has been based on a lie?"

"Oh, bullshit. Damaris, that's just flat wrong. Our friendship isn't a lie. The fact that we know each other and can depend on each other isn't a lie."

"Isn't it?"

"Hell, Damaris, I tried everything I could think of to either get over you or get you to see me as something more than your good buddy. When you shot me down, at first I went a little crazy. Slept with a bunch of women, drank a lot when I wasn't working, anything to get you out of my mind. All of which built up my 'reputation.' None of it worked. And nothing I did convinced you to give us a chance. So I tried to accept that all we'd ever be was friends. That didn't work either. Every woman I ever dated paled in comparison to you. Finally, I decided if I couldn't have you, then I didn't want anyone. And that's where I've been for nearly a year.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Then Grandma said she wanted to see me happy and settled down with someone. I couldn’t imagine that someone being anyone but you. So yes, I had an ulterior motive to asking you to be my girlfriend. Everything I told you was true, though. Grandma loves you. I couldn’t see asking anyone else to do this because I couldn’t imagine even pretending to be interested in another woman. I thought if this didn’t work then I’d give up. If this didn’t work nothing would.”

“Well, it worked. Enough to get me into bed, anyway.” That wasn’t quite fair or even accurate. But she didn’t care. At this point she was so hurt and angry everything seemed like Nate’s fault. Damn it, he’d made her fall in love with him. Even now, knowing what she knew, knowing the whole thing was a ploy, she still loved him. What was wrong with her?

“You know it wasn’t all about sex. Damn it, Damaris, I love you. I want to make love to you. Not just get it on with you.”

She brushed that aside as if it didn’t matter. “You never intended to come clean, did you?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Maybe if you hadn’t flipped out when I told you I loved you. But there’s no point in thinking about that now, is there?”

She wanted to cry and there was no way she would allow herself to do that in front of Nate. “We’re done here. I’m leaving. Please don’t come by or call me. You’ll have to think of something to tell Grandma K on your own. That’s your problem, not mine.”

He stared at her while she finished getting dressed. “I don’t believe this.”

“Believe it.”

“You’re breaking up with me?”

“No. You can’t break up a fake relationship. I’m calling a halt to this charade.”

“I love you. That’s not a charade. It’s as real as you can get. But you don’t want to believe it, do you? You’re too scared to admit that what we have is real.”

Her throat hurt from holding back tears. Why did he have to say it? Why couldn’t they have gone on the way they were? “Goodbye, Nate.” She walked out the door.

She managed to get in her truck and drive far enough to be out of Nate’s sight before she broke down. She pulled over to the side of the road and let the tears come. She wasn’t close to being finished when someone rapped on her window. Raising her head, she saw Ginny Clayborne. Great. Now the cops are out to get me.

Damaris rolled down her window. “Did I do something wrong, Officer?”

Officer Ginny Clayborne had short, reddish-brown hair, a dusting of freckles, and classic features. She was probably around Damaris’s age, medium height, slim, and looked like the girl next door but Damaris had heard that the woman was a crack shot and a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. Officer Clayborne had come to Whiskey River from the Dallas police department a few months before, so Damaris knew her but not well.

Embarrassed to be caught not simply crying but bawling her eyes out, Damaris wished she’d waited until she was on the ranch to have her breakdown.

“No, not a thing. Can I help? I wondered if you were having car problems.”

“Oh. No. I’m uh—oh, hell.” She sniffed and wished she had a tissue. There was a rag she used to wipe the windshield in the side pocket of the truck. It would have to do. Belatedly remembering what not to do when a cop pulled you over she said, “Can I get this rag out of the pocket here so I can blow my nose?”

“Sure.”

She did so, hoping the rag wasn’t dirty enough to leave grease or something on her face. Couldn’t be helped, though. What was a little grease compared to a humiliating breakdown? “I’m okay. I was upset so I pulled over.”

She nodded. “Very wise. I wish more people did that instead of driving badly. Are you sure there’s nothing I can do to help you?”

“Not unless you know what to do to a totally infuriating man who broke your heart.”

She smiled sympathetically. “Afraid not. But if you figure it out let me know.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Nate had a free day the following Monday. He’d been putting off seeing his grandma because he knew he was going to disappoint her when he told her what had happened. But he couldn’t avoid her forever.

“I was hoping you’d bring Damaris with you,” Grandma said when he showed up. “Is she working?”

“I don’t know.” He set the food—burgers from the Diner along with their signature sweet tea—down on the table and went to get setups for both of them.

Grandma peered at him when he returned. “Are you all right, Nate?”

“No.” He might as well tell her the truth. Obviously it had been a stupid idea from the get-go. “Damaris and I broke up.”

“Oh, no!” She put down her hamburger and placed a gnarled hand on his forearm. “Why? You’re crazy about each other.”

“One of us is. She’s done with me.”

“Did you do something wrong?”

Now, why did she think he was the one at fault? He started to ask her, then thought better of it. After all, according to Damaris at least, he was the one at fault. “I screwed up. She’s convinced I lied to her and now she says she can’t trust me.”

“Did you lie to her?”

He shrugged. “Sort of.”

“Either you did or you didn’t. Which one is it?”

“Technically I guess you can say I lied. But it was a lie of omission.”

Grandma looked at him for a long moment then drank some tea. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” she said, setting down her glass. “We’re going to eat our lunch and you’ll clean up and then we’ll go in the living room and you can tell me what the heck is going on.”

They basically ate in silence until they finished. After he’d cleaned up, he went to the den where Grandma sat with a crossword puzzle. She did one every day, saying they kept her mind working and at her age anything that helped your mind was a good thing. Setting it aside, she demanded, “What in the heck did you do? If Damaris says you lied, I’ll wager she knows what she’s talking about.”

“I screwed up. Royally.” He told her the whole story. How it started when she’d said she wanted to see him dating someone or have a more serious girlfriend. And given that Damaris was the only woman he wanted, he’d decided that asking her to be his fake girlfriend was the perfect way to convince her that the two of them should be together.

“Judging from seeing the two of you together, I gather it worked.”

“Yeah. Kinda. But Damaris never admitted how she really felt about me. She kept saying we were just temporary. I finally got sick of it and asked her to marry me for real.”

“What happened then?”

“Exactly what I’d figured. She flipped out. Especially when I told her I’d been in love with her basically since we met.”

“Is that true? You’ve been in love with her all this time? And she didn’t know?”

“Yes, it’s true. And no, she didn’t know. She wanted to be friends so that’s what we’ve been. I’ve been waiting, trying to figure out how to convince her she wanted more. So when you told me you wanted to see me settled, I thought why not try? Nothing else I’ve done has worked, so maybe this will. She’s the only woman I’ve ever been in love with. I’ve thought I was in love before but those were nothing compared to how I feel about Damaris.

“And now she’s pissed because I ‘lied’ to her when I didn’t tell her I loved her to begin with. But if I had, she’d have run so fast all I could’ve seen was her dust. Which I told her.”

“Lying’s not good. And a lie of omission is still a lie.”



“That’s what she says,” he replied grimly. “If I could have seen another way, I wouldn’t have done it. But she was always so adamant that we just be friends. So, yeah, I lied by omission.”

“Well, Nate, that’s a fine pickle you’re in. What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do? She knows I love her. She knows I’m—” Sorry, he started to say. But he hadn’t told her he was sorry. Because to him it hadn’t been a lie. But to Damaris it had. And she was the one who mattered. She was the one who felt betrayed. By him. The man who supposedly loved her.

