

SOUTH DAKOTA DREAMS
COLLECTION



MEGAN MCCOY



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STORMY'S TROUBLE



SOUTH DAKOTA DREAMS, BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER 1



Stormy Wagner slapped at the mosquito that dared land on her bare arm. Blizzard, South Dakota indeed. Right now it was sweaty and humid and full of bugs. She couldn't wait for the first frost and then the winter snows to hit. Right now, in mid-June it was unseasonably hot and muggy. She loved winters here. Summers she could barely tolerate. Luckily for her, they didn't last as long as they did other places. She shuddered thinking of living in Arizona or Florida. She loved winter, and snow and brisk winds. Summer, she just got through.

Walking just a little faster, and tucking a tendril back into her ponytail, she knew she was late to Joan's house. Hoping her other-mother wasn't worried, Stormy turned the corner, and looked down the street toward the house. Joan's medical issues were a concern, but Stormy's best friend Cara, Joan's only daughter, had just been deployed for a third time, so she was extra stressed. Rounding the sidewalk at almost a run, she saw a tall lean figure unloading a car. Her breath caught in her throat as she slowed to a walk, and realized Cade was home. Knowing he was due home this month, and seeing him, was entirely different. She had decided how she would act when they saw each other after all this time, and

thought she'd be cool, calm and collected, but instead she was hot and jangly with nerves, just at the sight of his muscled back. So much for planning.

Determinedly, she kept walking, but slowed a bit, trying to calm her breathing. She was trading Joan Cumberland, Cade's mom, dog walking for quilting lessons and wouldn't run and hide because he was home. Home for a year, in fact. She'd have to get used to seeing him. She had nothing to worry about, she told herself and it was silly to be stressed out or nervous about seeing him. He probably wouldn't even remember her, or recognize her. She'd changed a lot since the summer after high school, so had he, but she'd recognize the way he moved and walked, anywhere.

She'd lightened her dark blonde hair and cut it to shoulder length, and right now it was pulled back in a vain attempt to keep her neck cool. Her huge sunglasses hid her light blue eyes, and she'd put on some running muscle since high school. Her body was different, stronger and he didn't remember her body anyway. What was she thinking? It had been almost a decade since that one week. Taking a deep breath, she turned off the sidewalk to the pathway up to Joan's door as Cade came back out, to get more suitcases apparently. His car was probably packed full. A year was a long time, after all.

Always helpful, she grabbed one of the bags and boxes, out of the trunk and handed it to him, daring herself to be bold.

"Thanks, Stormy," he said, slowly. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Ditto, city boy," she said. Fine. He knew, remembered, who she was. His mom probably told him she was coming to walk Homer and Marge for her. "Glad you're here for your mom," she said, softly. She was glad. His sister, her best friend, Cara, had been deployed with her Naval Reserve unit for a year, and Joan was fighting cancer. She needed someone to help her out. Joan had told her that Cade had taken a sabbatical from his college to come here, teach a few classes at the local college, and research his next book while Cara was gone. She liked that he was ready to come home

and help his mom, but a little put out he hadn't managed to see her on any of his trips home in, oh, the last ten years. It was like she never mattered to him.

Well, had she? Probably not, if she had to be honest with herself. Just another of his little sister's friends drooling all over him. If a guy cared about you, he'd find a way to see you. Cade hadn't, so he didn't. She was smart, she knew that was a fact of life.

Crackthunder, he was still hot though.

Grabbing another suitcase, she picked up a box with her other arm and followed him into the house. "Be careful, Stormy," Joan called from where she held open the front door.

With what? Her back or her heart? Yeah. She'd try. "I'm good, Joan. Where's Homer and Marge?" She wondered if Cade noticed how frail his mom looked. Then she wondered if he noticed how grown up she looked. Not that she hadn't been grown up the last time she'd more than glimpsed at him.

