

Storm

by Kate Palmer

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Chapter 1

The last steer shot ahead of my midnight horse and through the gate. Ninety-eight. Eleven short of the full herd. My jaw clenched as I tried not to dwell on the significance of that number. The recent cattle rustling in the area weighed heavily on my mind. I needed every steer to sell at auction on Friday or I couldn't make the ranch payment due next month. Not to mention the four steers I'd already taken payment on but hadn't yet delivered to my neighbor, Dak. Surely, I had just missed them in the pre-dawn round up. If Conner had bothered to show up to work this morning, I wouldn't have missed them at all. I refused to lose this ranch over eleven lost steers. "I'm going out to find them," I called to Boots as he latched the gate.

"Best wait a piece, Storm." He nodded his head toward the barn. "Someone's coming."

How did he do that? Weren't seventy-year-olds supposed to lose their hearing? I only heard the incessant lowing of the cattle, but when I checked the road, a tan, king cab bounced to a full stop near the old red barn. Taggart. "It's about time he brought Conner." This sharing of ranch hands was not working out. "Taggart can't tell time." I wished, not for the first time, that

I could afford to pay Conner to be my full-time ranch hand. Haggling over his hours with Taggert never improved my mood.

“Looks like he’s alone.” Boots’ liver spotted hand scrubbed at the white stubble on his cheeks and chin.

Sure enough, only Taggert’s lanky body emerged from the truck. I clucked to Mystic and guided her toward Taggert. He’d cut his hair again. This time he’d cut the sides close to his scalp and left the middle longer and combed forward except at the hairline where he’d spiked it up with what had to be . . . gel. Taggert used gel? He was turning into a bit of a city boy. That probably didn’t go over very well with his older brothers. I didn’t bother to dismount, just steered Mystic close to Taggert. “You got Conner working on your place this morning? He’s scheduled here.”

Taggert pulled a sugar cube from his camo jacket and fed it to Mystic while he stroked her black mane. “He’s not here?” Taggert’s long face squinted into the mid-morning sun as he looked up at me perched atop Mystic. “I’ve been trying his phone all morning with no luck. Thought he might’ve left it here.”

“We spent all his hours yesterday mending a fence. Maybe he left it in the shop with the fencing supplies. You’re welcome to check.” I pointed into the barn behind Taggert. “I need to find some missing steers.”

“How many?”

“A few.”

Boots coughed.

“Several.” I glared at Boots.

“So seven or eight?” Taggert pressed.

“Something like that.”

“More?”

“Look, I don’t want to get worried over nothing. Check the shop for Conner’s phone. I’ve got to get going.”

“You’re missing eleven head just like Jim Jones aren’t you?”

Boots nodded.

“No need to worry others.” I eyed Boots.

“You going to report it?” Taggert asked.

“I’m going back out to look for them. Maybe a fence is down and they’ve wandered into another grazing piece or even into one of Dak’s pastures.” I gestured toward my neighbor’s property.

“Eleven missing steers. Seems a little suspicious. Seen a strange truck or trailer around?”

“I’m not jumping to any conclusions.”

“But a gooseneck trailer holds—”

“Eleven cows. I know.” Why couldn’t he let this go?

“Jim Jones, Z—”

“And Zeke Parker, and Robert Jorgensen have each lost eleven head to suspected cattle rustlers. I know Taggert. I still have to look.”

“When you don’t find them, you gonna report it?”

“If I don’t.” I refused to consider what was probably inevitable. Talk wasted time. “Go inside the barn, and I’ll call Conner’s phone.” I pulled out my cell and punched Conner’s number as Taggert disappeared inside.

Conner’s number rang and then went to voice mail. “Hey, Conner, are you sick? It’s not like you to miss an early morning round up. Give me a call.”

Taggert emerged from the barn just as I tucked my phone

away.

“Nothing.” He climbed back into his truck. “Let me know what you find out about your steers,” Taggert said before he started the engine and drove away.

Boots cleared his throat. “Missing one or two steers in the round up is one thing. Even three or four, but eleven? You’ve worked this ranch long enough to know . . .” Boots let his voice trail off.

“You’re right, Boots. I just can’t let Taggert think he’s right.”

“Even when he is?”

“He’s always poking his nose around here wanting to know just how everything is going.”

“Or how a particular red-head is doing anyway.”

I rolled my eyes. “If he were interested, he would have done something years ago when we were both a lot younger.”

“Maybe he tried. You’ve never been the easiest person to get close to.” Boots’ eyes twinkled mischievously.

“I’m independent. If he can’t handle that, he can’t handle the rest of me.”

“A man wants to be needed, trusted.”