He had to do something. But he had no freaking idea what.

\*

Damaris was in the barn saddling Cinnamon to go for a ride. What she always did when she was upset and didn’t know what to do. She knew she should talk to someone. Not her brothers. They didn’t need to know any more than she and Nate had broken up. Jaclyn, who knew her best, knew that whatever was going on, it wasn’t a simple breakup. But Damaris hadn’t had the courage to talk about it. As if ignoring what had happened would make it go away.

“Damaris, I need to talk to you.”

Oh, God. Nate. Just the sound of his voice brought on so many conflicting emotions. Love, despair, betrayal. “I asked you not to come here,” she said with her back still to him. She was afraid to look at him. If she did she might throw herself into his arms and tell him nothing mattered but the two of them. But that would be a lie.

“I know. But you wouldn’t answer your phone and I needed to tell you something.”

She drew in a breath and turned around. Damn, he looked as bad as she felt. Like he hadn't slept in days, maybe hadn't eaten either. "What?"

"I told Grandma the truth."

"Why?"

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“We broke up. There was no reason to keep up the pretense if we were over. So I told her.”

“Everything?”

He nodded. “All of it.”

“How did she take it?”

“She’s disappointed, of course. She loves you. She thinks you’re perfect for me.”

“Didn’t it bother her that we lied to her?”

“Not once I explained to her that it was my last shot at getting you to see what has been in front of your face since we met.”

Damaris didn’t know what to say to that. Had it been so obvious that Nate had feelings for her? Feelings that went beyond friendship? Had she been deliberately blind?

“She wants me to fix it, but I’ve told her I don’t know how to do that,” Nate continued.

“I don’t either. I don’t know if we can be fixed.”

“But you admit there’s a possibility.”

She didn't answer.

"Was what I did so terrible? So unforgivable? I didn't tell you I loved you early on. For one thing because I didn't realize it until later. Also because I knew we'd never even be friends if you had any idea how I felt."

"If you don't understand after I told you about Warner—"

"For God's sake, Damaris. Those are two absolutely opposite things. I didn't tell you I loved you. He didn't tell you he was cheating on you with two wives and God knows how many girlfriends."

She set her jaw and crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you done?"

"Yeah. I'm done and so are we. You don't have to worry. I won't bother you again." With that parting shot, he turned his back on her and left. She heard his car start up and take off like a bat out of hell.

Was what Nate did really so bad?

He manipulated me. That's bad in my book.

Would you ever have gotten this close to him if he hadn't? You said yes of your own free will.

I thought I was doing it to make Grandma K happy.

Oh, get real. You know that's not the only reason. Be honest. You were tempted. You've always been attracted to Nate. It's why you tried so hard to resist him. Doing this 'for Grandma K' just gave you an out.

As for going to bed with him, that was on her. Sure, he'd kissed her. And yes, she knew he wanted her. But she'd gone to his room. Even then, she'd made the first move, not Nate. He'd left that up to her.

Great. She didn't need to talk to anyone to know she'd lied to herself as much as Nate had lied to her. But she was a coward. She couldn't admit that fear, more than anything, was what had been holding her back.

\*

Three days later Nate was driving to the airport and still furious. Depressed, sure. But pissed as hell. If Damaris couldn't see there was a shitload of difference between what he'd done and what the bastard had done, then she wasn't worth any angst. He knew that in his head. But his heart hadn't gotten the message yet.

He wondered if part of the issue for her was that she still saw him as a player and didn't trust that what he felt for her was real. That he wanted her and no one else. How in the hell was he supposed to make her believe he loved her and only her?

But he still didn't believe he could have done anything differently. Other than not tell her at all that he was in love with her. Damn stubborn woman. If only he could forget her. If only the tape in his head would quit playing, reminding him of every time they'd been together, especially before he'd blown it.

Damaris in all her incarnations. Damaris the cowgirl. Strong, sturdy, hardworking. But soft enough on the inside to take in every stray who came along, be it a horse, a dog, a cat or any other animal in need. Damaris, his friend, laughing with him, teasing him, and always having his back. Damaris his lover, blowing his mind, tempting him until he knew he'd die if he didn't have her.

And here he was, left with memories. Memories that were all he'd ever have. He

must be the dumbest son of a bitch who ever lived to have screwed up as badly as he had. It was over.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

His phone rang and he tapped his earpiece. “Yeah.”

“When are you going to be here?” Travis asked. “Your student’s already here, champing at the bit.”

“Tell him I’m sorry I’m late and I’ll be there in about five minutes. I’m almost at—”

Holy shit! Out of the corner of his eye he saw a truck run a stop sign, spin and head dead straight for him. Automatically reacting, he shifted into first, turning the steering wheel hard as he did so. For an instant he thought he was clear and then the truck plowed into the driver’s side, just behind his door. The rear end spun around while he fought for control. A tree loomed, he tried to brake, but it was too late, and he slammed into it.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Late that afternoon Damaris’s cell phone rang. Travis Sullivan, the caller ID read. That was odd. Why is Travis calling... Oh, shit! It’s about Nate. He could be calling about something else, but a horrible feeling in her gut told her she was right and it was serious. All that flashed through her mind between the phone ringing and her answering.

She hit answer and snapped, “What happened?”

“Damaris? It’s Travis.”

“I know,” she said impatiently. “I saw the caller ID. Did something happen to Nate?”

Please, God, don't let it be a plane crash.

"Yes. He was in a wreck."

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. "A plane crash?" she whispered.

"No. Someone broadsided his car. He's in the hospital."

A car accident. That was better than a plane crash. Wasn't it? "The Jamison?" she asked, naming the big hospital in Last Stand.

"No, Whiskey River. It was closer."

"I'll be right there."

"Wait. I called you because I know you're close to Grandma K, and I thought it would be better if you were to be with her to tell her about Nate."

"Tell her what? I don't know anything beyond he was in a wreck and is in the hospital. I can't tell her that and leave her wondering if he's even alive." Obviously, he was alive or Travis would have said. Wouldn't he? "Travis, he's alive, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's alive. But you're right about Grandma K. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm messed up. I was on the phone with him when it happened."

"So you heard the wreck?"

"Yes," he said grimly.

"What are his injuries? He can't—he doesn't want to call Grandma K?"



“That’s the thing. We don’t know the extent of the injuries. The ER doc thinks his arm is broken and isn’t sure what else. Maybe some ribs. They’re taking him for x-rays and a CT scan.”

“That’s all the doctor’s been able to tell you?”

“So far. The thing is...they don’t know if he lost consciousness prior to when the EMTs got there.”

“How worried is the doctor?”

“I don’t know. He’s not talking much. Says we’ll see once he’s had the tests.” He paused and added, “Tobi just walked in. I’ll call when I know something more.”

“Never mind that. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Tobi, the doctor who’d put in her IUD, was Travis’s wife and a doctor at the urgent care clinic in town. She was thankful Tobi was there. Travis wasn’t doing well, which of course made her worry even more. If Travis was so upset—a pilot, who as far as she knew, never got rattled—then it must be bad.

She hollered for Marshall and started unsaddling Cinnamon. Luckily Marshall was in the barn and came quickly.

“What?” He took one look at her and asked sharply, “What happened?”

“Nate was in an accident. Car, not plane. He’s in the hospital. Can you take care of Cinnamon?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Of course. Is it serious?”

“I don’t know. Travis called me and he was clearly rattled. He said he was on the phone with him when it happened. I don’t even know if he’s conscious or not.”

