



Losses and Gains

Excerpt

Book 2 of the Cowboy Fever Series

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Chapter 1

"*"It was love, love, love at first shock,"*" Janaya Gaines crooned under her breath even after the recording crew dismissed her, saying thank you, they'd gotten what they needed for the radio commercial, and the check was in her hand. She gathered her coat and oversized sunflower bag and put on her wool fisherman's cap before heading out of the studio. When the words of the ridiculous song she'd just sung over and over went around in her head once more, she absorbed them for the first time. *Love at first shock? I'm singing a love song about some energy drink. Can my life stink much worse?*

Janaya grimaced as she looked at the check once more, conceding that, stupid as the gig had been, she could pay her rent this month with her earnings. That had to count for something, didn't it?

Maybe.

Yet she couldn't shake the heavy sensation that she'd sunk to an all-time low. Fifteen years ago, she'd come to Nashville in the hopes of getting a recording contract and becoming a famous country music artist. Most months, she scored gigs through word of mouth for radio and TV ads and commercials and made a decent enough living—at least enough to support the nightclub gigs that paid almost nothing but made her feel at least

worthwhile in her singing endeavors.

Shaking her head, Janaya pushed the check into the back pocket of her jeans, then slipped into her black wool coat. Retrieving her tote bag once more, she started down the hall toward the elevator that would take her to an exit. A thought floated into her head that'd been coming to her often lately. *This isn't the life I envisioned for myself. Singing for the love of energy drinks is most certainly not a personal goal, but, even then, I'm not living my dream despite the fact that I get a couple singing gigs a month. All I wanted in the world was to get married, have kids and settle down on a patch of land that I could call my own. I wanted to be a ranch hand's wife. Lance Olsen's... I wasn't the one who wanted to come to Nashville and make it big. No, that was Colleen. My big sister—two years older than me—wanted to follow in the footsteps of Gran as a country-western singer, although Gran only made it as a back-up singer. Yet Colleen married the cowboy, my Lance, settled down and had kids. How ironic that our dreams traded places.*

Her face warm, Janaya turned the corner that led to the elevator and a man came into view. A man who seemed familiar to her with his shoulder-length, loose, silky brown hair and a closely-trimmed moustache and goatee. He was tall and muscular and wore an expression of utter concentration. *Lance? Has Lance finally forgiven me and come to take me home?*

Janaya was so stunned, her bag slipped from her hand and the things inside it exploded onto the floor in every direction. Shocked at her own clumsiness, she got down on her hands and knees to gather her possessions. The gorgeous guy appeared in front of her in an instant, his designer cowboy boots in her line of sight the whole time. Then he was crouching in front of her, helping her gather her items. "Let me help you, darlin'."

Helplessly, her gaze met his and his grin was all charm. There was no doubt that this cowboy knock-off was cute, very cute, but he wasn't Lance Olsen. Up close, he was nothing like him.

When he handed her the last tube of lipstick and her bag was re-packed, she murmured, "Thanks."

"My pleasure, honey." He held out his hand. "Hank."

"Janaya," she told him as they shook.

"Makin' an album?"

Smiling, she shook her head. "Commercial jingle."

"Yeah. Me, too."

She offered him another awkward smile. "Well, thanks again for your help."

"Not a problem, darlin'. But if you really wanna thank me, I'd love to get your number, Janaya."

There was no good way of getting out of it, and he was the cutest guy she'd met in a long while. She rooted in her bag for a scrap of paper, but, when she turned over the first thing she pulled out to make sure it was

nothing important, she saw a photograph of Lance and Colleen and their young son Gavin. How on earth had that gotten unearthed from the deepest, darkest corner of her tote? Shaking her head, she reached into her bag again and found something else to write on. With a friendly grin, Hank handed her a pen. She jotted her number down for him. While she handed the scrap to him with the shiny silver writing instrument, she knew she wouldn't answer even if he did call.

