

Author Note

This is a short story that led to a novel that led to a series. George charmed me so much I had to share his story. I also insisted, despite one critique partner asking me “Why is he here?” and another sure that George and Jane were going to become a couple, never mind Jane’s almost old enough to be his mother.

I had other plans for George and Barb in my first novel in a new series, *Jane in St. Pete*. By the end of that book (due out this fall) I knew I was going to write a series and George and Barb would be recurring characters. At the moment, I am busy writing Book 2 of the “Jane in St. Pete Mystery” series. But this short story, written on a whim, was the beginning of it all.

I’m giving my readers this short story because September is my website’s birthday. Since 2002 (Yes, www.cynthiaharrison.com is soon to be 18 years old!) I’ve always done giveaways to mark the moment in my life when I finally felt like a writer. I hope you like this years’ gift. And thank you for reading. ~ Cindy

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The Charming Criminal

a short story

by Cynthia Harrison

George stashed the cards he'd picked up from Pauly's last night, a Visa and a Nordstrom, in his work wallet. In his crummy bedroom in a dump of a flat in Detroit, his wardrobe lay on his single bed. Department store cards were a pain, so he'd do the high-end handbags at Nordstrom and party with the Visa later. He pulled a mint Polo shirt over his head and zipped the neutral Tommy Bahama shorts. Nike running shoes, forest green, completed his shopping ensemble. The shoes not only looked the part, but at times did double duty when he had to make a run for it.

He tucked the wallet into a pocket and grabbed a ball cap. Tigers today although they were playing like shit, dead last in the league this year. He tried on a pair of Ray Bans, felt dissatisfied. He'd hit the Sunglass Hut for some Maui Jim's before Nordstrom. There was no rule about snagging merch for yourself during the job. One could argue that disguise was an important part of the role.

An hour later, he stood in the purse section of Nordstrom, glancing at a bag, not faking his lack of actual interest. His new Maui Jims dangled from one hand. He heaved a sigh, not too exaggerated, glanced again at the bag and away. Picked it up from its acrylic perch, checked the maker but not the price. Put the bag down. A woman came over to him from behind the sales counter.

“Anything I can help you with?”

She had a nice smile, plump bottom lip, a tiny gap between her front white teeth. Her white blouse had pin tucks down the front and her black pencil skirt skimmed her knees. He looked for the giveaway in her black heels, but no red sole. Of course not. She was a salesgirl. She might sell pricey shoes, but she didn't wear them. One pair might set her back a couple month's pay. Unless she knew where to shop. Like at Pauly's pop up store that never used the same location twice and was only open for two hours or until one of the crew spotted a cop car.

Her eyes were blue like the sapphires he'd scored from the jewelry store last week. She was blonde and he'd love to know if the color was natural. *Slow down dog*, he told himself. To her, he asked if the purse was the new season.

“Yes. We just got them in this week.”

“Other colors?”

“Let me show you.” She turned to walk from the center aisle into her lushly carpeted sales area.

He followed. Her ass was perfect. That didn't happen every day. A subtle rose scent trailed behind her. It distracted him so that he almost ran into her when she stopped at the Coach display.

He looked at the purses, trying to get his face to say he was debating.

“I’ll tell you what my problem is,” he said.

She smiled. Not polite, but like she was really enjoying this. “I’m here to help,” she said.

How old was she? 27? 28? *Stop. Now. Focus.*

“I have a mother, three sisters, and two nieces. They’re all getting purses, but I don’t know from handbags.”

“Gucci or Prada would be great for your mom. What’s her favorite color?”

“Red.”

She opened one of the locked cases and pulled out a quilted red Prada with a gold clasp and gold link chain shoulder strap.

“One done,” he said. “Five to go.”

“The younger girls would like Alexander McQueen. He does some fun things.”

“As long as you can find two that are different colors, I’m sold.” She pulled two purses, embellished with different sequin patterns, out of a drawer under the glass display counter, adding them to the Prada.