“Then he should do something worthy of being trusted, not try and steal my ranch hand’s hours every week. Can you get the water going to the corral? Daylight’s burning while we talk about things we can’t change.” I turned Mystic toward the open pasture.

“Hold up a minute, Storm. You’ve got another visitor.”

I paused to listen. In the distance, I could hear an engine. Time may have worn down Boots’ body, but it seemed to have improved his hearing. Slowly, I turned Mystic again.

Dak’s sun-washed rust truck bounced to a stop. No trailer.

He wasn't here for his steers. Maybe I could avoid telling him about my missing livestock. But why after a year of living on the ranch next door did he pick today to visit? Did he finally need a babysitter for his two girls? I hoped he had at least fed them breakfast before he brought them over. An eight and ten-year-old wouldn't go for my standard whole wheat toast topped with peanut butter and cottage cheese would they? I didn't have time to play homemaker today. At least the girls could ride—I had to find those missing steers. I dismounted and loosely tied Mystic's reins to the top corral rail.

Dak exited his truck, but no girls followed him. I checked my watch. Ten o'clock. What could possibly bring him here this early? Boots and I had made good time bringing the cows down even without Conner's help. Where was that boy? He'd never missed work—been late a few times, but that was bound to happen working for two different ranches. Still, he would have called. I brought my focus back to Dak's approaching figure. He walked steadily, but something about his movements seemed reluctant. As he closed the distance to the corral, I detected no trace of a smile on the widower's face. That was common enough. However, the conflict broadcasting from his eyes coupled with the rubbing—no wringing—of his hands made my insides skittish as a spring calf.

Dak stopped in front of me, removed his hat, smoothed down his light chestnut curls, and replaced the cap. He swallowed. "Lyle—Sherriff couldn't get ahold of you."

"Been rounding up steers from the outlying pastures for auction."

Dak's pale-blue eyes flitted to the corral and back again. "Looks like you found them. There's no way to sugar-coat this . . . so I'm just going to come out and say it. Conner," he

blinked hard and swallowed, “he died in a car accident early this morning.”

The back of my throat burned. I instinctively reached out for the nearest fence post as Boots stepped beside me. Regret at having been annoyed with Conner this morning filled me. Didn't I know he'd never miss work unless something was wrong? “He was on his way to work. For me.”

“Then he was driving the wrong direction. Lyle said Conner was headed into town about eight o' clock this morning.” Dak looked at the steer-filled corral. “You must have started at four or five to be back by now.” He shook his head. “He was going somewhere else.”

“He never called to say he wouldn't make it in this morning. That's not like Conner. He's young, but he's resp—” I caught myself, “was responsible.” That familiar tingling in my nose started. The tears weren't far off. “Thanks for letting me know in person.” My voice sounded husky.

“Do his parents know?” Boots asked.

Dak nodded. “And Taggert. I stopped him on my way in here.” Dak reached out and briefly placed a hand on my shoulder. “I'm sorry, Storm. I can help out some around the ranch until . . .” He let his voice trail off. “I'd have to bring my girls along, but they've become pretty good riders in the last year. Let me know.”

I set my jaw and swallowed back the tears as I considered where Conner had been going. Maybe he'd overslept this morning. He'd been working some long hours for Taggert. “It doesn't make any sense. If Conner wasn't coming to work for me, he would have been going to work for Taggert. But Taggert's ranch is further out than mine. What was he doing?” Eighteen was too young to die. Suddenly, another worry consumed me. “Was anyone else hurt?”

Dak shook his head, and Boots walked him back to his truck. A few words were said between them, but nothing I could make out. Then the engine growled to life and a trail of dust followed Dak down the dirt road.

I surveyed the cattle milling about in the corral. First eleven missing steers—eleven thousand dollars—and now Conner was dead. I blinked hard to keep the tears at bay. Conner was so full of life and eager to please, not to mention a hard worker. His eight-year-old sister adored him. A weight pressed against my chest. If only he'd come to work this morning. Where had he been going? My fingertips repeatedly traced my right eyebrow as I began walking. Something wasn't right. Conner wouldn't intentionally miss a round up. He knew I needed him.

I scanned the three hundred thousand acres of mountain ranch before me. Only an occasional fence line and gate interrupted the grassy pastures now carrying a yellow, autumn hue. Waves of pasture stretched out between mountains now dotted with fall colors. How could I possibly do all the work required to run this ranch? Boots couldn't put in a full day's work anymore. That's why I'd assumed ownership four years ago. Could I even find another ranch hand who would take orders from a twenty-seven year old woman? One thing was certain, I wouldn't be able to pay anyone if I didn't find those steers. I untied the reins and prepared to mount Mystic just as Boots returned.

He looked at me silently, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"I have to find those steers," I said.

He nodded.

Good old Boots. He always knew when to give me some space.