“Travis called you?”

“Yes. He wanted me to talk to Grandma K but I can’t tell her anything until we know—until we know—” She couldn’t finish the sentence. Oh, God, what if it was worse than Travis was telling her? “What if he—”

Marshall grabbed her by the shoulders. “Stop it. Whatever you’re thinking, just stop. You have to think positively. He’ll be all right.”

“I hope you’re right.” Because the alternative didn’t bear thinking of.

“Are you okay to drive?”

“I’m fine. I’ll call you when I know something.” She was anything but fine. Why did it take something terrible to happen before she could admit she loved Nate and didn’t care that he’d lied to her? Because she had lied too. Lied by omission. Just like Nate had.

\*

Whiskey River hospital was a small hospital not too far out of town. It had been around a long time, even longer than the Jamison in Last Stand. Although it was

small, the ER department was considered one of the best for a small hospital. In fact, the entire hospital had a very good rating for its size. She'd checked. Plus, if the doctors at Whiskey River thought Nate needed care they couldn't give him they would transfer him to a larger hospital.

At least, that's what she hoped.

She walked into the ER and saw Travis sitting in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs. He got up and walked over to meet her when he saw her.

"How is he? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, not long ago. They're not sure of the extent of his injuries. At the least it looks like a broken arm and a couple of broken ribs. They're checking to see if he has a concussion."

"A concussion? Is that bad? I mean, I know it's bad but what does it mean?"

"Depends on how severe it is. He thinks he lost consciousness but if he did it wasn't for long." He ran a hand over his forehead. "And don't ask me what that means because I don't know."

"Where's Tobi?"

"She's with him and Dr. Farraday, the ER doctor. Dr. Farraday is supposed to come talk to us soon."

"Can I see him?"

Travis looked doubtful. "I don't know. Right now it's family only."

Damaris resisted reminding Travis he wasn't family either. "Grandma K is his only family here. I'm his fiancée. I should be able to see him."

Travis frowned. "That's not the way I heard it. Nate was pretty clear you'd blown him off."

"I didn't blow him off."

Travis shrugged. "Potato-potahto."

She ground her teeth before managing to answer. "Fine, I'm not his fiancée anymore, but the hospital doesn't need to know that. Besides, we broke up like five minutes ago."

"Try over a week."

Great. Travis was not going to cut her a break. She couldn't honestly blame him. He was Nate's friend, after all. God only knew what Nate had told him about their breakup. And she'd only gotten a call because Travis hadn't known what to do about Grandma K. Thank God he'd thought to call her, though.

"What did he look like when you saw him?"

"Like he'd been in a wreck. He looked like hell. How do you think he looked?"

"I realize you don't like me at the moment, but I still care about Nate. And if I'm going to tell Grandma K anything, I need to see him. Can you or Tobi at least ask him if he wants to see me?"

“Ask Tobi yourself. Here she comes.”

She hoped Tobi would be a little less resentful of her than Travis was. Tobi reached them and greeted her, then turned to Travis. “He’s got a broken arm, a couple of broken ribs and contusions on his leg and torso. They’ve ruled out a concussion, so that’s good. He’ll probably need surgery on his arm, but he’ll need to see an orthopedist about that.”

“Can I see him?”

Tobi looked uncomfortable. “I can ask him. But...don’t be surprised if he says no. He’s feeling pretty bad.” She left to ask him.

“Considering what his car looks like it’s a freaking miracle his injuries aren’t more severe,” Travis said.

His car. His beautiful car he thought of as his baby. “His car is—”

“Totaled,” Travis said.

“But he’s going to be all right.”

“Sounds like it,” he said grudgingly.

Tobi came back. “You can go in,” she told Damaris. “Cubicle two.”

\*

Nate had been tempted to have Tobi tell Damaris that he didn't want to see her, but he figured that would make him too much of a chickenshit so he said okay. But he didn't want to see her and, in fact, wondered why the hell she was even there.

They were over. Done. Had she come out of pity? If so, screw that.

There wasn't much of him that didn't hurt. His arm hurt like a son of a bitch. He had cuts on his face from broken glass but those didn't bother him much. His ribs though, hell, they hurt even more than his arm. He supposed the fact that he didn't have a punctured lung was something to be thankful for but he drew the line at lucky, which is what one of the techs had told him.

Lucky? He didn't feel lucky. Not one damn bit.

"I won't ask how you are. You look like hell."

He turned to look at her. She was in her work clothes. Jeans, boots, and a T-shirt with Walker Paints emblazoned on it. Damn it, he couldn't look at her without wanting her. Without regretting what could have been but now there wasn't a chance of it happening. It irritated the shit out of him. That, coupled with the pain he was in made him snarl at her. "Thanks. Why the hell are you here?"

"Travis asked me to talk to your grandma. I wanted to find out how you were before I went to see her."

"Fine. You've seen me. Now go away."

"Do you really hate me that much?"

No, damn it, he didn't hate her at all. "No. It would be easier if I did," he answered truthfully. "Do me a favor and tell Grandma I'm fine. She doesn't need to know

everything.”

“You’ll have to talk to her, you know. She won’t be satisfied with only what I tell her.”

“I’ll call her. Later.” He glared at her, which, no surprise, she ignored. “You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“Not yet.” She walked over to stand next to him. “I told Travis and I’ll tell you, I still care about you.”

She cared about him. Whoopee. He ignored her comment. “Do you know what happened to my car?”

“Don’t you?”

“Not really. By the time they got me out of the car—” something he mercifully only had sketchy memories of “—I was concentrating on not passing out. It’s bad, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Travis says it’s totaled.”

“Shit. I loved that car.”

“I know. I’m so sorry.” She touched his uninjured arm. “I’m so glad you’re going to be all right. Can I do anything for you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Yeah. Go away.” For a minute he thought she was going to cry. But Damaris was much tougher than that.

“All right. I’ll go see Grandma K and explain what happened, but you’d better call her when you feel up to it.”

Don’t go, he wanted to say. But he wouldn’t beg her. They were done. Over. The only reason she’d come was guilt. And he damn sure didn’t need Damaris’s guilt or pity. He turned his head away.

She touched his uninjured arm. “I’m glad your injuries weren’t more serious.”

He didn’t answer. A moment later he heard her bootheels walking away.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Damaris stopped by Grandma K’s on her way home. The older lady took a long time to answer the door, but Damaris knew that sometimes she moved more slowly than others.

“Why, Damaris, what are you doing here? Did you and Nate make up?”

She looked so hopeful Damaris hated to disappoint her. “I’m afraid not. But I am here about Nate.”

Grandma gave her a sharp look and led her to the den, waving a hand for her to sit. She sat in her favorite chair and folded her hands in her lap, but Damaris noticed she



gripped them together tightly. “What happened?”

“He’s okay. He’s banged up—” what a way to describe his injuries “—but he’ll be fine. He was in a car accident.”

“How bad was it?”

“The car is in a lot worse shape than he is.” Which was certainly true.

“But he’s going to be all right?” Grandma K asked her voice quavering in a way that made her sound every one of her ninety-two years.

Damaris put a hand over hers and patted. “Yes, I promise he is. I’m sure he’ll call you soon.”

“Where is he?”

“He might be home by now,” she hedged. “I promise he’ll call.” She intended to make sure of that. Damaris was able to leave finally by promising to take her to see her grandson tomorrow. It was the last thing she wanted to do but who knew how long it would be before Nate could get over to see her?