"Dogs are in the back yard. I put Cade in Grandma's room," Joan said. Smiling, Stormy remembered coming over when Cara's grandma lived there. They'd fixed a den room in the back as a small studio apartment, complete with a tiny kitchen and bathroom, but it had been empty since she'd passed away. This would be a better place for Cade to stay while he was here for a year, than his old bedroom upstairs, next to his mom. The small almost apartment gave him some privacy and a retreat. It would also be a good room when Joan got frailer and wouldn't want to make the trip up the stairs every night to bed. Stormy knew she sometimes slept in the recliner in the living room after a rough treatment, instead of making that trip, now.

Carrying her burdens to the back room, she watched as he put his suitcase on the bed and asked, "Where do you want these?"

"Bed is fine," he said. "Thanks, I can do the rest."

"Good, I'm sure the dogs want a run," she said, shortly, and dropped the suitcase and box on the bed, then turned to go. Fine. He remembered her and wanted nothing to do with her. He was

probably married anyway or engaged or something. She didn't want anything to do with his raggedy old self either. See how well that worked out for the two of them? Sure, closure would be nice, but she'd gone without it this long, she didn't need to have any now. She was so over him.

Heading toward the door, she started as his hand grabbed her arm.

Whirling around, she glared at him, looking so far up. How had he gotten so tall? Was he always this tall? She thought she remembered every nuance about him. An occasional dream of hers still did. "Let go of me," she demanded.

"Please," he said, grinning lazily at her, in a way that made her want to melt and started butterflies in her stomach.

Please what? Oh. "Please let go of me," she scowled, but didn't tug on her arm. She rather liked his hand on her arm.

"Good girl," he approved and let go of her.

"I'm so over you, you know," she said, neither moving or leaving.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'd be worried if you still had a high school crush on someone years later," he said, his eyes raking her up and down.

When had he turned into a hot mess of a jerk, she wondered. A buff, gorgeous, hot mess of a jerk that still made her want to melt into a puddle at his feet, put on his collar, belong to him.

"Worry not," she said, loftily and tried to turn around and leave, but his voice stopped her feet from moving. Stupid feet.

"Miranda Storm," he said firmly. No one called her that. Ever. Since. But it worked because she obediently paused.

"I owe you a dinner, if I recall. Would it be okay to call you one night this week and take you out?" His tone was gentle and coaxing and she couldn't resist it.

Nodding without turning around, she blinked back hot tears and fled the room, calling for the dogs as soon as she hit the hallway. A minute later, she'd clipped their leashes on and was out of

the house. As soon as they hit the sidewalk she broke into a jog and the dogs loped alongside her. The two solid black Great Danes made a gorgeous sight, she knew. She also knew she needed not to cry because people would look at the dogs, and she didn't want anyone to see her being stupid. When the university wasn't in session, this was a small town and most people knew each other. She didn't need the fact she was crying on the street to get back to anyone. Especially not Cade. The idiot jerk face. The childish name didn't make her feel much better but did make her smile a little.

The idiot jerk face did owe her a dinner. He'd promised her a nice upscale dinner the day before he left. He didn't ever come through with it though. Odd that he remembered that after all these years.

"Homer, Marge, you ready to run?" she asked them, lengthening her stride, and heading toward the dog park two miles away. They knew where they were going and picked up their speed to match hers.

A while later, she unclipped their leashes and let them into the dog park to play. She wished she'd brought Bindi, but she'd do that next time. Her little Yorkie loved playing at the dog park. She let everyone know who the boss was and it wasn't those big dogs!

Leaning on the fence, she watched the dogs playing and felt grateful there was no one else there right now. Too hot, probably. The smart people would be coming out later in the evening or early in the morning. Unclipping the water bottle from her belt, she took a long swig, and noticed the water bowl in the dog area had been recently filled. Good.

Cade Cumberland. He'd always been the one who could shake her like no one else did. The one who made her heart pound and her palms sweat. Apparently he could still do it this many years later. She'd been a year older than her classmates due to a sledding accident that kept her in the hospital for months when she was six; she restarted the school year over the following year. So, she'd graduated at nineteen and that entire year had been spent mooning

over her best friend's brother to the detriment of her grades, and the chagrin of her mother and Cara.