George nodded.

“Now for your sisters, I’d say Gucci or Fendi.”

He followed her over to yet another glass display case.

“I love your eyes,” he said. Damn, he had not meant to say that out loud.

Those eyes met his, opened a tiny bit wider. Her eyebrows shot up.

“They’re such a cool blue. I need at least one blue purse.” *To remember you by,* he thought but did not say. “Just find three more, one of them blue, and you’ve made a

sale.” He should not be flirting during work hours, but it would be over soon. He didn’t care about the purses. But he sure would like to get to know her better. He had a firm rule: no mixing business and pleasure.

George let his salesgirl choose the bags, one of them blue, and followed her to the sales counter. He propped his sunglasses over the brim of the ballcap as he got out his nicely weathered work wallet. Opened it so she could see his (fake) black American Express. Stuck the stolen store card into the slot and signed the screen. The sale went through without a hitch.

She carefully folded the final purse into a sheaf of tissue paper before adding it to his stash. She came around the counter to hand him the bags, but she stopped just short of handing him the bags. They looked right into each other’s eyes. She was so hot.

“Thanks for all your help,” he said, reaching for the bags.

“You’re under arrest,” she replied.

Before he knew it, she’d dropped the bags and zip tied his hands behind his back.

“Wha...?” At first, he couldn’t compute. He’d never been caught before, had a whistle clean record. He was like an actor, so good at his job. Until now.

She finished reading him his rights, then turned away, as a guy in a suit took him by the arm. Crime scene people had come from nowhere, were already diligently processing the scene. She nodded at the suit and walked away. The sweet swing of the fine ass under her skirt killed him.

“Don’t cry,” said the suit, pushing him forward into a walk. “You’ll see her again soon.”

This made George happy. He’d never been smart, or so everyone told him, but even he knew it was stupid to get excited about seeing his undercover salesgirl again. He couldn’t help it. They kind of did the same thing for a living. Just on different sides of the law.

“You two Feds?” George had heard Pauly complain about the Feds sniffing around. If even one of his cards had come from out of state, he was doomed. The suit didn’t answer, just shoved George’s head down as he loaded him into an unmarked car. Hot FBI girl was not in the vehicle.

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Barb spotted the suspect about a half hour after she’d taken her place behind the sales counter. “Incoming,” she discreetly said to her partner, Cal. She angled her face so he wouldn’t notice her talking to herself.

“He’s just walked in,” she said into her almost invisible earpiece. “He’s wearing a navy Tigers ball cap, a mint Polo shirt and taupe Tommy Bahama shorts. Fancy running shoes, forest green.”

“Got it,” Cal said, from deep inside the menswear department across the aisle.

She casually watched the suspect glancing at a Coach bag, his sunglasses dangling from one hand, not showing a lot of interest. Nice work. Her suspect, George Sanders, was better at this than the old boys figured. Pretending to pretend disinterest. He’d be a good one to have on their side. With his help, she could bring down the

Detroit crime ring currently reigning terror down on the city, and show the men in the field office exactly what a female agent could do.

“Anything I can help you with?”

She smiled her nicest smile, showing more teeth than usual. She'd dressed with a salesperson's salary in mind. Even on an FBI salary, she couldn't afford what Nordstrom's sold. Neither could he, without the stolen credit cards. Everything went off without a hitch, although she'd been surprised when he'd asked her to find a purse the color of her eyes. Was he flirting or was this part of the scam? Not a big deal. If she had her way, he'd eventually become a damn good confidential informant.

She had a feeling he had no idea what kind of scum his bosses were, what kind of horrific crimes they committed, all much worse than mere credit card scams. And that worked to her advantage. She sensed at least half a heart in the guy.

She stopped home before returning to the field office, changed out of her sales clerk outfit and put on a pair of casual jeans. Just to mess with him, she pulled out her favorite purse with big splashes of blue that matched her eyes. Then she drove downtown.