Figuring Nate wouldn’t want to talk to her she called Travis as soon as she got in her truck. His voicemail picked up, but he answered before she could leave a message. “Did you see her? How is she?”

“Yes. I told her Nate was banged up, but he’d be okay. He needs to call her, though. Today. She wants me to take her to see him tomorrow, so if he doesn’t want that, he’ll have to convince her otherwise.”

“I’ll tell him. Uh, Damaris, thanks.”

He sounded a lot less angry with her than he had before. “I love Grandma K too,” she told him and hung up. Then she drove to the ranch, parked at her cottage, sat on her couch, and cried. At this point not even her horses could make her feel better. She called herself every name she could think of, then made herself quit crying and figure out what to do next.

Because, by God, she wasn’t giving up on Nate. Damaris Walker did not give up. Ever. Not when there was something—or someone—she really wanted. Why did it take losing Nate for her to realize how much she loved him?

Someone pounded on her door. “Open up! I know you’re in there,” Jaclyn shouted.

Damaris wiped her eyes and answered the door. If she hadn’t her sister-in-law was fully capable of staying out there until the cows came home.

“Hey,” Jaclyn said. “I heard about Nate. Is he going to be okay? Why aren’t you with him?”

“Yes, he’s going to be okay. As to why I’m not with him, we broke up, remember?”

Jaclyn held a wine bottle in one hand and a bag of microwave popcorn in the other. She elbowed Damaris aside, saying, “We need two glasses and a bowl for the popcorn. Then you’re going to tell me what the hell is going on with you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jaclyn stared at her, then laughed. “Bullshit. This is me, Damaris. You know, your friend who’s known you since we were eighteen? Now tell me the truth. What’s going on?”

Damaris went to the kitchen and grabbed two wineglasses while her friend stuck the

popcorn in the microwave and opened the wine while it popped. She hadn't planned to tell Jaclyn the truth about her and Nate, but this was Jaclyn, the only person besides Nate who knew what had happened in her past. And since Nate had told all to Grandma K there was no need to keep quiet anymore.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She brought the popcorn and glasses into the den.

Jaclyn poured them each a glass of wine, took a handful of popcorn and leaned back against the back of the couch. “Go.”

Damaris took a big sip of wine. “I’ve screwed up. Badly. And I don’t know if I can fix it.”

“You’re in love with Nate.”

Damaris nodded miserably. “Is it that obvious?”

“Duh. The two of you are perfect for each other. He loves you too, doesn’t he?”

“He did. Before I blew it. He’s done with me, Jaclyn.” To her utter humiliation she began to cry again.

Jaclyn got up and disappeared down the hall. She came back with a box of tissues and handed it to her. “So you’re in love with him and he’s in love with you, yet the two of you broke up. Why?”

“Because I’m an idiot who can’t get over her past.” She talked, starting from the beginning, when Nate asked her to pretend to be dating him to make his grandmother happy to the bitter end when she’d broken up with him because he’d lied to her. “He manipulated me into falling in love with him. And he even admitted that’s what he set out to do.”

“Let me get this straight. He manipulated you by being a man you can count on to do anything for you, a man who loves you, a man who wanted to make his ninety-something-year-old grandmother happy, for Pete’s sake, a man who understands you and doesn’t want to change you? But you’re pissed off that he didn’t tell you he’s been in love with you forever? Because he thought—no, because he knew you’d freak out and cut him off if he had told you he loved you ages ago. Have I got that right?”

“You make me sound stupid when you say it like that.” She drank more wine and glared at her friend.

“I won’t point out the obvious.”

“Of all people you know how hard it is for me to trust a man enough to fall for him.”

“Damaris, no one can blame you for being gun-shy, but very few men are as bad as that creep was. Least of all Nate, who’s proved to you over and over that he’s a good guy who would never do anything to knowingly hurt you.”

“I told you I screwed up.”

“How bad are his injuries?”

“Broken arm, broken ribs, cuts and bruises. No concussion, thank God.”

“So, he felt terrible.”

“Yes, and his car was totaled.”

“Oh, no! That was such a sweet ride. That would be enough to depress anyone.”

“He loved it,” Damaris said glumly.

“What happened at the hospital?”

“I wasn’t sure he was even going to see me, but he did. He didn’t want me there. I asked him if I could do anything for him and he said, ‘Yeah. Go away.’”

Jaclyn laughed. “I’m sorry, but that sounds like something Marshall would say. In fact, remember when he sprained his ankle a few months ago? He was a complete ass until I threatened to take every boot he owned and make a bonfire of them if he didn’t get over himself.”

Damaris smiled at that, but then sobered. “What should I do, Jaclyn? I’ve never seen him be so cold to me.”

“He’s just been in a car wreck. What did you expect? He’s not only in pain from his broken bones but you can bet he’s also emotionally upset over his car. And your breakup.”

“I know. But I don’t think that’s all there is to it.” She was terribly afraid he hated her. She’d never have imagined Nate being so indifferent toward her. She’d messed up big-time.

\*

Three days after the accident, Travis tried to talk Nate out of seeing Iris, but he was adamant. Iris was his baby and he was damn well going to see if his car could be fixed or if she was a lost cause. Since he was still on painkillers he’d had to rely on someone to cart him around, not to mention, bring his grandma to see him. Rather than have Damaris bring Grandma, or worse, take him to see her, he’d asked Tobi. Nate knew Tobi, as well as Travis, thought he and Damaris should get back together

but he didn't feel up to explaining why that wasn't going to happen.

Grandma knew he and Damaris had broken up—hell, he'd told her the whole stupid story—but she pretended she'd forgotten. He was ninety-nine percent sure she hadn't, but she was ninety-two so it was possible. But not probable since otherwise she was as sharp as she'd ever been.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Where is she?” he asked Travis when his friend picked him up to take him to his car.

“We had her trailered to Levi’s garage.”

Travis Sullivan, Zack Bannister and Levi Chapman were all part owners of Devil’s Rock Airport. Travis had brought Nate in early on when they needed another pilot, so he’d gotten to know all of them pretty well over the years. When Levi had learned Nate had a classic Corvette, he wanted to restore he’d offered to let him keep it and work on it at his garage behind his house. Since Nate lived in an apartment he’d jumped at the chance.

Levi’s ‘garage’ was a thing of wonder. At least fifty cars were housed there, some on racks reaching to the ceiling. Levi’s home collection was heavy on sports cars, but he had other types as well. He didn’t even keep all of his cars at the garage, housing some of them on some land out in the country with a state-of-the-art alarm system for the warehouse. A self-made billionaire, Levi was an inventor who equipped his houses, garages and whatever else needed them with state-of-the-art electronics, most of them his own inventions.

So Nate was familiar with Levi’s workshop, which had everything you could possibly need for restoring classic cars. But from what little he’d gleaned, Iris was going to need a miracle. Levi was waiting for them when they got there.

“You gonna try to talk me out of seeing her?”

“Nope,” Levi said. “But be warned. It’s not pretty.”



Not pretty was the understatement of the century. Nate barely managed not to throw up. Okay, now he understood why he'd been told he was lucky to have only broken an arm and a couple of ribs.

His beautiful Iris was a mangled mess.

"You okay, Nate?" Levi asked.

"No. Shit." He thought of a lot more curse words he could say but this...disaster...was too much for words. "Shit," he repeated.

"It's not quite as bad as it looks at first glance," Levi said. Travis didn't say anything. He was probably struck dumb too.