Saying he would be late and planned to give her a buzz later, he hurried past her. Janaya sighed. Again, she made her way toward the elevator and then the line of doors to the outside. Once on the sidewalk, her fingers closed over the photo and she brought it out once more to see the beautiful face of her only sister, her nemesis. The face filled her vision and her memory. *I never had a chance. I was destined to live in your shadow...because you wouldn't have had it any other way, sis.*

Colleen had been gone four years now, taken in a fire that consumed most of the Triple Aces Ranch, taken along with the life of Colleen and Lance's little Gavin. Despite the tragedy, Janaya had realized all those years ago that if she'd gone home permanently, she still would have resented all Colleen had stolen from her.

Not wanting to live her life filled with grudges, she'd left home at the age of eighteen and stayed away, returning only for a brief moment when her parents had told her about her sister's death. After she'd left, she'd been afraid to go back for longer than that in and out jaunt for the funeral. Afraid there was still nothing there for her. *But maybe now it's time. Time to start living my dream instead of Colleen's. Time to make amends for the past.*

Janaya emerged from the recessed alcove of doors in front of the recording studio into the cold sunshine of the early February morning and threaded her way through other pedestrians until she got to the bus stop. She waited, boarded the bus, and rode to her apartment across the city wondering *why*. Why she stayed here, far from home, in a place she wasn't even crazy about living in. Unlike her grandmother, the backup singer of a country-western artist who'd enjoyed major success, Janaya wasn't cut out for life in the big city, supporting someone else's dream. *What's keeping me here? An okay, nothing-special career that barely keeps food on the table, partially doing what I love with singing. A string of dates that I can never get serious about. A nice apartment, stylish clothes, good friends in my neighbors on either side, Byron and Alyssa. But, at the end of the day, what's keeping me here?*

Absolutely nothing.

Once off the bus, Janaya walked a couple blocks to her apartment building, where she let herself in, got her mail, and headed up the cavernous stairwell to her place. Her mind served up another helping of unwilling realization. She'd chosen to try to become a famous singer because it was the one dream Colleen had always claimed to want but had never bothered

trying to pursue. As a teenager, Colleen had never wanted to settle down. She'd wanted to go out and live an exciting life anywhere but the Texas Panhandle, anywhere but on a dirty, dusty ranch. Yet, in the end, the two sisters had exchanged dreams. *And here I am. But I haven't changed in all this time.*

Janaya unlocked the door of her apartment and Byron Aldrich's door opened beside hers. "How'd it go?" he asked, looking picture perfect in fashionable clothes, every hair on his head and clean-shaven face in place.

"I got paid. How about you?"

Byron was a freelance makeup artist and pretty much lived his life the same way she did—job to job.

"They asked me to come back tomorrow."

Janaya smiled, stepping inside her apartment and leaving the door open for him to follow. "Then you must have done well." She dropped her bag on a chair, then hung up her coat and hat on the tree near the door.

While her best friend had started his career as a model—metrosexual male models did surprisingly well these days—he'd grown disillusioned with the instability of such a life. Janaya couldn't see that a freelance makeup artist did much better in that regard, but Byron seemed much happier in the years since he'd switched careers.

As if reading each other's minds, Byron started filling the teapot with water while she took down bright orange mugs and popped in chai teabags.

"Alyssa back from her job yet?" Janaya asked of their modeling neighbor.

Byron shook his head. He'd opened a bag of apple cinnamon rice cakes and offered her one. Janaya took it, not particularly enjoying the pitifully dry snack, though she polished it off in a minute. In that time, the tea kettle whistled and she poured hot water into each mug. Byron picked one up, then she followed him, his movements sheer grace, into her sparse living room.

She'd never been able to stand the slightest clutter and so she'd refrained from doing much by way of decorating her apartment. The minimal living room furniture options were mostly bare and had been dusted just the day before. Often she wondered, if her family ever came here, what they would think. Her apartment barely looked lived in. She owned so few possessions. She could pick up and leave here within a day or two, if she really wanted to. Would they think that was her intention? Should she do more with her home?

Instead of choosing one of the inexpensive, functional chairs, she and Byron sat down together on the wide, padded window seat before the immense window that dominated her small, bright apartment. Sunlight streamed over them, negating the chill of the day. "I've been thinking, Byron."

