

STORM CHASER



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Summary: When a fire forces her family to turn their home into a guest ranch, aspiring horse trainer Jessica finds herself working once again with her favorite horse, Storm Chaser, to tame the wild filly for snobbish, spoiled Ariel, Storm Chaser's future owner.

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*To Brandon, in hopes that you'll soon
be working on that great book idea.
You've got the talent. Just do it!*

ONE

Jessie, get down!” Thirteen-year-old Jessica Warner ducked behind the gate and tried to make herself as small as possible as her father drove the herd of horses toward the pen. She knew better than to stand out there like a warning flag flopping in the wind. If the new horses saw her, they would swerve off the path and refuse to enter the capture pen.

The pounding of hooves grew to a thunderous roar as the herd approached the gate. Jessica could feel the vibration under her feet. She pushed her long, dark hair from her eyes and peered through the boards. Screams of “Yah, yah!” echoed from the men driving the horses forward.

It was her job to slam the gate closed once the horses were inside. Her heart galloped in her chest and she took a deep breath, praying she’d get the door closed before any of the horses circled the pen and tried to run back out.

Jessica could see her older brother Duncan and his two friends from the nearby reservation, Gator and Wyatt Lightfoot, riding their horses into positions at the sides of the herd.

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They waved their hats to keep the young quarter horses moving toward the pen.

From where she crouched, Jessica saw mostly bays—with their shiny brown coats and black manes and tails—and bright red chestnuts. There were also a couple of grays, a blue roan, and the most beautiful black-and-white paint she'd ever seen.

The horses were three and four years old, and had been running on high mountain pasture on the Northern Nevada Reservation for the last several years. They'd been weaned and handled at six months of age, but left wild ever since.

Wild Hawk Ranch, which belonged to Jessica's family, bought fifteen horses each summer from the Paiute Reservation, and broke them to sell to local ranchers and rodeo competitors. Duncan and the Lightfoot boys did most of the work, and Jessica watched them every chance she got. Someday she hoped to be as good as they were at training horses.

Jessica knew she could do it, if only they'd give her a chance. She loved her father and brother, but for the last couple of years, whenever she'd asked to help with the training, they'd waved her off, saying she was still too young. But Duncan had been helping their father since he was eleven. It wasn't fair. She considered herself plenty old enough to train horses. Maybe her family and the Lightfoot boys didn't know it yet, but *this* was going to be her year.

Every muscle in Jessica's body tensed as the herd bore down upon the holding corral. She could see the wide-flared nostrils of the lead horses, their sides heaving, tired from their headlong run across the mountain. She put her hands

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on the gate and kept a low profile, hardly daring to breathe as the first quarter horse entered the pen.

The surprised cries of several horses rang out when they realized they were trapped. The blue roan in the lead circled around, looking for a way out. The dust they churned beneath their powerful hooves rose so thickly Jessica had to squint to see. When the last horse crossed the threshold she pushed the gate with all her might, slamming it closed just as the roan galloped near.

“Good job, Jess!” Duncan yelled above the clamor of frightened whinnies and pounding hooves.

Gator, the seventeen-year-old Lightfoot boy, gave Jessica a thumbs-up. Wyatt, the younger brother, smiled shyly at her as he led his golden palomino gelding over to the water trough.

Jessica felt her cheeks warm. The handsome Paiute boy with the shiny black hair and laughing eyes was fifteen, her brother’s age. She’d grown up with Gator and Wyatt and thought of them as family. But lately, whenever Wyatt smiled at her, she got a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. She looked away quickly, turning her attention to the horses—especially the black-and-white filly.

Mr. Warner stepped down off his horse and patted Jessica on the back. “You did good, girl. I couldn’t have done a better job myself.”

Jessica beamed at the words of praise. “I can do more,” she said, crossing her fingers for luck. “I’m old enough to help out with the breaking now, Dad. I’ve watched you guys train horses for years. I want to learn and help out this year.”

Mr. Warner rubbed the stubble on his chin and gave his

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daughter an appraising look. “Jess, I’m just not sure if you’re ready yet, honey. It’s a dangerous job working with these wild youngsters. You could get hurt.”

Jessica’s heart fell to the desert sand at her feet. She sucked in a big gulp of warm air, feeling the backs of her eyes sting. *Great.* All she needed was to cry in front of her dad and the boys. That would just prove her father’s point.

“But Duncan started helping four years ago.” she said, taking another deep breath, willing herself not to cry.

From the corner of her eye, she could see the boys looking at the ground and scuffing their boots, clearly feeling uncomfortable witnessing her dilemma. She crossed her arms and looked up at her father, staring him straight in the eye. “I can do it. I know I can.”

Her father reached out and put his big hand on her head. Jessica frowned. Having her father treat her like a little kid in front of the boys was almost worse than having him say no.

“Give me a few days to think about this, Jess, okay?” her father said. “For now, go on up to the house and see if your mother needs any help. I’ve got to get these horses settled in and fed.”

Jessica turned and walked to the house, her back ramrod stiff.