"The only way it could look worse is if it was burned beyond recognition."

"Not really. The worst of the damage is to the front end and the windshield. The rear bumper is messed up but the passenger side is fine. Luckily you didn't roll it or you'd likely have been looking at total destruction."

Nate started to shrug and thought better of it. "Have you looked at the engine?"

Levi nodded. "It's in surprisingly good shape. You can fix this, Nate. It will just take time and money."

"Thanks. I appreciate you letting me use your garage, but I'm not sure how long it will take." Or even if he wanted to attempt to restore it. But then, now wasn't the best time to think about that. Especially since with a broken arm and broken ribs it would be hard to do anything about it. Still, he could start the search for parts.

"Why don't y'all come up to the house and we'll have some tea."

“Only if you or Dana didn’t make it,” Travis said.

Levi laughed. “Don’t worry. Muriel made it,” he said, referring to his housekeeper/cook/woman of all trades.

Neither Levi nor Dana cooked worth a damn, and that extended to making tea, Nate remembered.

As they walked to the house Travis said, “Let me know when you’re off the painkillers and I’ll take you to rent a car.”

“Why rent one?” Levi asked. “You can borrow one of mine.”

“Thanks, but you’re already doing enough letting me keep Iris here.” With his luck he’d wreck Levi’s car too.

“Okay, but let me know if you change your mind.”

“Thanks, but it’s not necessary.” Since the other driver had been at fault, eventually his insurance should pay Nate, but knowing insurance companies he wasn’t holding his breath.

He couldn’t drive, couldn’t fly, couldn’t do much to fix his car, and couldn’t see Damaris. Eventually he’d be able to do the first three things again, but seeing Damaris? He was shit out of luck on that front. It was her move, and if he knew Damaris, and he did, she was done with him. Game over.

And, he admitted, throwing her out of the ER when she came to see him after the accident had only made things worse. If possible.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the next month after Nate's accident Damaris only caught glimpses of him. She'd heard from Tobi that he was fixing up his car and was planning on being able to fly soon. Then one day she ran into him—literally—at Booze's when she'd gone there for takeout. In one hand she carried a sack filled with Styrofoam boxes, the other held a cardboard cup holder full of drinks. She wasn't paying attention as she left, and she walked right into him at the entrance. Damaris dropped the bag of food to rescue the drinks from hitting the floor. With his good arm Nate reached out to balance her. For a moment they'd just stared at each other.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

He let go of her arm the minute he knew who she was. Awkward. “Sorry,” she said.

“No problem.” He picked up the sack and handed it to her.

“Thanks. You look good. How are you doing?”

“Okay.”

She was getting used to Nate looking remote and inaccessible. His famous grin was nowhere in sight. No surprise since he wasn’t likely to grin at her anytime in the next, say, century.

“You?” he asked belatedly.

“Great,” she said, lying like a champ.

“Good. Well, see ya.”

Thoroughly depressed she watched him go. Nate might not be a cowboy, but he filled out a pair of jeans as well or better than any cowboy she knew.

Why had she thought it was a good idea to break up with him?

Jaclyn had asked her and several other people to lunch and sent Damaris to pick up food from Booze’s. She thought it was kind of weird but honestly she’d been glad for a break. Until she’d seen Nate and stewed about him all the way home. So when she walked into the farmhouse kitchen she wasn’t in the best of moods. “Food’s here,”

she shouted, setting everything on the island in the middle.

Jaclyn, her other sisters-in-law, Chantel and Ella, and her friend Hazel all came into the kitchen. There was a variety of food, from sandwiches to salads. Damaris made sure to grab her roast beef sandwich before someone else took it. Then she got some iced tea from the pitcher in the refrigerator. It took the women a while to sort out who got what but once they did they each grabbed their container of food and a drink and took them to the big kitchen table.

They ate for a bit without much conversation. Finally, Damaris put down her sandwich and asked, “Okay, Jaclyn. What’s this about?”

Her friend glanced toward Hazel, who shrugged. “It’s an intervention.”

Damaris frowned. No one in this group had a drug or alcohol problem. So what could... “No. Tell me you’re not—”

“You got it,” Ella—Chase’s wife and the ranch manager—said cheerfully. “We’re here for you.”

“Me? I don’t have a drug or alcohol problem. Or gambling or anything else that would require an intervention.”

“Oh, Damaris.” Chantel shook her head pityingly.

She turned to Hazel. “Are you a part of this bullshit?”

“Oh, honey, it was my idea.”

“What?” she screeched.

Hazel pointed her fork at Damaris. “I’m sick to death of seeing you moping around all because you’re too damn stubborn to admit you’re wrong.”

“Me too,” Jaclyn said. “You can’t let your past ruin your future any longer.”

“Too true,” Ella said. “I’ve been there and done that. When you find a guy who’s the one—”

“He’s not ‘the one,’” Damaris said. “At this point we’re not even friends.”

“Which is why we staged this intervention,” Chantel said. “You’re in love with Nate. Why can’t you admit it and make up with him?”

“Why? Because it was all a pretense. Which every one of you knows now.” Once she’d told Jaclyn the truth, she’d said she didn’t care if she told the rest of the family. Which she had. Hazel was the only one who had already known, but Damaris had told her it was no longer a secret. And this is what she got for telling them, who were all convinced she and Nate belonged together. An intervention!

“It may have started out that way, but it’s been clear for some time that you two are in love with each other. Why, Nate’s been crazy about you as long as I’ve known him,” Chantel said.

“Did Nate want to break up?” Ella asked.

“No,” she answered grudgingly. “He told me he loved me and that he had almost since we met, years ago.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Oh, my God!” Hazel exclaimed. “The man should be flogged!”

Damaris gave her a dirty look. “He lied to me. All this crap about his grandma was a ploy to make me fall in love with him. Or at least, to show me how good we are together.”

“Are you?” Chantel asked.

“What? Good together?” She started to snap out a rude answer but then she thought about it. Really thought about it. About all the things they’d done when they were simply friends. Riding, flying, hanging out. Watching movies—surprisingly they both liked many of the same ones. Playing cards. Kicking his ass at gin rummy, which she suspected he let her do. She thought about how comfortable she was with him. How they could finish each other’s sentences so much of the time. He understood her. He knew what made her tick.

Then she thought about the months since they’d been pretending to be together. Of course, she couldn’t think about that without thinking about the sex. Amazing sex. Soul-stirring sex. Making love. Not just sex but making love. Even thinking about it made her belly—and other parts—clench. Her stomach did somersaults. They fit together. They knew each other. Really knew each other. They—

“She’s thinking about the sex,” Hazel observed sotto voce. “See, now she’s blushing. I rest my case.”

No point denying it when it was obvious. “Sex isn’t the only thing to consider,” Damaris said primly.

Every one of the other women laughed. “No,” Chantel agreed. “But it sure as hell helps.”

“Definitely,” Jaclyn agreed, eyes sparkling.

“Fine,” Damaris said, laughing. “I’ll give you that sex is important.” Sobering, she added, “But so is being truthful.”

“Damaris, you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but what did Nate lie about?” Ella asked her.

Jaclyn looked at her. Your story, her expression said.

So she told them about Warner. Just the basics but enough for them to understand why she felt the way she did. “It was—he—oh, damn it, Nate lied by omission. Which is still a lie.”

“What did he omit to tell you?”

“Yes, Damaris,” Jaclyn said. “Tell them.”