Mildly interested, he looked at her with green-flecked hazel eyes,

blowing on his tea. "About?"

"Going home."

"Home?" he asked in surprise, his eyes opening wider. He lowered his mug. "As in Texas?"

She nodded. Was the idea crazy? She supposed her best friend might think so. She'd gone out of her way to make it clear to her friends that she'd left home permanently. Neither Byron nor Alyssa had been surprised when she went home for her sister and nephew's funeral—and returned the very next day.

"For good?" Byron asked, now much more interested.

She shook her head, yet said, "Maybe. I'm not sure. I think it might be good for me to go home."

"*Good* for you? You've spoken of it as if it was a form of hell, Jana."

Janaya shrugged, taking a small sip of her tea before answering.

"Colleen never made it easy for me. She spent her life manipulating people to get them to do what she wanted. She did that all my life. There was no chance that I would have a normal life there, knowing she'd forever be trying to destroy everything I built for myself. But she was the only bad part...besides losing Lance. Now she's gone, and the reasons I've stayed away all this time don't seem valid anymore. Maybe now it's time that I went back and made a life for myself there. Reconciled with those I hurt. Made *my* dreams come true." The only way to do that was to ask Lance to forgive her. Could she do that without telling him everything? *Maybe it's also time to tell him the truth.* That idea shocked her because she'd never considered it before. She wasn't sure why, but while Colleen was alive that had never been a possibility. Now...

Pulling her out of her thoughts, Byron stared at her, looking almost too pretty with his almond-shaped eyes and thick eyelashes. She loved him to pieces, but she secretly thought only Texas could make men that were...well, *men. Through and through masculine.* In her limited experience, she could come to no other conclusion. Where she came from, growing up on a ranch, there were no shades of masculinity—certainly little confusion over sexual identity. Based on his somewhat feminine appearance and beauty, Bryon had been told all his life that he was gay, and people assumed that he must be, passing off his own denials on the subject. He'd been told he was so often, he'd actually come to believe it. The modeling lifestyle had contributed to his own understanding that he didn't have a choice about his sexual identity. Although he'd been in many relationships with men, whenever one of them had tried to push him sexually, he'd ended the association. Over a year ago, Janaya had been the one to suggest to him that maybe he *wasn't* gay. How could he be? She saw the way he looked at their neighbor Alyssa, how tongue-tied he got in her presence. Even the way he talked about her was telling—as if she was some celestial being that didn't belong in the earthly realms with the rest of the mere humans.

At Janaya's suggestion, for the first time, he'd seriously considered that the reason he couldn't progress in his relationships was because the unions hadn't felt right to him—he'd realized he did have a choice, regardless of how he looked and what everyone mistakenly assumed about him because of it. He hadn't dated anyone—male or female—since he'd decided he was thoroughly heterosexual, but he and Janaya often teased each other about being spinster virgins.

In many ways, he and Janaya were twins concerning their shyness in relationships. She'd been told she was supposed to date, get herself in a committed relationship, enjoy her life to the fullest. Whatever that meant. But none of the men she'd ever dated had made her desire anything more than friendship—a mild one at that. None of them were "the one". *None of them are Lance Olsen.*

"I don't like the idea of you leaving, Jana," Byron said softly, setting his cup aside and leaning toward her to hug her. "I love you. I don't want you to go."

Janaya juggled her teacup with the comfortable embrace. Bryon was a natural-born hugger. "I love you, too. We'll always be friends, honey. I promise..."

He shook his head as he backed away an inch. "No. I mean, *I love you.*"

Janaya's mouth fell open as she started to say something, then realized why he was stressing the sentiment they'd exchanged hundreds of times. "You said...well, that you were afraid women wouldn't want to go out with you. Because they would assume you were gay. And, once they found out you thought you *were* once upon a time, they *really* wouldn't want to be with you."

He backed against the wall once more, his expression tense. "You think I feel this way for you just because you're safe for me, because only you accept me for who and what I am?"

"I'm not the only woman who would do that." *Even still, I could never feel about Byron the way I did about Lance. That has everything and nothing to do with Bryon. But how can I make him see that—without hurting his feelings?*

Byron grinned, but his face was tight with vulnerability. "You always say that the best person to fall in love with is your best friend."