“See ya, Jessie,” Wyatt called after her, but Jessica didn’t trust herself to speak. She waved her hand in the air and continued toward the house.

She found her mother in the laundry room, folding towels. “Do you need some help, Mom?”

Mrs. Warner shook her head and smiled. “No, thanks. I

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can get these.” She nodded toward the living room. “I know you’re dying to call Marybeth and tell her about the new horses, so go ahead.”

Jessica hesitated in the doorway. “Mom, do you think I could help Dad and the boys train the horses this year?”

Her mother stared at her a moment, sizing her up. Then she nodded. “I think so, Jess, but you know the decision is up to your father. Horse breaking is his department.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Jessica ran out of the room, but her mother called her back. Jessica poked her head around the door and got pelted with a fluffy washcloth.

“Better wash your face before Wyatt sees you looking like a crow in a mud bath,” Mrs. Warner teased.

“Mom!” Jessica protested. “I don’t care what Wyatt thinks about *anything!*” As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she knew they were untrue. Okay, maybe she did care...but not that much.

She quickly washed her face and then picked up the phone to call her friend Marybeth, who lived a half-mile down the road at Thunder Mountain Ranch. Marybeth was three years younger and could be a little annoying sometimes, but she was the only girl close to Jessica’s age who lived nearby.

Jessica had a few friends who lived in the smaller towns on the other side of the valley, but she only saw them at school. She didn’t hear much from them in the summer. Marybeth got under her skin sometimes, but one thing was for sure: they both loved horses!

Jessica dialed her number but kept getting a busy signal.

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That usually meant Marybeth or one of her brothers was hogging the computer. Their family had an old dial-up account just like the Warners did. She hung up the phone and turned on own her computer to send Marybeth an e-mail.

The open window allowed a breeze to drift through the warm house. It was the beginning of June. School had been out for a few days, and the heat was already beginning.

She began typing her message, breathing in the sweet scent of high desert sagebrush. Then a sudden rumbling noise caught her attention. She paused with her hands over the keyboard, listening to the sound of a vehicle making its way down Wild Hawk Ranch's long gravel driveway.

Jessica brushed her hair over her shoulder and leaned forward to peek out of the family room window. She frowned at the fancy SUV with the large decal on the door bumping up the road. Her father would not be pleased.

She dropped the curtain back into place and returned to the computer, squinting her green eyes as she quickly finished her e-mail. A car door slammed in the driveway just as Jessica hit Send. She had more to tell Marybeth, but at the moment, the prospect of watching her father do battle with yet another travel agent seemed more exciting.

She shut down the computer and ran out the side door to the large poplar tree that grew in the middle of the lawn.

Shep, their black-and-white Border collie, rushed from the barn, barking at the stranger. A moment later Mr. Warner walked through the stable door. He stretched his tall lanky body and ran a calloused hand through his short sandy hair, scowling as he walked forward to greet the unwelcome visitor.

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Jessica dropped to her knees, busying herself with pulling cheat grass from the patch of pink flowers that circled the tree. She didn't want to just stand around and stare. Her mother would scold her for being rude if she got caught. The May rains had made the weeds grow just as plentifully as the flowers, and pulling weeds gave her a good reason to be close enough to eavesdrop.

She plucked a dandelion and watched the familiar scene unfold. A lady in a well-tailored business suit got out of the car and walked forward with her hand extended. Being a gentleman, her father shook it, but that's where the courtesy ended. As usual, the travel agent offered her father a deal on using Wild Hawk Ranch as a guest ranch for city-folk vacationers—or dudes, as they liked to call them out here in the country. And, as usual, her father offered the travel agent an immediate escort back to her vehicle.

Jessica rocked on her heels, tossing a clump of cheat grass over her shoulder as she watched the well-dressed woman drive off. She wouldn't mind having guests around the ranch. It was so lonely here with only her brother and Marybeth to keep her company.

Duncan—whom she fondly called “Dunce” on occasion—with his quiet personality, didn't make a good companion. Trying to get him to talk was like waiting for lightning to strike the same spot twice—it rarely happened. Marybeth dropped by for visits every week, but her company got old fast. Sometimes it seemed like she'd never go home.

Jessica stood and brushed the dirt from her knees as she watched the vehicle disappear down the road. Her father

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turned to her with hands on hips and gave her a knowing stare.

“You heard?” Her father slapped his cowboy hat on the leg of his faded jeans and cued the Border collie to sit.

Jessica bobbed her head and kicked at the dirt beneath her tennis shoes. She knew what her father would say next. The words were always the same.

“This is our home.” Mr. Warner waved an arm toward the old two-story brick house, the large wooden barn, and the scattering of bunkhouses and out buildings. “I’m not going to have a bunch of strangers roaming over my property, getting into things that don’t belong to them.” He paused, smoothing the mustache that ran across his upper lip and down to his chin. “Especially if they’re city folk. I don’t cotton much to people who don’t know about animals or working the land.”