After giving Jaclyn a dirty look, she said, “He’s been in love with me since we met. Which he didn’t tell me until recently. Some bullshit about me running if he’d told me the truth. He claims we wouldn’t even have become friends if he hadn’t backed off as soon as I friend-zoned him.”

“Is it bullshit?” Ella asked. “Or is he right? Would you have run?”

“Probably.” She shrugged. “Okay, yes.”

Chantel frowned. “So you’re equating Nate not telling you he was in love with you



with the man who lied to you about having two wives and a bunch of girlfriends?”

“It sounds stupid when you say it like that.”

“You said it, not me,” Jaclyn commented.

“Thanks a lot. I’m going riding.” She took her trash to the can in the kitchen.

“Apparently my intervention idea didn’t work,” Hazel said.

“I appreciate y’all wanting me to be happy. I really do. But I still don’t know what I should do.”

She opened the kitchen door and Jaclyn said, “While you’re riding ask yourself this question. Why are you trying so hard not to be with the man you love?”

\*

Riding her horse always made Damaris feel better. But it wasn’t working today. She took a well-trodden path, so she didn’t have to pay as close attention. She tried to let go and relax, but all she could think about was Nate. Damn it, she missed him. Missed him so much it was like having a big, empty hole where he used to be.

An intervention, for God’s sake. What were her friends thinking? Obviously she hadn’t been dealing with things as well as she believed. She thought about Jaclyn’s parting shot. Why are you trying so hard not to be with the man you love?

Why indeed? Had Nate ever lied to her about anything else? Other than this lie of omission, not that she knew of. She remembered getting so frustrated with him when she set him up with someone and he’d go out with her and then...nothing. And he never said anything beyond, ‘yes, she was nice’ or ‘yes, she was pretty.’ Well, now

she knew why. He'd been in love with another woman. Her.

Cinnamon shied suddenly and Damaris went flying, landing on her butt and back. She couldn't breathe. She knew she'd had the air knocked out of her but for a moment she almost panicked. Finally, she drew in a deep breath. Cursing herself for being a fool, she lay on the ground, trying to take stock of her injuries. Whatever had frightened Cinnamon must have disappeared. Possibly a snake if she had to guess. Or, just as likely, it could be nothing. There was no way to tell. Her horse didn't spook easily but there were a few things that bothered her, snakes being one of them. Cinnamon, being well trained, not to mention Damaris never having let go of the reins, stood by patiently waiting for Damaris to get her shit together and remount.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She decided she hadn't hurt anything major and other than a few scrapes and an injury to her pride, she'd be fine. But when she tried to get up she discovered she'd rolled her ankle too. Her weak ankle that she'd injured over and over again. It hurt like hell to put any weight on it, but she was fairly sure it was sprained, not broken. Not that it mattered since it was her left ankle, which would make mounting really difficult. She called Cinnamon, who ambled closer to her.

She talked soothingly to Cinnamon before attempting to mount. "What's wrong with you, sweetheart? Shying for no reason. It's not like you to jump at nothing." Cinnamon snorted. "I understand, though. You were afraid you'd get hurt. So you...ran away."

Just like she had when Nate admitted he loved her. Like she would have if Nate had told her ages ago that he was in love with her. He'd been exactly right about that. Furthermore, she'd known it. But knowing and admitting were two different things.

Fear had motivated Cinnamon. Wasn't that really why she'd broken up with Nate? Fear of getting hurt? Not because he hadn't told her but because he'd finally admitted that he loved her, and she'd done exactly what Nate had known she'd do. Run away.

She managed to mount by putting her right foot in the stirrup and hauling herself up to lie across the saddle, then take her right foot out of the stirrup to swing it over Cinnamon's back. Her horse thought she was weird but not enough to balk at it. Besides, it wasn't anything she hadn't done before.

She rode slowly back to the barn. Even going as slow as possible, her foot hurt like hell. She couldn't prop it up on the saddle since that would hurt even more, but

having it hang down was excruciating. Served her right for not paying closer attention.

Marshall was waiting as she rode up. “Where’ve you been? You missed meeting the new buyer.”

“Sorry. I had an accident. Cinnamon shied and threw me.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Only my ankle and my pride. Help me get off, will you?”

“The left ankle again, huh.”

“You got it.”

With Marshall’s help, she managed to dismount without doing too much more damage to her injured foot. He helped her into Ella’s office in the barn, guiding her to a chair.

“What happened?” Ella asked, getting up.

“She got thrown. Sprained her ankle.”

“It happens to all of us,” Ella said consolingly.

“I know, but I should have been paying attention.”

“You need to ice it,” Marshall said in his best big brother mode. “That boot needs to come off, too.”

She saw the glance he and Ella exchanged. “Oh, no. You are not cutting up my favorite boots.”

“They’re all your favorite,” Marshall pointed out. “You should have taken it off before it swelled. It’s not going to come off easily. It’s going to hurt like hell to cut it off, much less pull on it.”

“Gee, thanks for the useless advice.”

Ella had gone to her desk and retrieved a pocketknife while Marshall lectured Damaris. Knowing her brother, it was futile to argue. “Fine, but I’m not watching.” She turned her head away and braced herself but it hurt even more than she’d been prepared for. Even cursing Marshall didn’t help.

He simply laughed and said, “Now, now. That’s not very ladylike.”

Damaris told him where he could shove it.

“I think she’s pretty inventive,” Ella commented. “There were several I haven’t heard before. I’ll have to ask Chase if he knows them.”

“He should,” Damaris retorted. “I learned them from Cole so I know Chase must have heard them too.”

“Oh, that explains it,” Ella said. “Oil field cursing is different from cowboy—and cowgirl—cursing.”

Damaris responded with a particularly innovative curse, making Ella and Marshall laugh harder.

Marshall tried to convince her to let him take her to get the ankle x-rayed but she

refused. “I’ll go tomorrow if it’s worse, but I don’t think it’s broken.”

Ella helped her to the cottage while Marshall took care of Cinnamon. Once Damaris was seated on the couch with her foot up and an ice bag on her ankle, Ella dug out the crutches and boot Damaris had kept from other injuries.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“I’ll ask Ruthie to send down some dinner for you. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Can you stay and talk a minute?”

“Sure.” She sat in the chair by the couch.

“I’m not really sure how to ask this tactfully, so I’m just going to come out and say it. What made you trust Chase not to cheat on you? I mean, you knew he was a player before he met you, but even that picture that appeared on the internet of him kissing that woman didn’t make you distrust him.”

Ella didn’t appear surprised or offended by the question. “I could tell by his body language that he wasn’t into the kiss. He looked like he wanted to get away. But honestly, that was never our problem. I had trouble with his profession—the rodeo and all that it meant. Chase was always clear that he loved the rodeo. He never implied he would give it up.”

“Until he did,” Damaris said.

Ella laughed. “Yes, but not right away. He had to come around to it. And I couldn’t ask him. It had to be his decision. He’s happy now breeding bucking horses, thank God. Does that help?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure anything will.”

“You need to decide if you’re willing to take the risk and allow yourself to love again

or if you're too afraid to chance it."

"That makes me sound like a wimp."

Ella simply smiled.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Nate had graduated to a soft cast and a sling, which he didn't use, a week before. His physical therapy was going well. It was possible he'd be flying again before too long. In the meantime, he was helping out at the airport and working on his car. Levi had been right that Iris wasn't in as bad a shape as he'd feared. Still bad, but not insurmountable problems.