Janaya nodded. "That's true. But..."

She closed her eyes, remembering what it was like to be with someone who consumed every thought, every dream. Someone who you touched, and the connection was always electric. *Lance and I were always talking, but we were also always joined in some physical way. Holding hands, fingers entwining, brushing sensitive flesh with our lips and fingertips, kissing endlessly...* Janaya had no doubt she would have wondered back then what friendship had to do with love. She and Lance had been together like that—completely obsessed with each, like breathing air—air neither of them could

take in when they were apart. At least that was how it had felt to her all the time. Only when they were together could they breathe and be whole. Their minds and hearts and bodies had been woven seamlessly together. But friendship? Their souls were one. Friendship didn't begin to describe that kind of whole-being, whole-life melding. No, she wouldn't have described their relationship that way then, nor could she imagine it being a state they could ever share again. *Not after all that came between us.*

Janaya sighed, looking at her friend once more. "It's not the way it should be in love with us, sweetie. When we touch...we're friends. You know that. You must. You don't feel anything electrifying between us, do you, Bryon? Honestly?"

He wasn't meeting her eyes while he drank his tea and looked out over the bustling city.

Setting down her mug, she leaned toward him and put her hand on his cheek. "Byron, you feel electricity with a woman. You feel it with *Alyssa*. Not me."

He seemed surprised by her words. Did he actually think anyone could miss his reaction to their gorgeous neighbor whenever she was within a ten foot radius?

Janaya couldn't help grinning. "Don't tell me you don't, honey. You're all but *scared* of her, you're so attracted to her. It's not the same with her as with me. Admit it, I'm the one person in the world you feel comfortable with, comfortable enough to be *bored*...and that isn't really an ideal thing when it comes to wild, savage true love."

"Wild, savage true love?" Bryon grimaced, obviously unable to help a soft, reverent chuckle. "Is that what true love is like? Wild savagery?"

"True love is...restless, impatient, life or death every moment you're in a room together and every single second you're not."

Her friend's expression filled with awe and agony. He shook his head, looking defeated. "It's not possible. She's...she's out of my league. She's a goddess. And she dates all those..."

Janaya pushed back her old fears, when Colleen had been the otherworldly beauty and she was nothing more than a pale shadow in her radiant light. Her lips twisted. "Bad boys? I know for a fact *Alyssa's* sick of dating bad boys. She might be interested in having something in common with a man she dates—just for once. She might appreciate having a guy tell her the truth for once, instead of what he thinks she wants to hear. She can talk to you, Byron. You must have noticed that. I think, if you gave her a chance, gave *yourself* even half of one, you might be surprised. You might find your secret dreams coming true."

Enlightenment glowed in Byron's eyes. "Now I know what's going on here. You're not planning to leave just because you've been thinking about home lately."

"Don't even suggest it," Janaya warned. Sometimes dumping everything

you thought and felt onto another person for countless years wasn't such a good thing. Bryon knew her backwards and forward. If anyone could guess why she'd been thinking about home so much lately, it was him. She had nowhere to hide from his knowing gaze.

"It's been four years," her friend offered quietly instead of calling her out with the omniscient glee he could have easily shamed her with. "Maybe you've got a chance with him now. Maybe he's waiting for you."

Janaya's heart leapt at the wish she hadn't allowed herself to hope for, let alone fully form in her own mind. She'd thought only of the fact that she was wasting her life, not exactly unhappy here but certainly unfulfilled. More than once, she'd wondered if she was grieving the past and being in this place, living her life hand to mouth, not exactly unhappy, was a poor way of coping. *I'm not recovering from what Colleen did to drive me away so she could get the man I love into her waiting, manipulative arms. Their age difference hadn't matter to her any more than it had to him, and what was a two year gap? Colleen never seemed much older than we were. The only way I'll ever be able to recover from what happened to me, to us—Lance and I—is to go home. But will the pain only get worse if I do? Even if it does...isn't the chance of happiness worth the risk?*

She couldn't answer her question quickly or certainly. But something whispered fearfully inside her that being with Lance again was worth any danger her heart had to face.

