

Learning to Love on



INDIAN TIME

Carla Beck's life has been turned upside down in the last few years. Newly divorced and newly graduated from the seminary, she moves across country to start a new life as the pastor for the Brahma Community Church in Brahma, South Dakota. Although the small town appears to be as deserted as the nearby Badlands, the western culture and the nearby Indian reservations open a whole new world to her. The best part of her new life is meeting Owen Begly.

With a Lakota mother and Irish father, Owen embodies the best of two different cultures. The moment he meets Carla, he knows he has found what he's been looking for, but convincing Carla will be a challenge.

Things are complicated enough for Carla with a new job, without having to juggle a new relationship too. But maybe Owen is the best thing that could happen to her.

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And Mike Williams, who has taught me what a reader wants in a story.

C. Fern Cook

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***INDIAN
TIME***



by

C. FERN COOK



~CHAPTER ONE~

Carla has never felt so alone. This is the first time in her life she is totally out there on her own. She went straight from living with her parents to the safety of having a husband to back her up. Even when she returned to college, she felt like she was a part of the student body; at least there was a sense of camaraderie with her fellow students. But now there is nothing ... no one here in this part of the country where she has traveled to take her first job since graduating from college.

Not since she was an insecure teenager has she let her subconscious beat up her self-esteem like today. The long drive through the barren landscape of the Dakotas has given her mind plenty of time to dwell on her imperfections. With the grueling drive across country almost over, exhaustion and boredom fuel her thoughts of self doubt.

What was I thinking, coming out here in the middle of nowhere, with no friends or family for support, and starting a new career? A lot of people still don't like women pastors, especially divorced women. That's two strikes against me. Maybe I should've picked something else for a career.

Her gut rumbles from all the extra juices bubbling up to provide punishment for her impending failure. *When people find out I can't be a saint...* The solitary road sign pointing to Brahma, South Dakota, 45 miles ahead, breaks her destructive train of thought. *Well, I'm almost there; no turning back now.*

* * * * *

State Highway 83 takes her straight through the middle of Brahma. Turning onto the main road that leads to town gives her a bad first impression, and she fights the urge to cut and run back to the safety of her mom's house. But with most of her funds gone, and not wanting to give her mom the satisfaction of being right about the foolishness of taking a job across country, she continues driving down the main street.

The town resembles a scene from a 1950's sci-fi series of a dusty, deserted ghost town. A sign points to a business district, but from the looks of things, that sign must have been put up years ago. The only thriving business in the area is the truck stop back on Interstate 90.

The residential area seems just as deserted; the only signs of life are a couple of stray dogs running across the road.

Carla pulls up to her new place of business, the Brahma Community Church. The outside of the church looks like another abandoned building. The wood siding is bare except for a few spots of peeling paint still hanging on. Carla tries the front doors, but they're locked. Walking around to the back, she sees the sidewalk that leads to an equally deteriorating parsonage. The wood frame house with a blue tarp tied across the roof, and a yard that is a mixture of sand and weeds, fits right in with the rest of the town.

Trying the back door of the church, Carla finds the door unlocked. When she steps inside, she is surprised to hear the high-pitched voices of playing children coming from the basement. The voices lead her down the steps into a large room filled with toys, miniature tables and chairs, and a gaggle of rowdy children.

The children stop playing to stare at the stranger that has walked in. Apparently they don't see many strangers in this

part of the country. A short, slightly overweight woman comes over to find out what this stranger is doing here. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. The sign out front says this is the Brahma Community Church. I'm supposed to start to work here as the new pastor." Carla is surprised to see so many children, when the rest of the town seems deserted. "Is this some sort of preschool?"

"Yes. This is the area Head Start. I'm the teacher here. And you are...?"

"I'm sorry," Carla says, extending her hand to introduce herself properly. "I'm Carla Beck."

"I'm Mrs. Janie Anderson," the woman says, smiling as she shakes Carla's hand. "Welcome to Brahma, Miss Beck."

"If you don't mind me asking, do you go to church here?"

"When I can."

"So what else do they have going on here besides Head Start?" Carla winks at a shy little girl hiding behind Mrs. Anderson. The little girl pokes her head out from behind Mrs. Anderson's skirt, her curiosity about the stranger winning over her shyness.

Mrs. Anderson glances at the clock behind her. "You'd be surprised. A lot happens here. The whole town uses this building for one thing or another. It's used like a community center, since the town never built one. They have the town meetings here, and the local AA meets here. I don't know if the Boy Scouts are going to meet here this year or not. And of course, Head Start rents the basement. When my assistant gets back, I can show you around the church."