Duffy, the agent in charge, met her at the door. Cal was with him. They'd already sketched out the plan. Show time.

“Is he ready?” Barb asked.

“Yeah.” Duffy checked out her tight ripped jeans. “Nice. He'll be put at ease by the outfit.”

“I think so.”

“So you lead on this. Cal and I will be listening in next door. We’ve got you covered should there be need to interrupt before Cal’s cue to join you. I don’t anticipate any problems. I know you can do this.”

Turning her first criminal was a huge opportunity for Barb, but she’d earned it by reeling Sanders in.

“Thanks, Duff.” They headed down the hall, Cal and Duffy peeling off a door before the interrogation room.

When Barb entered, Sanders had his head hanging down like a dog, but it snapped up. He glared at her. She kept her cool, looked around the table.

“Didn’t anyone get you coffee? Water? Are you hungry?”

“Nobody said shit to me. I’ve been sitting here for over an hour and I haven’t even gotten a damn phone call.”

“We’ll get to that, but first would you like something to drink?”

“I could use a beer.”

She laughed, zipped open her purse and handed him the water she’d stashed inside. She took the seat across from him.

He cracked opened his water and drank half of it down.

“Listen, Mr. Sanders—”

“George is fine.”

“Okay, George. I’m Special Agent Barb Stone. Good performance today. I would have believed you if I’d been anybody other than who I am.”

“A Fed.” George said, not looking at her.

“Yes. Are you aware of the various other enterprises your bosses are into?”

“Well, it’s got to be more than credit card scams, but no, I don’t ask questions. I take the cards and deliver the merch.”

Barb lifted her index finger. “Drugs.” She held up another finger. “Prostitution.” Up went a third finger. “Human Trafficking.” She lay her hands down on the table. “Sexual assault of minors. Kidnapping of minors. There’s more, but you see the problem?”

“I didn’t know that stuff. Never saw it. Never heard about it.”

“I believe you, George. You seem like an okay guy.” She locked eyes with him. “No priors, not even a DUI.”

“I am aware.”

“We’ve been watching you for a while now, and we think you could get out of this with probation if you become a confidential informant. My confidential informant. You’d work with me; we’d bring these guys down together. Back up team, of course. But for the job, I’ll be your girlfriend. Think they’d buy it?”

“Shit. I can’t be no rat. I’m not made that way.”

Barb had expected him to resist. “So you’re looking at ten years in Jackson.”

This was Cal’s cue and he walked in right on time. He pulled out the chair next to Barb and sat down.

“Maybe twelve,” Cal said to George. Then to Barb “You’re getting nowhere with this guy, Stone.” Cal used her last name and a subtle derogatory tone on purpose, to soften up George. Get him on Barb’s side. “Let’s get him his phone call, book him, and lock him up.” He scraped his chair, got up, headed for the door.

“Wait a minute,” George said. “You’d be my girlfriend?” He looked at Barb.

“Yes. And we would need to practice. We’d have to be convincing.”

Barb thought George was basically a nice guy, probably grew up poor, got in over his head. He had a soft side. She'd seen it right away. What kind of guy thinks up a scam that involves buying expensive purses for all his female relatives just for the hell of it?

"Okay, I'll do it."

Cal left the room. George looked surprised.

"He's bringing the paperwork. You need to sign first. Then we start rehearsing."

"Where?"

"We have a hotel room for you. Safe. If anyone sees you, you'll be with me, so it looks real."

"And we practice?"

"Yes. I've got a script."

George caught his breath.

"Cool it, cowboy. They'll be listening. This is a job. Just like any other job. Got it?"

Barb kept her tone even. She thought she could handle George Sanders.

Cal came back with the agreement. Sanders read through it at a steady speed, then signed.

She'd done it. After too many years on the job doing basic dull paperwork, she'd turned her first criminal. The rush was incredible. Her chest exploded with joy. She did not allow her feelings to touch her work face, but this was the biggest day in her career.