Jessica nodded and returned to the house to help her mother with the evening meal. She knew her father would never give in, but it was still nice to dream about having guests. It would be fun having somebody else to hang out with and go riding with over the fields and mountains. Sometimes Duncan went with her. But Jessica’s chestnut horse, Rusty, was really old, and Duncan’s young mount liked to race the wind. She might as well be riding by herself with Duncan so far ahead of her.

“Why the long face, Jess?” Mrs. Warner placed a pan of homemade bread dough in the large oven as she eyed her daughter curiously. She wiped her hands on her apron and blew a lock of reddish hair off her forehead. “Come on, out with it,” she said with a smile.

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Jessica pulled a chair up to the large counter that stood in the middle of the kitchen and began snapping the pile of string beans that lay on the cutting board. “We just had another visit from a travel agent.”

Mrs. Warner took the chair next to her daughter and reached for a handful of beans. “And what did your father say? Let me guess.”

Jessica grinned. “Well, he was more polite to this one, probably because she was a woman, but he said the same thing he always does.” Jessica deepened her voice and did a perfect imitation of her father.

Mrs. Warner laughed. “You really shouldn’t poke fun at your dad like that, honey. You know he wants what’s best for us.”

Jessica snapped a bean into three sections, tossing them into the strainer. “What do you think, Mom? What if we turned Wild Hawk into a guest ranch?”

Mrs. Warner looked down at the counter, busying her hands with the beans. “I think it might be a good thing if we did it on a limited basis. I’ve had an agent or two catch me when your father wasn’t home. They talk a good game, and they gave me a lot of information on what it would take to turn Wild Hawk Ranch into a vacation place.”

Jessica kept quiet as her mother stared out the big kitchen window to where her dad and Duncan were unloading hay at the end of the barn.

“Lord knows it has been a tough year,” her mother sighed. “Beef prices are down. Feed costs are up. And I hear the Bureau of Land Management is talking about raising the

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grazing fees again. If we don't get this year's calves fattened up enough to get a good price out of them, we're going to be in trouble. We could use a little extra help."

"We've got those empty cabins out back," Jessica said. "It wouldn't hurt to clean a couple of them out and use them. I think it would be fun to have some new people around here."

Mrs. Warner dried her hands on her apron, then ran a loving hand over her daughter's hair. "I know it gets lonely out here for you, Jess. Marybeth's a little too young, and Duncan's got Wyatt and Gator." She picked up the bowl of snapped beans and took them to the pot of boiling water on the stove. "It's a good thing you've got your horse."

Jessica smiled. Her parents had given her Rusty on her third birthday. He'd been old even back then. Now that she was thirteen, poor old Rusty needed to retire. His gaits were slow and most of his energy gone, but she still loved him with all her heart.

"Go tell your father and brother that supper will be ready in about forty-five minutes," Mrs. Warner said. "That should give them enough time to finish stacking the hay in the barn." She winked at Jessie. "And if you hurry, you could probably get old Rusty brushed and have plenty of time left to make friends with that pretty little paint filly I saw you eyeing."

Jessica grabbed a couple of carrots from the refrigerator and headed for the horses. Duncan was just pulling the tractor and empty flatbed trailer from the end of the barn. They'd gotten an early crop of hay this year. They might be

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able to get an extra cutting by the end of the season. That would mean extra money in the bank. Jessica didn't know a lot about finances, but she knew her parents struggled to keep the ranch afloat.

Mr. Warner climbed down from the loft, dusting his hands on his shirt front. "That does it. All the hay from the first crop is in the barn," he said with a satisfied smile. "We were lucky to have such an early spring." He shaded his eyes and looked toward the nearby mountains and the gathering clouds. "And not a moment too soon. Looks like we might be in for a summer storm."

Duncan parked the trailer, then walked to the nearest horse trough and dunked his head into the cool water, shaking his blond hair like a wet dog when he stood up.

Jessica squealed, holding up her hands. "Thanks a lot, Dunc" She saw the grin cross her brother's lips and bounced a piece of carrot off his noggin. Duncan just laughed as he caught the carrot chunk and popped it into his mouth, crunching the tidbit like one of his horses.

Jessica smiled to herself as her brother turned and gazed at the gathering clouds. Duncan liked nothing better than to ride his horse into a storm. She saw the longing on his face, but her father shook his head and pushed Duncan toward the house. She hoped that someday her brother would invite her to go on a storm ride with him. The thought both scared and excited her.

A nicker drew Jessica's attention and she turned to the pen that held the new horses. The young stock in the corral snorted and huddled at the far end of the pen, but the paint

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filly stepped near the fence and pricked her ears, staring curiously.

Jessica grinned. Wyatt would call that a sign. She felt it, too. A plan began to form in her mind, and she put a little extra spring in her step as she walked to Rusty's stall.

She stopped in front of the stall and scratched Rusty on the neck as he leaned his head over the door to accept the carrot. She'd been honing her riding talents on the old gelding for years, dreaming of the day she could join her father and brother in the training pen. Somehow, some way, she was going to convince her father to let her train this year.

Her first project would be the beautiful paint filly.