* * * *

"I still can't believe you're doing this," Alyssa said while Janaya finished packing the little she owned in the apartment she'd given up. For once, she was glad she wasn't a pack rat and had done little to enhance the décor of her apartment by amassing meaningless little possessions. Right now, she didn't want anything to stop her from this course, even if she ultimately regretted it. She'd booked a flight yesterday, deliberately not making it round-trip. She hadn't done anything beyond that—hadn't called her parents or even made arrangements for lodging once she got to Texas. Like she had fifteen years ago, she was going and she didn't want to look back.

Her friend sat back on the bed, watching her fill her luggage with mostly clothes. Even in such a casual, unposed position, Alyssa looked like a goddess with her waist-length dark hair spread out behind her on the orange bedspread. "He must be really cute...or you really were solid-gone in love with him all those years ago. What did you say that town was called?"

"Fever. Fever, Texas."

"And you've got cowboy fever, darlin'."

Grinning, Janaya shook her head. Unlike experiences with other beautiful women, she'd never felt intimidated by her friend's beauty. Alyssa was just too cute with adorable dimples and an ultra-friendly expression that

prevented anyone from seeing her as a rival. "Look, can you do something for me? Byron thinks he's really going to be lost without me. Can you watch out for him? At least for a couple weeks after I'm gone? Until he adjusts to the change?"

Obviously seeing the worry in her face, Alyssa sat up a little, as if she felt the weight of the responsibility Janaya was imparting on her. "Sure. Of course. Anything."

Janaya folded a sweater with utmost care. "He's a great guy. All he needs is the right woman to take a chance on him."

Alyssa raised one, prettily arched brow. "You think that whole "straight" thing will take?"

"I'm a hundred percent sure of it. Despite what everyone cruelly assumes, he's never truly done anything in his life to warrant the gay stereotype. He's as much of a virgin as I am. So...spend time with him, okay? Make sure he doesn't think he's lost all his friends."

"Virgin? Really? He's a virgin?"

"Is that really so hard to believe?"

Alyssa thought about it for barely a second before she murmured, "No. I guess not. You two are really anomalies in the world, aren't you? But I like it. It's really sweet. No problem. I'll take care of Byron. You ready to go?"

Closing her suitcase, Janaya nodded. "Thanks again for agreeing to take me to the airport."

"Letting you leave the city for good in a taxi would have been cold." Alyssa stood up and looked around the tiny bedroom that didn't appear much different than it had before, save for some empty hangers in the closet. "Besides, it's on my way to a modeling job."

Janaya giggled. "Is that all?"

Alyssa shrugged. "And it could be the last time I ever see you."

The sorrow was bittersweet. She'd already been hugged and kissed a hundred times by Byron in the last couple days, and he'd insisted he couldn't be there to see her off—he would lose it completely. She and Alyssa cried and hugged hard, making promises to e-mail and call and see each other soon. They parted with smiles at the airport.

Janaya couldn't deny her own relief and excitement once her plane took off and she was winging her way toward the only home she'd ever claimed inside her heart. But then the worries started. What was she going to do? She didn't have a job, a place to live, the slightest plan. Oh, she knew her parents would let her stay with them for a while, but sooner rather than later they would be asking her the very same question she was asking herself now: What was she going to do? *They'll assume I'm home for a reason—one I'm not even willing to admit to myself.*

If not for lack of sleep the night before, she might have worried through the whole flight. Instead, she slept and woke only when the pilot announced they would be arriving at the Lubbock airport soon. Then she quickly called

her parents with her cell phone.

"Janaya, is that you, sweetheart?" her mother asked in surprise.

"It's me, Mom. I'm...I'm coming home. My plane lands in a few minutes."

Instead of sounding happy or even shocked, her mother demanded in a distressed tone, "Home? Oh, sweetheart, why didn't you let us know?"

