

The Bookstore on Conner Avenue

By

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There's a small bookstore on Conner Avenue, situated near the middle of a block along the north side. The four-story brick building houses three businesses on the street level—the bookstore, an artist supply store plus a bicycle shop. None of these businesses are particularly profitable and nor will they go away easily. Conner Avenue has three blocks devoted to the trendy shops and odd retail stores. People love to walk up and down the uneven sidewalk, browsing for new and used merchandise and perhaps stopping for a coffee at Starbucks. The coffee shop cleverly retains the old interior brick walls of one of the old buildings rather than going with a modern decor.

Ali's Books is owned by a wealthy man who kept the store as a tribute to his departed wife. While he doesn't come to the store often, he feels he's protecting her memory by clinging to it. Behind the wood framed windows sit a few hard cover books, all used but in good condition. The man's nephew is the sole employee—the part timer having left to go traveling and so far no one else is interested in making \$7.50 per hour among the worn shelves.

Jeffrey knows his uncle is paying him too much to manage the store, but also knows he might be the only one his uncle trusts to care for it. The wood floor creaks as it's walked on and the shelves seem to tilt at a slight angle, making one to always move slowly about the small spaces. It's a bookstore that needs special attention to survive, even among the odd shops of Conner.

Jeffrey thinks he's happy. When he is asked how he's doing, the reply is invariably, "Just fine, just fine. How about

you?" He finishes with a quick smile. But deep down Jeffrey feels he's lying to himself. He does have friends and he shares a pint now and then with them. They read a lot, like him. A couple of them even aspire to be writers, churning out detective or adventure stories that no eyes will read with interest. One of his friends works for a lawyer that specializes in divorces of once-loving couples. He hates his job, but is scared to quit and look elsewhere. As for women, none of his friends are successful there. One is living in common-law, but there will never be a commitment made there.

Jeffery himself has been dumped by his two previous girlfriends and he never really understood the reasons why. They didn't mind he wore last year's fashions, or that he was just always a little quiet. His looks weren't a hindrance, tall with a bit of a stomach on a heavy frame, but didn't give cause for a second look. They dropped him because he just didn't want to do anything different, same thing day in day out. His passion was books and he didn't understand while books spoke about life, they weren't meant to be life itself.

Tonight he was going to meet up with Frank and Jim at the Black Dog pub. They would sit in Mila's section and flirt with her as she served drinks. She was pretty, personable and working her way through college. At the end of the night they would tip her well, thankful for the odd hand she had placed on their shoulder. On special occasions, such as birthdays, she would give them a hug. She did like them – they were all nice guys, but at the end of the evening her thoughts were on going home to her boyfriend.

Jeffery stood behind the counter reading a used pocketbook while keeping one eye on the two customers picking out books. He appeared slightly distracted as he glanced at his watch a third time. She was late. This Saturday, like all Saturdays, heralded the arrival of Miss C

around two-twelve PM. The time was the careful averaging by Jeffery of all the times Miss C entered the bookstore over a period of three months and two weeks. The time average didn't take into account the three Saturdays she missed nor the lone Friday she choose instead. Miss C, her name because Jeffery had seen the letter C on her driver's license while the rest of the letters were washed out from the reflected light, was an avid book reader who normally spent an average of thirty-seven minutes in choosing her two books to read each week. One was usually of romance and the other usually fantasy, although she had chosen other genres as well.

At two twenty-five PM, Miss C stopped in front of the bookstore to scratch behind the ears of a mutt chained to a parking meter. She then took the single step up over the concrete threshold to open the door, spilling sunlight into the interior. She gave Jeffery a quick smile and proceeded to the shelves of books.

He watched her. Today she was wearing blue jeans, a dark blue knit top and low-heeled sandals that seemed designed to show off her painted toenails. Her brown wavy hair was held in place by a plastic comb on her right side. He saw her poke around the table that contained the cheap romance novels and pull out a couple before securing one. Now she headed for another section. As she did one out of four times, she pulled out a book from the erotica section, opening it in the middle to read a few paragraphs, but this time replacing it. She then went to the science fiction section, choosing a Larry Niven novel. That surprised him—she normally preferred Sawyer when she did stray to science fiction.

Miss C waited patiently as he dealt with another customer. She placed her choices on the counter and from her handbag, pulled her two books she read last week.

As with last time, he asked her about the books. "Did you

find them interesting? I mean, were they any good?" He stumbled out the words, his hands suddenly damp.

Again, she gave that flash of a smile. "Fine. Not too memorable, but okay."

He wanted to say more, wanted to ask her out for a coffee or a drink, or anything. He stared at her brown eyes, wanting to have the courage to say something, anything but "How were your books?".

"What's Larry Niven like?"

His jaw worked, his mind reeling from her question. "I, well...he's a good writer. Pushes the science aspect of science fiction. His books are usually part of a series, tied together but you can usually read them separately."

"Oh."

He forced himself to smile. "You like to read different stuff. Like romance, then fantasy."

"I do. I read a lot I guess." The smile she gave him stayed longer.

His courage increased. "What, what do you do? If you don't mind me asking."

"I teach at Walter Stewart School. Grade three."

"That's not far from here. I guess you live around here, too."

"Just a few blocks from here. I like to walk along Conner and shop. I love spending my Saturdays here, people-watching over a coffee and then coming here to get a couple of books."

"Ah, the Starbucks up the street."

"No. There's another ... "

"Henry's Mug."

"Right. They have an outdoor patio. So I sit and read sometimes, sometimes watch."

Jeffry's heart was pounding. 'You're talking to me! If only I knew if she liked me well enough to go out with me.' "I can't see much from here. I'd like to do that sometime, sit

outside and watch the world.”