"Is there a phone here I could use?" Carla fishes for a slip of paper in the front pocket of her jeans. "I need to call Owen Begly."

"Sure. You'll like Owen." Mrs. Anderson winks at

Carla.

Carla returns with a “Huh?”

“He’s a good guy. He’s been holding the church together since the last pastor left. If you want, you can use the phone in your office. Just go back up the stairs, into the sanctuary, and the first door on your right will be your office.” Mrs. Anderson grabs a little boy by the arm as he tries to run by, and wipes his nose. “These kids always have a runny nose, no matter what the weather is.”

“They’re some cute kids you have here.” Carla smiles at the little girl when she pops out from behind Mrs. Anderson skirt again. The little girl ducks back behind Mrs. Anderson immediately, making Carla grin, remembering when she use to be a shy little girl. “I guess I’ll go try to call this guy. Thanks for your help.”



~CHAPTER TWO~

Walking into the open sanctuary, Carla is taken aback by the disparity between how rundown the exterior was and how inviting the sanctuary is. Her first inkling was that the interior would be as drab as the exterior of the church. But a recent coat of eggshell-white interior paint and beige pew cushions give the sanctuary a light, open feeling. With plenty of light streaming in through the large windows, the sanctuary feels cheerful.

When she opens the first door to the right, it leads her to a cramped ten-by-ten room, barely big enough for the wooden desk and a banged-up file cabinet wedged in the corner of the room. The dark walnut wood paneling is quite a contrast from the open, light-filled sanctuary. The two corner windows let in plenty of light, but the dark paneling and tight space give the office a dungeon-like atmosphere.

Despite the gloomy atmosphere, Carla gives her new office a trial spin; she pulls out the old wooden chair tucked behind the desk and takes a seat to get a feel for her new surroundings. Opening the top drawer on the right side of the desk, she snoops for anything that she can find that will give her some idea of what kind of mess she has gotten herself into. All she finds is a drawer full of old church bulletins and a ring of keys.

Leaning back, she swings the chair around, props her feet on the corner of the desk, and folds her hands behind her

head, commenting out loud, “I guess I can live with this.”

A sudden knock on the door makes her jump straight up, slamming her feet on the floor for balance. Mumbling, “Come in,” she struggles to regain her composure.

Mrs. Anderson pokes her head through the doorway. “You ready for that tour?”

“You bet. I’ve got a million of questions I’m dying to ask, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead, ask away. I’ll answer as many as I can.” Mrs. Anderson waits by the door for Carla to join her.

Carla gently runs her hand along the wood grain of the built-in bookcase on her way out. “When was this church built?”

“In 1888. It’s one of the oldest buildings in the area. It was the first church built in the county. It was the Brahma Lutheran Church, but since the town no longer has any other churches in town, the members voted to change it to a non-denominational church.” Mrs. Anderson stops behind the large, intricately carved walnut podium. “Of course, this is the sanctuary.”

Carla picks up the hymnal book lying on the podium and causally thumbs through it. “Why did the last pastor leave?” She puts the hymnal back down and follows behind Mrs. Anderson.

“Well, he didn’t take kindly to us changing it to a nondenominational church. Pastor Johnston decided it would be better if he left. He wasn’t a very compassionate man; he would have made a better accountant than a pastor. Come on down to the basement, I’ll show you where the cleaning supplies are.” Mrs. Anderson leads the way to the stairs.

Stopping at the bottom of the staircase, Carla asks, “Did you like him?”

“He was okay, I guess. But I don’t come to church because I like the pastor. Besides this is the only church for

miles around.”

“What kind of people come to this church?”

“Mostly older women. What we need is to get the kids interested in this church. It wouldn’t hurt to get some more men in here either.” Mrs. Anderson jokingly winks at Carla.

Joining in the joking mood, Carla does her best imitation of humming Saturday Night Fever. “Maybe it would help if we put up a mirrored disco ball in the middle of the sanctuary and added some strobe lights. Or maybe if we tried playing some of the church hymns to a rap beat, it would shake things up and get the kids in here.”

“Yeah, you go girl,” Mrs. Anderson chimes in, skipping with a few dance steps as she opens a closet door built under the staircase. “This closet holds all the cleaning stuff we have. I want to put a hasp and padlock on it to keep the children out of here, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, just let me know where the key is.” Carla wonders if the rest of the church members will be as open-minded as Mrs. Anderson.