All she'd wanted that year was to wear his collar and be his puppy. Not in a furry sort of way, she didn't even know about that then, but just be his. Belong to him. It was weird and odd and it took her several more years to figure out why. The man had been the first natural dominant she'd ever met and he brought out her submissive side like no man had since. She didn't want to think about that right now, though. Or him. Happily, Cara's boyfriend walked up with his goofy Lab puppy. "Hi, Max," she greeted him. "How's Angel?"

"Not such an angel," he said. "Brought her to run some energy off and maybe she won't eat my shoes tonight."

"Put your shoes in the closet and shut the door," Stormy suggested. "Heard from Cara?"

"Not for a few days. She said it would be a while before she got to Guam. She'll get ahold of me when she can. I'm used to this, you know," he said opening the gate and letting Angel run into the dog area. "She comes and goes a lot."

"Did you hear Cade made it in today?" she asked as casually as she could.

"Nope, but I knew he was coming and am looking forward to meeting him," Max replied, leaning against the fence. "Angel, quit barking!"

"You haven't met him?" Why did that surprise her?

"I've only lived in town a year now, since I transferred here to be closer to Cara anytime she's home," he reminded her. "Cade hasn't been home in over a year."

"Oh yeah, I just assumed you knew him since you and Cara had been going out so long," she said. "Homer! Behave!" Silly dog, thought he could hump a Lab puppy.

Max looked at her sharply, "When was the last time you saw Cade?"

Instead of answering, Stormy opened the gate to gather up the

dogs. "I have to get them home and go take care of my beast. You want to walk back with me and meet Cade?" Another person could help diffuse the tension.

"Wish I could, but I have to be at work in half an hour," Max looked at his cell phone. "Or twenty minutes."

"Working the late shift?" she asked.

"Yup. Someone has to do it," he grinned at her. "Those ambulance drivers think once they dump the patients, they're done. They just leave them to us to take care of them."

"Good thing for PA's like you," she said. "Know any more about Joan's condition? She doesn't like to talk about it, and Cara asked me to keep an eye on her. I know I don't have legal permission, but, do you?"

Max's face got somber, "I'm not directly involved in her care, but I can say I'm glad Cade's home and Cara has the Red Cross on standby in case she needs notified of anything. Angel, come. Let's go home. Daddy has to go back to work." He and the yellow Lab took off at a slow jog back toward Max's little apartment by the hospital.

Stormy gathered Homer and Marge and headed back to Joan's, crushed by what Max didn't say, and what he implied. Joan had been her second mother growing up, her scout leader, Sunday School teacher, as well as her room mom and volleyball team advisor. As they grew older, she found they had a lot in common. Love of animals and crafting and silly game shows on TV. When her mom moved to Arizona with her new husband, Joan helped her with the transition, which was doubly hard for them both, because her mom was Joan's good friend, and Cara left for boot camp about the same time. They supported each other. Stormy had actually hired Joan, off and on, in her store for temporary help during the busy seasons. Then when her cancer diagnosis came, she offered to walk the dogs in exchange for quilting lessons, to help out and be close to her. Everyone who lived in South Dakota needed a quilt or two, no matter how

much they enjoyed the cold and she liked having a reason to drop by often.

Deep in thought, she wiped a drop of sweat from her nose, walked up the path to the house and let the dogs out in the fenced back yard to do their final business for the evening.

Cade came up behind her. She felt his presence and didn't turn around. "Do you know how your mom is?" she asked softly.

"I do," his answer was simple and succinct. Without another word, she turned and rushed into his arms, and he held her while she tried hard not to sob.

"I didn't know," she said. "I thought it would be okay."

"We are getting her the best care and she has very good friends around her," Cade stroked her hair and down her back. Stormy felt very safe in his arms, and didn't want to leave so she snuggled in close to him. It just felt right, but suddenly, she felt a little embarrassed by the tears that had leaked out despite her best efforts.