Insurmountable problems, like he had in his relationship with Damaris. He trudged up the stairs to his apartment and realized Damaris was sitting beside his door. With a pair of crutches beside her. For a minute he thought he'd hallucinated her, but he wouldn't have hallucinated crutches. She looked up at him when he reached her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. What happened to your foot?"

She frowned. "I sprained my ankle."

"You walked up all these stairs with a sprained ankle? Why?"

"I didn't walk. I hopped and used my crutches. I wanted to see you. Can we talk? Inside?"

"Okay. Can I help you up?"



“Please.” She held out her hands and he took them, unsurprised when she managed to get up without hurting her ankle. Damaris was very coordinated, which made him wonder how she’d sprained her ankle.

She followed him in and sat on his couch, setting her crutches beside her.

“Want a drink? Water or beer is all I’ve got.”

“No, I’m good.”

“What did you want to talk about?” He tried his best to squash the hope that had overwhelmed him when he first saw her. Best not to get his hopes up before he even knew why she was there.

“You and me.”

“I thought there was no you and me. Last I heard you didn’t even want to be friends.”

“I was wrong.”

“About?”

“Everything.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“That’s a pretty wide range. Want to elaborate?”

“My sisters-in-law and Hazel staged an intervention.”

“I don’t understand. You don’t have a drug or alcohol problem.”

“It was an intervention to show me how stupid I was being about the two of us. Not that they said that exactly but that’s what it came down to.”

“I’m having a hard time imagining that. Did it work?”

She shrugged. “Kind of.”

“What happened after the intervention?”

“I went riding. Cinnamon threw me and that’s when I sprained my ankle. But never mind that. I came here to ask you if we could try again. I’ve missed you like crazy, Nate.”

He wanted to say hell yes, and grab her and kiss her, but he also wanted to know what brought about this change. Why had she suddenly decided that his ‘lie’ didn’t matter? Had the ‘intervention’ somehow changed her mind?

“What about the lie?”

“Here’s the thing. I lied to you too.”

“How do you mean?”

“When we met and started going out and then I told you we couldn’t be more than friends,” she said.

“Yeah. You said we weren’t suited for each other but you still wanted to be friends.”

“Did you believe me?”

“You were pretty adamant about it.”

“You were surprised, though.”

“Yes. Especially since we almost made love the night before you told me. Gotta tell you, my ego took a severe dive,” he said.

“That night we almost had sex. That’s all it would have been. But I put the brakes on. You’d have moved on almost immediately if we’d had sex.”

He didn’t deny it. Maybe he would have. But maybe not. “We’ll never know because you wouldn’t give us a chance.”

“You terrified me.”

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“You, terrified?” He laughed long and hard. “Fat chance. I’ve never seen you be afraid of anything.”

If he only knew. “It’s true. You were nice and funny and charming and hot—”

“Hold on. You thought I was hot?”

She narrowed her eyes and gave him a dirty look. “Of course. I knew I could fall for you. And if I had it would have been almost as bad as what happened with Warner. You were a player then, Nate. You know you were.”

He scowled. “Yeah, I was a player but I damn sure wasn’t a bigamist with God knows how many girlfriends.”

“I never thought you were. It wasn’t so much that I had no faith in you. I lost faith in myself. In my ability to make the right decision. Especially about love. I’d made such a huge mistake, I couldn’t bear to do it again.”

“I’ll admit that after you made it clear that you were off-limits other than as a friend, I slept with a lot of women, trying to forget you. There were even a few I might have fallen for. If I hadn’t been in love with you. But I was, so it didn’t work. Eventually, I quit. Sleeping with them anyway. Besides that, I could never be as bad as that bastard who hurt you.”

“I know.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Wait a minute. You’re telling me that you friend-zoned me because you were afraid you’d—”

“Yes. I was afraid I’d fall for you. And it wasn’t until Cinnamon threw me that I realized I was afraid of something that might never happen.”

“What does this have to do with Cinnamon?” He looked totally lost.

“She shied at something that wasn’t there. I mean, it might have been a snake but I never saw one and she calmed down immediately after she threw me, so I don’t think it was. She was terrified of what might have been. So was I.” She sighed. “And that was why I kept pushing you to date other women. Not consciously. But subconsciously I was waiting for you to prove me right. That I couldn’t trust myself to choose the right man for me.”

“So...you lied.” His lips curved into a grin. “Well, well, look who’s lying now.” He sang the words to the tune of the Journey song.

“Hate to tell you but the title of that song is ‘Who’s Crying Now.’”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. And I’m not lying now. That’s the point.”

“I’m a little lost. What is the point?”

“I made a mistake. I should never have broken up with you. When I finally figured

out that your lie of omission wasn't any worse than my lie of omission, I knew I'd used it as an excuse. Because I was scared. Which, let me tell you, infuriated me. I hate feeling like a coward."

"I'm still lost."

"I love you, damn it!"

Instead of sweeping her into his arms and telling her he loved her too, he crossed his arms over his chest and smiled, that wicked curve of his lips that always turned her on. "Say it again."

She rolled her eyes. "I love you. I have for a long time. Not at first, of course. But the longer we knew each other the more I wondered why I was so set on you being only a friend. Whenever I sent you out on a date with another woman I prayed you wouldn't get along. Or that you'd find something about her that turned you off. Or that she'd decide she wasn't interested, but that never happened, damn it."

"Not true. There were some who blew me off. Nicely, but still."

"Some?"

"A few. Hard to believe, I know, but I'm apparently not irresistible to all women." He wore his most modest expression.

"You're making this as hard as possible for me."

"Seems only fair. The past few weeks since we broke up have been hard as hell for me."

"There's the small matter of your wreck. That also had something to do with how

you've been."

"True, but you breaking us up was worse."

"I'm sorry. I told you, I made a mistake." She drew in a deep breath. "I was a chicken. An emotional chicken. I was so afraid I would do the wrong thing that I turned my back on you. I wouldn't let myself trust you, no matter how many times you proved to me that you were trustworthy. You are the best thing that ever happened to me, Nate. I love you and I want us to get back together."

He didn't say anything, he just stood there looking at her. She had no idea what he was thinking.

"How much does your foot hurt?"

Confused she asked, "My foot?"

"Yeah, your sprained ankle. How much does it hurt?"

She shrugged. "It's not excruciating. It's okay as long as I don't put weight on it or jar it."

"Good." He scooped her up off the couch and started for the bedroom.

"You're going to hurt your arm. What are you doing?"

"My arm is fine. I'm taking most of the weight on my right arm. As for what I'm doing," he stopped and kissed her. "I'm taking you to my bedroom where I plan to make mad, passionate love to you for two or three days, or until we get hungry. Whichever comes first."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “That sounds like a good plan. But you haven’t said the magic words.”

He stopped beside the bed and carefully laid her on it. “I love you,” he said, looking down at her. “So much.”

“Make love to me, Nate.”

“My pleasure.”

“And mine.”

They helped each other undress, pausing to kiss after removing each item of clothing. Finally, when they were both naked, Nate got up and walked to his dresser where he picked something up. When he came back to bed he held out his grandma’s diamond, now set in a ring.

“Will you marry me, Damaris? For real this time.”

“Oh, Nate.” Her heart swelled. Her eyes teared up.

“Don’t cry. Oh, shit, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

She laughed amidst her tears. “They’re happy tears. I would love to marry you.” She held out her left hand and he slipped the ring on, then kissed her hand.

“And now,” he said, and kissed her mouth. “Now we celebrate.”