As they walk back toward the Head Start class, Mrs. Anderson points across the hall. “This is the only bathroom here. It’s small, only has one toilet, and gets kind of busy with all the kids down here.” As they stand at the doorway to the Head Start classroom, all the kids yell in unison, “Hello Mrs. Anderson.”

“When we’re around the children, please call me Mrs. Anderson. I think its better that way.”

“Okay. What time do your classes start?”

“I have one class in the morning and one class in the afternoon. So, I’m here from about eight to four-thirty. This is about all there is to the church. Do you have a key to the parsonage?” Mrs. Anderson leads the way back to the steps.

“No.” Carla leans against the banister. The railing starts to give way from the weight. Startled, she abruptly

straightens up. "I guess we need to fix this railing."

"Yeah, there are quite a few things around here that need fixing up. We've been lucky so far that all the repairs are just minor." Mrs. Anderson knocks on the wooden banister for luck. "The keys to the house are in your desk. Did you want me to show you the parsonage too?"

"Nah, I think I can do that on my own. Thanks. Is it all right if I call you Janie when the kids aren't around?"

"Sure. Let me know if you need anything. Nice meeting you, Carla. I hope you like it here." Janie walks back to her class.

While climbing back up the steps, Carla hears the kids yell, "Hello, Mrs. Anderson."

Carla opts for touring her new home before calling Mr. Begly. She steps out on the back steps and onto the sidewalk that leads to the parsonage. The bright sun temporarily blinds her when she moves out from under the shade of the old church. She places her hand across her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun, waiting to regain her vision. It's early October, but the temperature must be above 90 degrees. This is what her mom calls 'Indian Summer.' *I wonder what the Indians call it.* She laughs at her own joke under her breath and continues towards the old house.

The minute she walks through the front door of the parsonage, she is hit with a blast of hot air. Apparently the house has been shut up since the last pastor left, and the air is stale. Immediately she opens all the living room windows to get some fresh air in there.

She is let down by the shabby interior. For a moment she thought maybe she would find the interior of the parsonage nicer than exterior and fixed up inside like the church had been, but that bubble of hope is busted.

The dirty wallpaper makes the living room seem smaller than it really is. "This wallpaper has to go," she

announces aloud, feeling free to grumble about her new home, since no one can hear her gripe. “Maybe I could talk the church into letting me have some paint.”

The first thing she does when she walks into the kitchen is to check if the water is running and flips the light switch on to check the electricity. *At least I've got electricity and running water.*

She climbs up the narrow staircase to a dimly light hallway that leads to a tiny bathroom, which makes sense of the phrase ‘water closet.’ The other two rooms upstairs are barely big enough to hold a bed and dresser. All the rooms are equipped with a small oil-burning stove; no central heating or air conditioning in this house. Judging by the high ceilings, small rooms, and the dark woodwork, Carla guesses the parsonage is as old as the church.

With the tour of her new surroundings complete, she meanders back to her office to contact Owen Begly. After the other end of the line picks up, Carla begins, “Hey, Mr. Begly, this is Carla Beck. I made it into town and thought I would call to let you know.”

“Glad to hear you made it okay, Miss Beck,” a deep male voice resonates from the phone. “Did you stop by the church yet?”

“That’s where I’m at now.”

There is an uneasy pause before he continues, “Well, I hope you stay and give us a try anyway.”

“The outside is a little scary looking, but the sanctuary is very pleasant. I expected the church to be a little bigger, though.” Carla tries to be diplomatic and doesn’t mention how depressing the parsonage is. “This is the first time I’ve been to South Dakota.”

“I want to welcome you; you’ll love it once get to know the people. I’ve got to run into town later, around three or so. I’d like to stop by. Maybe I can show you around town.

Show you the hot spots and where everything is.”

“I drove through town; I didn’t notice any hot spots,” Carla says, idly doodling on an old church program.

Owen laughs, “Oh, you just have to know where to look.”

“If you say so. I’m just going to start moving my stuff into the parsonage and try to make myself at home. I’ll be looking forward to meeting you later. I’ll see you when you get to town.”

After hanging up, Carla leans back and relaxes in her office chair. It suddenly occurs to her that there is no computer in this office, just an old manual typewriter. *How am I supposed to type up my sermons? I can’t type on that old thing. This place is going to take a lot more getting use to than I thought.*