

On The Sly

by Ron Earl Phillips

She was a sucker punch.

Mr. Cowley didn't see her coming. The red head just appeared curves and all with a blue dress on. Not his typical clientele. At Coglin's, one of the nicer department stores in the city, Mr. Cowley, Senior Men's Salesman, usually dealt with gentlemen of a certain stature, wealthy old geezers.

I can't remember the last time I saw anyone south of fifty shopping Coglin's Men's department. So a sharp twenty-something in a blue dress that hugged just enough to separate the woman from the girls was a welcomed eyesore. Mr. Cowley was all grin and fluster as he approached her.

She was looking over the men's handkerchiefs, displayed in a flourish of color across the counter. Mr. Cowley said something, all shakes and jitters, and her smile was just enough sweetness to settle him. Both were smiles as they talked over the handkerchiefs. She would lift one up to his chest, say something on the color I supposed. Each time Mr. Cowley would go flush with color. And the two would laugh softly.

I wasn't sure who was doing the selling here.

When I was sure Mr. Cowley would burst he took a handkerchief from the pile, a blue silky number that matched her dress, and walked behind the counter. That's when pleasure became business. I saw her slip a handkerchief or two into her purse.

Mr. Cowley returned with a small box, handkerchief already folded inside. She was smiles again taking the box. She took a slip from Mr. Cowley, signing it before passing it back. A brief thank you, good-bye and she left.

I stepped over to the counter.

"Beckner."

He nodded. I returned the favor.

"Cowley."

He straightened the handkerchiefs.

"That girl who was just here?"

"Oh, you saw her?" He smirked. "How could you not? She was delicious. Just your type I imagine? Not the kind of lot you get to see since they moved you downstairs, is it?"

"No, not at all."

He was trying to goad me. Turn the screws.

He thought me to be a ladies' man. Perhaps I was, but it was better than being a prudish old man at a men's sales counter.

I mentally shrugged it off.

"Anyway, I saw she signed for the purchase instead of paying cash."

"Yes. She's a secretary, I gather, for Dan Meyers. Said she was picking up a gift for a client. A sweet girl, she was. To be young again and rousting about with a beauty like ..." He paused. Looking at the signed slip. "Carrie Llewellyn."

Mr. Cowley sighed.

"Carrie Llewellyn, you say."

I turned, not explaining, I followed her out the way she left.

"Good luck," he said. I heard a chuckle.

I didn't have to go far. She was sitting at a table outside of Del Toros just across the street from Coglin's scanning a menu.

Her blue dress was cinched up above her knees and a car nearly hit me as I absently crossed the street.

The car's horn blared.

I rose up my arms, "Sorry, sorry."

She saw me coming. I half waved.

"Carrie ... Carrie Llewellyn?"

I ran my hand down smoothing my tie.

She smiled her sweet smile again.

"Yes?"

"I saw you in Coglin's."

"As I did you."

She gestured to the open chair in front of her.

"Would you like to sit?"

"Thank you."

Normally I'm smooth with the ladies, but Carrie was different. I reached in my jacket and pulled out a pack of Pall Malls and shook one free. Between my lips I lit it and inhaled. Then let it go.

"No, Ms. Llewellyn, I saw you."

I gestured to her purse.

"While Old Cowley's back was turned you helped yourself to a couple more handkerchiefs. Slipped them right into that pretty blue handbag."

"Well, it seems you've caught me Mr."

She was sharp, and it wasn't the dress and the curves or the long curls of her red hair that made her that way. Coy and calculated, she had an edge.

"Beckner. Chance Beckner. I'm a house detective at Coglin's."

"I gathered that Mr. Beckner. So what are we going to do?"

"Normally, I wouldn't have let you leave the store. Then you bought the handkerchief. On credit even. So that makes you a valued customer. I guess."

Her eyes glinted.

"So it's because I'm a valued customer? Not because you find me attractive?"

"Well, I can't say that didn't have anything to do with it. You're a lovely woman, Ms. Llewellyn."

"I'm glad you noticed. The handkerchiefs were just a guarantee. I wanted you to follow me. Apprehend me, if you will. Silly, isn't it?"

"I don't get you?"

"Don't be so vacant, Mr. Beckner. You're an attractive man."

She reached into her purse.

"Let me give you the handkerchiefs and we can start over."

Pulling them out with the contents of her purse. The box with the blue handkerchief and a long blue envelop fell to the ground in opposite directions.

She bent down and retrieved the box.

I grabbed the envelope.

"Here you go."

She rejected it.

"Oh, that's yours."

Mine? I looked at the envelop with my name on "Charles Elliot Beckner."

"I don't understand?" I said removing the papers inside.

"Mr. Beckner, you have been dutifully served on behalf of my employer Daniel Meyers, Esq. and your wife Eleanor Fife Beckner. Divorce papers. I'm sorry."

She seemed almost apologetic.

I wasn't going to ask why. I knew why Ele wanted a divorce.

She handed me the errant handkerchiefs. I shoved them in my pocket absently.

"Why charade? Why buy the handkerchief?"

She smiled. Not innocent or sweet, rather a little guilty and nervous.

"It's a present."

Carrie Llewellyn handed me the box, got up and left.

Inside was the blue handkerchief. Color same as the dress. Under the lid was scribbled.

*When things straighten out,
you'll need a little color in your life.*

Call me,

Carrie.

Her number was included.

Sucker punch.

