

Talia's Time

South Dakota Dreams Book Two

By

Megan McCoy

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Chapter One

Talia Hansen flipped her long blonde braid back over her shoulder and washed her hands. How long could she stall? Not long. The Sunrise Cafe buzzed with hungry customers and her co-worker Emily had called in sick. She made a face at herself in the mirror. Suck it up, girl, she told herself. Double the tips. Well, not quite because people wouldn't be quite as happy with her level of service, but she would do the best job she could, and count her money at the end of the early morning shift. Then she would start her three hours of homework she still had to get done before tomorrow. She enjoyed her job, working in her mom's diner, but didn't want to be a waitress, sometimes cook, all her life. Online classes were the only kind she could fit into her schedule, sometimes she opened and sometimes closed, but that was okay. She was happy to finally be back in school. Pasting on her happy server face, she walked back out into the small cafe, and grabbed the tray the owner and cook, and her mom, Donna had put on the counter.

"Thanks," she said, and took it out. Living in a small town had its perks. She knew many of the customers, especially the early morning regulars. Of course, they had a large college in town, but most of the college kids didn't come downtown to eat, preferring the fast food places closer to campus.

"Here you go, Stormy," she said, as she put a big platter of pancakes down. "Yours, too, Cade. You guys planning to run in the Turkey Trot before the Thanksgiving parade this year?" The town always hosted a fun 5K run right before their annual parade, which always ended with Santa showing up in town for the first time. Talia loved the parade, but could see nothing fun about running 5k. To each their own. Her *own* was working toward her degree.

Stormy nodded, while cutting into her pancake. "We're taking the two Danes with us. They'll love it. I have Lily to watch the store while we run, so that's covered. It's going to be a great time, right, Cade?"

Cade turned to look at Stormy and the look of love he gave her filled Talia's heart with a tiny bit of envy. No, not envy, happiness Stormy had found Cade, or they had found each other. She knew there had been a stalker who targeted Stormy, but she'd been caught, so everyone who knew about it was breathing a bit easier. No one wanted an arsonist and over all nasty person around. "Yeah, it's going to be a good time, but you promised I'd be done running in time to watch the parade," he teased her.

Stormy smiled and nodded, "We're running the same route as the parade goes. All we have to do is stop at the end and stand there. The parade will catch up and maybe they will still have some candy left for you to catch."

Talia laughed. "I'll probably watch from that window, but if it's nice, I'll toss some candy your way." She pointed to the big window that covered the front of the cafe. "I'll try to wave if I see you, at least," she said. "Enjoy your food. Gwen, Kevin, I'll be over with your to go cups, in just a bit."

Walking to the hostess station to seat her new arrivals, she frowned remembering she'd forgotten to ask Cade about his mom. Hopefully Joan was doing better after her last cancer treatment. Well, she'd ask when she refilled their coffee, she thought as she got the two police officers their morning to go cup of caffeine on the house. Though Blizzard, SD, was a small town, Donna liked a police presence in occasionally, so offered all on duty cops a free to go cup

of coffee or tea once a shift. It gave them all a good reason to drop in, other than the food on their breaks.

“Thanks,” Gwen smiled at her. “It’s a little chilly this morning, but supposed to warm up again in a few hours. Usually I love it, but sometimes being outside most of the day isn’t much fun.”

Talia laughed, “It’s always warm at the cafe. We’re hiring another server.”

“I think I’ll keep my day job,” Gwen said, dryly, “though sometimes I’m not sure why.”

“Hanging out with me?” Kevin asked her.

“Yeah, I’m here despite that,” Gwen told him, picking up her coffee and heading toward the door.

“Lucas asked about you the other day,” Kevin said to Talia softly. “Wanted to know how you were.”

“Did you tell him that I was none of his business?” Talia said, equally as softly.

“Nope, not my job to do that. Not my brother’s keeper or yours. Just relaying a message.” He picked up his coffee and followed Gwen out the door. “Thanks for the coffee. Call him.”

Talia didn’t even bother to answer but fumed inwardly through the rest of her shift while she smiled and served.

Counting her tips a few hours later, she logged them into the small computer in the back for tax purposes.

“Hey, Charlene,” she said as the second shift was getting ready to start. “You closing tonight?” The Sunrise was open from six am to seven pm, and only served breakfast, and sandwiches, but had a huge variety of sweet and savory items that brought people back again and again.

“Yeah, I heard Emily called in again,” she said, hanging up the coat Talia knew she’d need going home tonight.

They chatted a few more minutes before Charlene went to work. After she called good-bye to her mom, Talia headed home, to her homework. Her small old car sat on the tiny parking lot behind the cafe, and she took a few deep breaths of fresh South Dakota air before getting in and heading to her apartment. Trying to think if she needed anything, she decided the only thing she needed to do was get home and bury herself in homework.

Sometimes she went days without thinking of Lucas Strong. Other times he was the first thing she thought of in the morning and all day long. She was the stupid one. Despite what Kevin said, today, his brother, her ex, never thought of her anymore. He had a life. He never cared about her anyway. She knew that. He’d only married her because she’d gotten pregnant. She knew that, too. When she’d lost the baby, they had drifted apart within the year. He went off to college and she stayed here, and found herself drifting even more.

Why would he be asking about her now? He’d been home from college and whatever he did after that, for a few years, and had taken over his dad’s mechanic shop on the other edge of town, something he’d sworn to her, he would never do. He hated it there growing up and she wondered what changed, and if he had. Didn’t matter though, she didn’t want his bossy self anyway.

He’d been twenty-two and she’d been eighteen when they married. He acted as if he were her parent instead of her husband. He’d been her one and only and she loved the way he handled her in bed. It had been amazing, and during her experimentation after their divorce, no man was the same. She gave up dating, except for the rare set up Stormy or Charlene did for her occasionally. Now, she worked and studied. Studied and worked. Finally getting over the

depression her miscarriage brought on, and the feeling of failure her divorce did, she snapped out of her fog and started to focus on getting a life, and there was more to it, than being an employee in a cafe. Unlike Lucas, when she said she'd never take over the family business, she meant it, not that her mom was ever going to retire or give it up. She loved that place.

Letting herself into her small one bedroom apartment, she thought once again about getting a cat. Someone to come home to might be nice. But then she'd have to be responsible for someone and she wasn't sure she could do that.

Opening the curtains to her little balcony, she looked at the large Silver Maple tree across the road. There were a few leaves starting to turn. Wasn't it a little early for that? Her friend, Stormy, loved the cold. She tolerated it, she'd lived here all her life and complaining about the weather was one thing Blizzard residents did well. Summer was hot and humid. Winter was just almost inhuman. Spring and fall were lovely, though. She loved fall and decorated her little place in the colors of leaves turning, rusts, greens, browns, yellows and oranges. Watching the tree across the road turn from bare winter to green spring, to lush summer to vibrant fall helped her mark the times of her life.

Looking at her laptop, she knew she should turn it on and start on her homework, but felt restless and uneasy. Lucas. Of course. What would he think of her going to college? She couldn't help but smile as she pinned her braid up and started making a loaf of bread. Kneading soothed her. Lucas would have an opinion, all right, and he wouldn't be shy about telling her. The man lived to give her orders and be in control. She often liked that, but, as a teenager, it was hard to handle. What would it be like to be with him now? Had he changed? Had she?

Why was he asking about her?

Why did it matter? It didn't. She'd been down that road once and now her priority was herself and figuring out her own future. The past was just that.