I swung my leg over Mystic and spurred her into a gallop.

Connor and she had galloped this very meadow a few days earlier. My vision blurred, but I didn't rein in Mystic. The wind stretched my long ponytail out behind me and did a fair job of wiping the tears from my face as well. When my tears subsided, I slowed Mystic to a canter while I puzzled out just how to express my condolences to Connor's family. Making them a casserole was out. Making them any type of food was out. What could I do for these people who had lost so much? Sending flowers seemed too trite and didn't express my shared feelings of loss over losing Connor so suddenly. My offering needed to be personal. There had to be something an art major turned rancher could do.

The sun was high overhead when I reached the mountain pasture Boots and I had collected the herd from this morning. I'd seen no sign of the missing steers along the way. I reined Mystic toward the fence line. First, I'd check it all the way around.

An hour and a half later, I determined that my fence was sound. There were no gaps and the far gate was closed and latched just like the one on this side. I pressed both hands to the back of my neck. How had cattle rustlers even known about this mountain pasture?

The hill sat low and invisible wedged between the two main mountains easily viewed from the ranch home. I clasped my fingers behind my neck and squeezed my eyes shut. To trailer the cattle out of here, rustlers would have had to use my road. Surely I would have heard a truck and trailer bounce down the dirt road. Unless they'd herded them up and over the mountain, but that would land them between Dak's and Taggart's ranches. I dragged rough palms from the back of my neck across my cheeks and clasped them in front of my mouth where I gnawed on my index finger's knuckle. I had to ride the two adjacent pastures to be sure my steers weren't there.

A growling protest twisted my stomach reminding me that my four a.m. toast with peanut butter and cottage cheese wasn't meant to last ten hours. Searching my pockets for a granola bar, I came up with a piece of gum. It was something anyway. Peppermint flavor flooded my mouth as I spurred Mystic into a lope.

Three hours later a dull ache had replaced my stomach's low growling, and I'd not seen one steer. Resigned to my loss, I turned Mystic toward home. Once home, I rubbed down Mystic and gave her bay coat a good brushing before turning her loose in the south pasture. I picked up my saddle and gear and headed to the one place I could always sort things out.

Something about the smell of leather and the way the sun streamed through the one wall of rough cut planks in the tack room offered me comfort. Maybe it was how crowded the room felt with all the saddles perched on stands and the bridles and reins hanging along two walls. I arranged the blanket on its rack to provide maximum airflow. Mystic had earned her keep in sweat today. I hefted the saddle over the waiting rack and hung the bridle and reins. Eleven steers. I exhaled a long breath and backed myself into the corner then sank down to the dusty floor. My fingertips smoothed my right eyebrow again and again trying to iron out my eleven thousand dollar problem.

Boots found me huddled in the corner of the tack room just like I knew he would. He'd found me here the day I'd realized my father had left me here for good—not just until I'd recovered from surgery like he'd told me.

“No luck?” Boots asked then continued without waiting for an answer. “Been reviewing the loan papers.” The setting sun streamed through the tack room walls. Boots' stubbly face lay in half shadow so I couldn't read his expression. “You could apply for

an extension.”

I let my head fall back into the corner of the barn. “I’ll call Evan first thing in the morning. He’ll probably want to inspect the place as collateral for a loan. None of the machinery is debt free so he’ll want to see our water rights.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll file a missing steer report tomorrow—or whatever term they use for this situation. The insurance will only cover half of what each steer is worth. I don’t have any leeway. I needed every steer to sell at auction to make the payment.” I rubbed my eyes. “Any word of when Conner’s funeral will be?”

“Saturday. His parents want his horse, Bo to lead the hearse into the cemetery—just a hint of a cowboy funeral. Nothing too overdone.”

Now I knew just how to help the family. “Think I’ll stop by early that day.”

“Takin’ a casserole?” Boots’ eyes sparkled, and he didn’t even try to hide his smirk.

“You makin’ it?”

“I ought to if’n you want them to eat it.”

My stomach complained against the measly piece of toast I’d eaten today. “Careful there, Boots.” I gripped a small piece of leather that had worn off the end of a saddles’ cinch strap.

“I’m only statin’ the facts ma’am.”

I let the leather fly. It struck Boots’ thigh and fell to the tack room floor as my stomach twisted and rumbled with hunger.

“Watch it,” Boots teased, “or I won’t share any of the supper I cooked.”

“You’re just lucky I’m starving.” I pushed myself up and brushed the dust from my backside.

“You’re tough—no question there, but you’re not the type to beat up on an old man.”

“What? You’re not afraid of me?”

“Only your cooking.”

“Enough already! I’m not taking a casserole or any other type of food to Conner’s family.”

“Smart girl.”