Straightening her back and shoulders, she left his arms and told herself she was being smart, even though it didn't feel like it.

"No wonder Cara was so upset about leaving this time," she said. "I wish she'd told me."

"We all make decisions we regret after the fact," Cade told her and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze before letting it go. He looked in her eyes and she could barely see his through her wet eyes, but he looked somber. She wondered if he was thinking of his decision so many years ago, or his mom.

"Who cleans up the dog poop?" were the next words out of his mouth, which made her give a watery giggle.

"Your dogs, your yard, your job," she told him. "I'm going to say goodnight to Joan."

"Don't let on you know anything," he said, firmly.

"I won't," she promised. "She'd think it was weird if I didn't come in to say goodbye though. We need to confirm our next lesson time, too."

"I can tell this is hard on you, can I help at all?" he asked. "I'm

home now. I can help.”

Years ago, you could have, she thought. Too late now. People who leave, leave. They don't come back, other than a bungee jump here or there. Well, unless they are deployed like Cara. Then they mostly come back, but men who leave you because you aren't what they want, don't. Wise women never chase. She was a wise woman. Whether she felt like it or not sometimes.

Cade made her feel like not... sometimes. She often wondered what would have happened if she had chased. Just happened to go to college in his town. Just happened to take a class he taught. Shaking her head, she knew nothing would have happened. Except people would know how pathetic she was, moping and chasing after a man who didn't want her. She had entirely too much pride and self-respect for that.

What had pride and self-respect gotten her? A successful life, she owned her own business, had friends, dated off and on, kept busy with community activities. Oh, sweet lightning, all it got her was a lonely life without Cade.



CADE SAT on the porch a few hours later, watching the occasional car go by. Much different from the constant sound on his Chicago street. He planned to take a few days to spend some time with his mom, talk to her doctors, see how things were going. Seeing Stormy again had set his thoughts back to the summer he graduated from college. Specifically, the week before he left for Chicago for his first teaching job.

Life had taken them in different directions and at the time he thought it was the right thing to do. But he still loved the way she looked at him, trusted him, and simply submitted to him in her own way. A jealous pang went through him as he thought of all the other men she might have looked at in that way, over the last decade or so.

His fault he knew, but still it hurt. She'd been too young, and needed to go off to college, live her life, be a kid. He'd planned to catch up to her later after she had a few years of college under her belt, and maybe see if she wanted to finish them in Chicago with him. At the time, he'd felt noble, strong, and wise. Looking back, he realized he'd been nothing of the kind. Just an immature fool.

Still, he'd planned and then life interfered and the years had slipped away. He hadn't seen her on his infrequent trips home and she'd drifted from his mind, for the most part. Cara mentioned her in passing a time or two, but he tried not to listen. That apparently hadn't helped because when he saw her yesterday, all the feelings he'd had rushed right back to him. All the emotion, that one magical week they'd spent together and then him breaking her heart when he told her he was leaving town.

He didn't want to do that to her again. She knew he was only here for a year. If she wanted some play time, he could indulge her. Asshole, he called himself. He could tell by the way she looked at him that she'd play with him, and then fall in love again. Maybe he'd just enjoy a good season, a good time for a while. Give her some time to remember, too.

He had planned a few trips while he was here. His next novel was about the Lakota Sioux Indians who lived here generations ago. He wanted to go see the Black Hills and do some exploring. He hadn't been there since he was a child. Maybe she'd want to go with him.

Most of the time though, he'd be spending with his mom.

It felt weird being back in the house he grew up in, knowing he wasn't going home to Chicago in the next day or so. It also felt right and he wondered if seeing Stormy had any part of that.

He needed to set up his office space, he decided. Walking back into the house, his mind still on that gorgeous butt he'd seen walk away from him, he wondered what he'd been thinking all those years ago when he'd nobly walked away.