
ROUTINE PERSUASION

by Julie Cordova

The call came in at precisely 11:47 p.m. Officer Roger Zephyr acknowledged it and gave it little thought as he drove through the winding streets. The night weighed on him. Bedroom lights coming from the rows of homes whispered of warmth radiating from the inner sanctums, teasing the emptiness of the night and the few who lingered out in its vastness.

As he pulled up behind the parked Lexus, he noted a figure sitting in the front seat.

The headlights were out.

When Roger stepped out of his patrol car, he noticed that the figure didn't move. With a hand on his gun, he approached the car cautiously.

A light flickered out from the house directly across the street. Right then, Roger knew the occupants of that house had been the ones to call the station. All of the high tech home security systems and guard dogs throughout the neighborhood did little to insure the owners of safety. He was often called to this park for suspicious vehicles. The call most often ended up being a man half-dressed, with a woman who usually was not his wife.

Roger wondered if another person was in this car after all, but maybe lying down, unseen. He reached the driver's window and glanced down at the man's lap. Nothing. Just an oversized belly covered with a pinstriped shirt, contrasting against dark, tailored pants.

The man stared straight ahead. Roger used his flashlight to tap the window. The man turned slowly and looked at him. Then as if suddenly awakened from a deep sleep, he lowered the window. "I'm sorry, Officer. What can I do for you?"

"For starters you can tell me why you're parked here."

The man looked around as if embarrassed. "I was just thinking."

"Can I see your license and registration, please?"

"Certainly," the man said, reaching into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. "The address on my license is still my legal residence, but I haven't really lived there for the past few months," he added, handing over the identification before looking for the registration.

Roger read the name and address quickly. "Sanders Street? That would be just two blocks that way, wouldn't it Mr. Collins?"

"Yes. My wife still lives there. She kicked me out about six months ago. We're getting divorced."

"I'm sorry," Roger said, silently examining the man and his condition. His wing-tipped shoes were unmoving. His hands rested on the bottom half of the steering wheel. He showed no signs of edginess, which made Roger happy. He didn't want any hassle, especially with this large man who surely doubled him in weight.

"Have you been drinking, Mr. Collins?"

"No," he said with an almost undetectable shake of his head. "I've

never really been a drinker." He added with a slight laugh, "Maybe if I had been, my wife wouldn't have gotten so bored with me. I work all the time. I'm addicted to my job. From what she said, that was our biggest problem."

Roger leaned closer to the window. There was no hint of alcohol. He glanced at the passenger seat and contemplated the suit jacket tossed atop a briefcase. He bit his lip, wondering if he should be worried over its contents. "So you haven't had any alcoholic substances this evening"?

"No, sir, I haven't."

Roger moved the light into the man's eyes. Before Collins blinked and turned away, Roger was assured that he was sober. He then asked a few pertinent questions about Collins' employment, along with the phone number and the address currently being used. The man answered them all with an unthreatened tone. "Thank you," Roger concluded. "I'll just take a minute to run everything through the proper channels. Can you please remain . . ."

"My wife said I was a stranger."

"Yes, sir, well I'll just . . ."

"What kind of a reason is that? After all the years we've been married. I just don't understand. Can you believe she'd say something so off the wall"?

The words were slightly different, but the message was the same he'd been hearing for months. "I wouldn't know about that, sir. Please remain in your car while I check your plates."

As if he didn't hear, the man continued, "I've been spending the last six months telling ex-wife jokes at the office, pretending her words did not affect me, but you want to try and guess what she's doing tonight"?

Roger looked toward Sanders Street again. Images of a faceless woman wrapped in her lover's arms came to him. Flashes of the same woman packing up the last of her belongings also found a way into his mind.

"I'll tell you," the man said, not waiting for Roger's answer. "She's celebrating."

"Is that so?" Roger studied the man's movements carefully as he combed back his hair and rubbed his cheek.

"All of our friends and family are at the house for her graduation."

Roger felt his brows rise.

"I knew she was taking a few classes here and there, but I didn't know she was ready to graduate. I called her earlier, and she told me she was in the middle of her party. So, of course, I wanted to know party for what? I heard her sigh into the phone, and then she told me.

"I didn't even ask her what her major was. I was too ashamed. I just apologized for interrupting the party and hung up the phone."