“Why don’t you take a chair outside sometime? Take a break and sit and drink a coffee.”

He smiled nervously. “Yeah, maybe I’ll try that.”

“How much do I owe you?”

He took her two previously read books, deducted them from the price from this week’s choice, and rang up the sale.

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Miss C sipped her coffee on Henry’s Mug patio. She relaxed on the wood chair, her feet reaching out from her straight legs to rest on the wooden planks that made up the patio.

Charlene stared at her feet, considering them maybe her best body feature. She liked her hair and her face, but wondered why her boobs had to be small and her hips big. She liked to wear black pants and skirts, believing they gave a slimming effect to her hips. She was too critical of herself – most others considered her pretty, not noticing any disproportion between her top and bottom.

Life wasn’t bad for her. She loved teaching the third graders and had a few good friends. One was an odd friendship she developed over the past couple of months at Ali’s bookstore. She thought Jeffery was going to ask her out at one time, but instead they became friends, chatting in the bookstore or in front of the store the odd time when he was having a coffee break.

She had a romance going at the school with the grade six teacher, Bill Williams. Bill was older and had traveled a lot, impressing her with his stories of faraway places. While she was happy with a lot of things in her life, many nights before she fell asleep she wished she could live in one of her books – the fantasy, romance novels or even the erotic books the odd time she took one to read.

Now it was time to continue her journey down the avenue before going home to her apartment. A dark cloud moved in front of the sun, blocking it out as the wind began to pick up.

The following days passed uneventfully and the parking lot of Walter Stewart School was almost deserted when Charlene returned at close to five PM. Charlene had forgotten her paperwork, and if it wasn't a Friday, might have come in early the next day instead. She was surprised to see two other cars still in the lot. One was Bill's SUV, the other the vice-principal's sedan.

Charlene went to the staff room first to pick up her papers and then looked in the lunchroom through the open connecting doorway. She dropped her papers.

Bill had his hand on her breast as he kissed her on her lips. They were oblivious to her and the falling papers. Charlene covered her mouth, walking backward out of the room before turning around and scampering down the hallway. She ran outside, tears streaming down her face as she took out her car keys and ran to Bill's vehicle, scraping the paint along the driver's door and then along the back. She paused to do the same on the vice-principal's car as well before jumping in her own car and racing out the parking lot.

She drove hard and fast back to her own apartment, parking in her designated stall at an angle. Almost wailing with despair, she raced up the stairs and flung her door open. She slammed the door behind her, looking for a place to bury her face into. The phone rang. She glared at it, but then crept toward it until she could read the call display. She recognized Bill's cell number on the display, almost screaming at the instrument before running out of her apartment.

"Leave me alone you bastard, you fucking bastard," she

called out as turned the corner on Conner Avenue.

Then her pace suddenly slowed, unsure where she was going, unsure of herself.

"I lost Bill to that whore. That whore. Why, why, why?" She spoke to herself, to no one.

Her feet kept moving, slowly at first, but then with greater speed. She went past Henry's Mug, past the clothing stores that were now closing and past Starbucks. Another shop was closing its doors, the "Please Come Again" sign being reversed in the window when she pushed past the startled clerk.

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Jeffrey didn't recognize her at first, her face red from tears. As she crumbled on the floor by the counter, he reacted. He knelt on the floor by her, wrapping his arms around her as she cried.

"That bastard, that bastard," she choked out her words.

Jeffrey still didn't know who or what she was talking about, but he felt good comforting her as he repeated, "Things will be okay."

After a few minutes, she began to slow down her mutterings and asked for a Kleenex.

Jeffrey stood, handing her a box of tissues and then locked the door. He felt he had to explain it wasn't to keep her in. "To keep people out."

Charlene calmed down enough to explain what had happened while Jeffrey stood close to her, occasionally rubbing her shoulder with his hand.

As she finished talking, he wrapped his arms around her again, hugged her and kissed her on her head. She looked up at him, a question in her eyes, eyes looking so lost and confused. He hesitated, and suddenly understood what those brown eyes were calling for. He leaned down and

kissed her on her lips, lingering as he tasted the salt of her tears. For a brief moment it looked like she was going to cry again, but then she put her arms around his neck with conviction and pulled him back down, kissing him back.

Jeffery felt her mouth part and copied her action, tentatively pushing his tongue inside her mouth. She responded in kind and they exchanged kisses until she lowered her hands and began to undo his shirt buttons.

He immediately began to fumble with her knit top, trying to pull it over her head. She stopped undoing his shirt long enough for him to remove her top and then resumed her efforts.

“You won’t be mad at me if I continue, will you? I don’t want to lose you as a friend.”

“God no. Please, I like you very much.”

They kissed some more and then they began to look for a place to become horizontal.

Jeffery strode over to the table containing the romance novels and used his arm to sweep most of them off the table, scattering them on the floor. She quickly slid on the table, her arms outstretched toward him. He leaped on top of her, kissing her, his hands roaming over her body.

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Charlene had read plenty of romance novels and a few erotica books, thinking in some ways this was like a chapter in them. None of them described how hard a wood table was on your back.

The table shook, sliding and scraping on the floor as it strained under their combined weight. More books tumbled to the floor.

She cried out.

He groaned.

Then there was silence except for laboured breathing and

unfinished sentences of affection.

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There's a small book store on Conner Avenue and there are a lot of people crowded inside. But then, how often does an engagement party occur in a bookstore?

## About the Author

NS Howard lives in eastern Alberta. He is married with two kids and a dog. He enjoys the wide open spaces of a semi-rural life and when he's not working, writing or fishing, can be found driving his quad or in winter, his snowmobile.

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