\*

Fittingly, the first person they told was Grandma K. The following day Nate called her and asked if he could come over. Wanting to surprise her, he didn't tell her he was bringing Damaris with him.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? She probably hates me now."

"She doesn't hate you. If she did you'd have known it when you told her about my accident."

Maybe, but Grandma K had been so worried about Nate that Damaris doubted she had thought about anything else. She was still nervous.

They pulled up to the small, beige brick house. There were flowers in front that she knew Nate had helped her plant. Or rather, had planted at Grandma K's direction. Another example of what kind of person he was.

Nate gave her a crutch and took her other hand in his. She'd worn the boot brace so she could make do with one crutch. "Stop worrying. Grandma loves you." He rang the doorbell then used his key. "I told her I'd let myself in so she wouldn't need to get up," he told Damaris.

They walked into the living room where Grandma sat on the couch brushing Murphy who sat on the floor beside her. She glanced up as they came in. Her eyes widened as she looked at the two of them and their joined hands. "Damaris? Nate? Does this mean—" Her voice quavered.

"We're back together. We're getting married," Nate said. "For real."

"Oh!" She dropped the brush, put her hand over her heart and burst into tears.

Murphy put his head in her lap and looked at her soulfully.

“Don’t cry,” Damaris said, hobbling across the room as fast as she could, and flinging away her crutch to drop down on her knees in front of her. “Please don’t cry.” She glared at Nate. “You shouldn’t have sprung it on her like that.”

“Hell,” Nate said, crossing the room to sit beside her. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d be happy.”

Grandma K reached for a tissue and blotted her eyes. “You foolish children. These are happy tears.”

“Thank God for that,” Nate said.

“It’s really true?” she asked Damaris, giving her her hands.

“Yes, ma’am. We love each other and we’re getting married. Soon.”

She scooted over to let Damaris sit beside her. “What happened to your foot?”

“Cinnamon threw me—” she said smiling at Nate “—and knocked some sense into me.”

Grandma K laughed and turned to Nate. “This is the best present you’ve ever given me.”

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Damaris couldn't imagine a more perfect day for a wedding. She had never thought about her 'perfect wedding.' In fact, until she and Nate got together, she'd never thought of her own wedding at all. She'd been a tomboy, for Pete's sake. She'd always thought more about horses than weddings.

Their families and close friends were all gathered for the ceremony and basically the whole town of Whiskey River and part of Last Stand were invited to the reception. Luckily, the Harwood Inn, south of town, was a great venue with plenty of room for both the ceremony and the reception. Damaris knew this because her brother Gabe and his wife Chantel had gotten married there.

Damaris's mother Josie, her sister Jedidiah, Nate's sister, Kali, her friend Hazel, and her sisters-in-law were all in the bride's room—set aside for the bride and her wedding party to get ready. Jaclyn was her matron of honor and the only person standing up for her. Nate had asked his brother Liam. Otherwise they'd have had to ask far too many people to be in the wedding, so they'd decided on one attendant each.

"You don't look nervous," her sister Jedidiah said.

"I'm not. I'm happy." She'd never been more sure that she was doing the right thing in marrying Nate.

Jedidiah handed her a makeup brush. "You need a little blush on this cheek."

“When did you become so knowledgeable about makeup? I thought Jaclyn was picky, but she runs a makeup company. What’s your excuse?”

“I’m a woman of many talents,” Jedidiah said loftily.

She said it jokingly, but Damaris knew it to be true. Her little sister was a computer genius, but in no way did she look like a nerd. All dressed up, Jedidiah looked beautiful, which, while it didn’t surprise her, was unusual. Normally, when she was at the ranch Jedidiah wore jeans, an old T-shirt, no makeup, and her hair curled wildly down past her shoulders. She could never be unattractive, but dressed like that she was merely pretty. When she dressed up she was stunning. Tonight she wore a long dress in an emerald green that matched her eyes, her makeup was perfect, making her eyes mysterious, her lips glistened with red lipstick, and her long, curly auburn hair had been tamed into submission in a French braid.

“I miss you,” Damaris said. “I wish you could come home more often.”

“About that,” Jedidiah said.

“What?”

“I’m thinking about moving back to Whiskey River.”

Damaris simply stared at her. “You hate Whiskey River.”

“No, I don’t. I just needed to get away. To be on my own and see other places.”

“You’ve been away for ten years. You’ve been in California for the last three. I thought you were happy there.”

“Not lately. I wanted to ‘see the world.’ Well, I’ve seen it and it’s not nearly as great

as it seemed at first.”

Before Damaris could ask what she meant, Jaclyn said, “It’s almost time to go.”

Damaris’s wedding dress was a beautiful white lace floor-length design with capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline that dipped low in the front. It had a diamond-shaped illusion back, which, unsurprisingly, Damaris had never heard of. But it meant the back was open with lace framing the diamond. The train was a long, lacy tulle. She’d left her hair down since that was the way Nate liked it best. She’d fallen in love with the dress at first sight, which had surprised everyone except her mother. They’d all thought she’d want something more modern and not quite so feminine but Damaris figured if she couldn’t be feminine and lacy on her wedding day, when could she be?

Standing with her father at the back of the library at the Harwood Inn, Damaris realized she was nervous. Apparently her dad was too. Her arm was tucked into the crook of Mike’s elbow, and he kept squeezing it to his side and not saying a word. But then she looked at Nate, and the expression on his face made all her nerves disappear. He looked like he was being given the world. Their eyes locked and they smiled at each other and she and her father walked down the aisle. Nate looked breathtakingly handsome in a charcoal-gray suit and striped tie. A tie she knew would come off the minute the ceremony was over.

Her father gave Nate her hand, kissed her cheek and told her he loved her. Nate smiled at her. “I’ve always known you were beautiful, but tonight you’re absolutely gorgeous. Are you ready to get married?”

“I am. Are you?”

“Totally. Let’s do this.”

They turned to the minister. “Dearly beloved...” he began.

When it came time to say their vows they each recited their own. Damaris went first. “Nate, I can’t imagine anyone who fits with me better than you. You’re my best friend. I can talk to you about anything, and I have. You understand me, you know how much I love my horses, and you’ve even gotten to be a pretty good hand with them. I promise to love you, cherish you, and be true to you for the rest of our lives.”

Then Nate said, “Damaris, I knew the first time I saw you that you were the woman I wanted to marry. It took me a lot longer to convince you that I was the man you wanted to marry. I would have waited forever, but I’m really happy you didn’t make me. You’re the perfect woman for me and I’m the luckiest man to be able to call you my wife. I promise to love you, cherish you, and be true to you for the rest of our lives.”

After the ceremony there were hugs and kisses all around. Eventually the guests left for the reception, which was in the big remodeled barn where large events were held. Damaris and Nate told them they’d be there shortly.

“I thought they’d never leave,” Nate said.

Damaris laughed. “Why? Did you have ideas?”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:56 am*

“Oh, yeah,” he said, his eyes sparkling with pleasure.

He pulled her into his arms and looked down at her. “I love you, Damaris.” He kissed her.

“I love you too, Nate,” she said when they ended the kiss.

He kissed her again and she sighed and snuggled against him. “We should probably go,” she said after a while.

“Do we have to?”

She laughed. “Down, Romeo. We have the rest of our lives to make love.”

“True. But you can’t blame me for wanting to get started as soon as possible.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She kissed him, took his hand, and together they started the rest of their lives.

The End