Confused, Janaya swallowed through an ever thickening throat. "I thought I'd let it be a surprise." *One that I couldn't talk myself out of because the deed's done. No turning back now.*

"No, that's not what I mean, Janaya. I mean, *we're* leaving. Tonight. We're packing. We'll be in Paris for a few weeks. Your timing is horrible. You should have told us you were coming. How long have you known?"

"I..." Janaya closed her eyes. She should have realized. Since they'd both retired from Triple Aces, her parents traveled often. Her mother had come into a considerable inheritance when Gran died and left her everything. They considered getting out of their dinky little hometown a privilege they'd never had before when they were younger and perpetually strapped for cash.

Janaya flushed at her own stupidity. If she believed in things like following what was "meant to be", she might have taken the fact that she'd given up her apartment and life in Nashville only to come home when her family was clearing out, albeit temporarily, as a definite sign that her decision to come home was a mistake. She'd hoped everything would fall in line, reassuring her that she was doing the right thing.

"Look, Mom, you and Dad should go. I've already rented a car..." *Lie.* "I'll see you when you get home. I'm going to stay in Fever a little longer than usual." *Another lie because I don't want anyone to tell me I promised I would stay if I decide I don't want to.* "So I'll see you when you get back. And we'll see each other before your flight takes off tonight. It's no problem." *No problem, except Fever is a small town, and, once someone gets wind of the news that I came home when my parents aren't here, they'll all wonder and speculate and the rumors will fly fast and furious.*

Her mother didn't sound sure of anything, but Janaya continued to console and assure her even when she wanted to, once in her life, ask her parents to do something for *her*. All her life, their attitude had been: *Anything for Colleen. Janaya? She'll be fine. She can take care of herself.*

Forty-five minutes later, Janaya loaded all she owned into the back of a rental car and then she got behind the steering wheel and spent more time than she knew she should have fixing her face and hair. Outside of her hometown, she never worried about being attractive. She always got noticed wherever she went in Nashville, where no one had ever seen Colleen Gaines-Olsen, and men made frequent passes at her. But here, where she'd grown up and would have had to compete with her perfect big sister, she'd never been able to make the grade. She'd given up long before the competition could ensue. She didn't have Colleen's long, wildfire blond hair with natural

reddish streaks and green eyes, like their mother. She didn't have curves that made all the boys stand up and take notice. She had plain, vanilla-blond hair, blue eyes and a figure that men rarely paid attention to unless she was trying to get noticed—a truly rare occurrence.

She pulled at her sweater, wondering if she shouldn't have worn something better than old denim and her lucky orange knit turtleneck. She'd planned to go to her parents' house—why dress better? *But if I don't go to Triple Aces right away, I won't go at all. I'll chicken out because there are too many reasons why I shouldn't go.*

Caught up in memories of growing up with the kids of the other ranch hands in the area—Lance, Jared Chapman, Alana Hamilton, Shawn Jacobs, Ken Abrams, Alex Lynch, and Gina Calhoun, Mac and Ki Mackenzie, Josh and Angela Lewis, Maggie May, and Karla Sanford—she burned through the miles from the airport to the Fever, Texas ranch, arriving just before lunchtime. The pickups were pulling in for the afternoon meal just as she took a space in the turnaround.

She barely recognized anything, and that wasn't surprising. The fire had forced them to rebuild from scratch. All the buildings—the horse barn, the silos and other buildings were new. The main house was a world different—huge enough to hold all the men who owned and worked there cooperatively now. But she recognized the boys immediately, and she was flushed with warmth when she got out and they came whooping and hollering their welcome to her, recognizing her on sight.

"What are you doing back here, Janie?" Shawn demanded with a grin spreading clear across his handsome face. "Lord, you're a sight for sore eyes. Tell me you're not married, sweet thing."

Janaya mock-glared at him. "And why would you want me to be single?"

"Guess," Alex muttered, and they all laughed.

"You're staying for lunch, Jana," Ken informed her.

"I didn't come here expecting an invitation," she insisted, under an umbrella of the muscular arms of two of the guys she'd grown up with, "but I'd love to. I forgot how much I missed this place."