Silence fell between the two men. Roger wondered if he should ask

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the dispatcher to call for assistance. If he had the guy picked up for a psych eval, it would mean at least an hour's worth of paper work for him, and he was due off in fifteen minutes. His friends were already at the bar, waiting to buy him a cold one. He decided the man just needed some time to do what he'd been doing...thinking.

"I'll check the plates now."

"I've just been trying to remember the text books left around the house. The papers I saw. The conversations she'd had with me when she talked about her classes...and I just can't remember what she said her major was."

Roger nodded and shifted his weight to the other leg. The man's obvious despair made him uncomfortable. "Sir, I'm sure you'll be fine, but if you'd like, I can help you get in touch with a doctor."

Collins looked at him suddenly and laughed. "No, I'll be fine." He shook his head, mumbling. He explained, "I just keep remembering how I thought things would be. You know, back when I was in college and planning my life. I had ambitions to make lots of money and then retire to some fishing town. I made my money, and, in the meantime, my kids grew up, my wife became this incredible woman, and I missed it all. I'm a success, and I have nothing to show for it. I'm alone. If I retire now, the thought of hanging out in a small town without my wife...it just isn't appealing. I missed my chance."

Roger studied the vast park on the other side of the car. He knew the park to be full of luscious gardens and tall fountains, yet in the dark cover of night the open space appeared empty. A familiar ache of loneliness seized him, and he sighed. The sweet memory of the love he once had. Long talks, about nothing in particular. Making love until dawn. Eagerness to get home and see her face, her smile. He cleared his throat and spoke as honestly as he could to this stranger, "Why don't you go home and try to talk to your wife?"

"I'd like that," the man whispered. A small line of moisture appeared along the bed of his lashes. His nose reddened. Just then, high pitched ringing filled the car. He looked toward the passenger seat and retrieved a cellular phone.

"Maybe that's her," Roger said.

"No. She never calls me on this thing. It's probably a client who needs some late night assistance."

Roger wanted to step away, to give the man privacy, yet at the same time part of him was curious to see what the man would do. The ringing continued. Collins looked at Roger directly. Roger could see the pain swimming deep in his eyes. "I seem to be at a crossroads, don't I?"

"Yes sir," Roger agreed. His apprehension left him, and on intuition he handed back the papers he'd been holding. "I'm going to have to ask that you limit your stay here, Mr. Collins. You have a nice evening and good luck."

Collins took hold of his documents while clutching the phone.

Roger returned to the patrol car. The ringing stopped. From where Roger sat he could not tell if the man were talking into the receiver or not. The flashing lights pulsating against the exterior of the car quieted.

After shutting off his own car, he reported to the dispatcher and canceled the call. As he broke the transmission with her, he heard a car door slam and saw the headlights flash on Collins' Lexus. He watched as the car drove away.

Roger was unaware that he was holding his breath until after the car passed Sanders Street. He groaned and whispered aloud, "You schmuck." A wounded ache filled him.

He reached for his clip board and filled out the report. When he turned on his own headlights, he noticed an object lying in the street directly in front of him. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped out of the car to investigate.

A cellular phone was perched along the gravel-covered blacktop. A good servant, standing at attention, waiting patiently to serve its master.

It rang. Roger bent and picked it up. He let the ringing continue as he debated how to return the item to its rightful owner and whether or not he should. Then the silence, left in the sudden wake of the quiet phone, startled him.

He looked at his patrol car before glancing at his watch. Images came to him of the familiar smoke-filled bar and the greeting he received when encountering his buddies. The slaps on his back, the laughter, the wife bashing, the tequila chasers teasing his palate.

Then, her. Sleeping alone in their bed. Waking in the morning, trying to keep the kids quiet while he slept.

Her eyes. Her smile.

He stepped up into the vastness of the shrouded park. After one last glance toward Sanders Street he dialed the phone. She answered quickly. Sleep filtered her greeting.

"Hi, sorry to wake you."

"Is everything okay?" she asked. The concern obvious in her voice.

"Everything's fine. I just thought maybe if you were up, you could wait for me."

"Aren't you going to the bar?"

"No, I was planning on coming straight home tonight."

After a pause she asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

Something caught in his throat. "Fine, I just really want to come home and spend time with the one person who means more to me than anything else in this world." There was no response. He waited. Finally he spoke, "Honey?"

Her voice whispered, "Yes."

"You okay?"

"I'll be waiting," she said. He could hear the tears salting her words.

"Okay, bye."

"Rog?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

He bit back the surprising warmth seeping into his throat, "I'm just finishing a routine call, I'll be home soon." ❖