Before she could finish her sentence, another pickup pulled up. Turning, Janaya tensed from head to toe. Jared and Lance got out of the truck, and, up until the moment Lance recognized her, he seemed about ready to welcome her. He obviously hadn't realized who their visitor was, and there was no reason he should have. But she didn't expect his expression to become withdrawn, dead-cold and dismissive at realizing who she was.

"I'm gonna get lunch and head back out to the field to doctor them cattle," he said, looking away from her and stomping into the house without so much as a "hey" of greeting.

For some reason, the boys didn't comment on his rudeness—she expected they understood better than even she did that Lance was furious at her, the way she'd suspected during the funeral she'd made a very brief

appearance at four years ago. The why of his anger could be a combination of so many things: He was furious that she'd stayed away so long. That she'd never met his son, her own nephew. That she'd ducked out of the funeral before her sister and Gavin were even in the ground. How could he understand?

In the minutes that followed Lance's abrupt snubbing and disappearance, the guys crowded around her near the trucks and tried to explain his behavior toward her. Their explanations only made her feel worse when Lance came out with a thermos and a couple sandwiches. He got back in the truck and pulled out once more without looking at any of them or speaking another word.

Tears slammed into Janaya's eyes. *I came back here hoping Lance would see me differently, maybe even forgive me. Dear God, hoping that he might want to pick up where we left off before Colleen found out about us. Hah! What an idiot I am. I should have realized Colleen poisoned him against me completely in the years they were married. I actually thought she'd changed after she had her first and only child because of the picture of her family and those weird letters she sent me that I barely read after the first surprising one. I couldn't then. The hurt was always too fresh. I threw them away—though not the photograph—and I regretted it after she died because I let myself believe she might have changed with motherhood. But apparently not.*

Jared put an arm around her and led her into the warm house. "How long you stayin', honey?" he asked.

She swallowed, not sure what to say, especially when she couldn't hide the tears she brushed away. "I'm...I'm not sure."

Jared's craggy face broke into a grin. "Well, hell, stay with us. We got plenty of room. Your folks're headin' to *Paree*, ain't they? You don't wanna be alone and you're always welcome with all of us."

Stay here? And endure Lance's scorn for another second? I don't think so.

Shawn pulled her into his arms and hugged her. Janaya had to fight bursting into tears. "If you can't stay, at least say you can come to the circle barbeque tomorrow night. We're hosting."

Even when she was little, all the ranches in the area—Triple Aces, the Sanford, Lewis and May Ranches got together as often as they could to help each other out with ranch work and especially to keep the doldrums of winter from seeping in and making them insanely lonely and isolated. This time of year, the weekly barbeques were in the various barns on each ranch—provided that the weather cooperated enough to allow them to travel, that was.

She couldn't say no to the barbeque even when she knew there was no way she would take up occupancy here for even a night. Not when Lance, who seemed to hate her guts, lived and slept only a few doors down.

Janaya took a deep breath and forced herself to back off and grin at all of them. She shoved her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Sure. I can come tomorrow night. But I really can't stay...can't live here, even for a little while. I could never trust Shawn to stay in his own bedroom." They all laughed, and Shawn didn't even try to deny his intentions were in perfect alignment with her teasing.

When she sat at the massive farmhouse table with a couple of the men while the rest made a hot lunch, she couldn't help thinking about her glimpse of Lance before he'd burned out of the turnaround in a blaze of fury. He was bigger, more muscular, *even more gorgeous*, than he'd been at eighteen. She hadn't believed it was possible because he'd been the most perfect male specimen alive to her back then. *I wish I didn't find him attractive anymore. This would be so much easier if seeing him didn't affect me at all. But it does. Dear Lord, is he still grieving Colleen and Gavin? After four years?*

Janaya couldn't deny that his life had become little more than the ranch and his friends. Though he'd spoken almost nothing, she could see that he'd lost the softer side of himself, maybe even the half he'd believed made him human. But then she thought that the life she'd built for herself wasn't much better than his. What did she have to show for herself? *Mostly losses. Few gains. I no longer even have foolish hopes and dreams to keep me going. Colleen took everything from me, and now I'll never know if she did it because she truly loved Lance or if, just like everything else all our lives, it'd just been a competition to her that she had to win.*