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By

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Bright red blood oozed from a wound in his head while more blood spurted from the gaping hole on his left calf.

“Sir! Sir!” John Tsai said in a tight, tense voice, as he bent his long legs into a crouch. “Are you okay?”

No response.

“He’s unconscious. Check to see if he’s breathing,” I ordered.

John lowered his head so his face was next to the victim’s mouth. “Nothing.”

I pressed two fingers against the rubbery skin on the victim’s neck. No pulse. I shook my head.

“Let’s start CPR,” John said, kneeling down on the pavement beside the body.

I turned to the huddle gathered around us. “Make sure someone’s called 911 and go find the AED.” As I spoke, I pointed to someplace off yonder where the defibrillator was attached to a wall inside City Hall.

“And one of you put pressure on that wound.” The spurting blood from the calf hit the sleeve of my white long-sleeved t-shirt and spread into a dark red stain. Shit!

I swiped the back of my gloved hand across my brow, pushing renegade strands of long blond hair out of my face. Next time I went to an emergency I’d bring a hair band. And a clean shirt.

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Our Public Works receptionist, Cheryl Erickson, crouched next to us. Huge pink peace signs dangled from her ears. She slapped a gauze pad over the spurting blood. “Eeeeew!” she squealed. She looked a little green, but held firm.

John leaned over the body readying his arms and hands for chest compressions.

Dreary dark clouds swirled overhead like a washing machine filled with dirt. Great. Any moment it would start to rain. I gave John my best ‘you better listen to me buster’ look. “I am not doing breaths. No way.”

“You’ve got a mask! Use it.” John sounded a little panicked.

“No. I did it last time. Move over. I’m doing the chest compressions.”

John didn’t move. “You suck at chest compressions. I’m a guy. I’m bigger. I’ll do it.”

I glared back. John was always hogging the spotlight, trying to one-up everyone, and I was sick of it.

“Team one, your patient is dying.” Jeff, our barrel-chested firefighter first-aid instructor tapped his watch. “Over 30 seconds without breathing.”

Frowning at John, I knelt over the resuscitation dummy and slapped a plastic mouth guard over its face.

John started pushing down the chest with the heel of his hand. A rhythmic popping noise accompanied his counting, “One and two and three and...”

I jabbed my fingers under the dummy’s head, and cranked its chin back. When John said “twenty nine and thirty,” I stuck my mouth on the plastic and blew. Nothing. The dummy’s chest didn’t move.

“Pinch the nose,” Jeff, Mr. Patience, suggested.

“Oh, yeah.” I pinched the nose while holding the chin. I felt like an idiot. My knees ached from kneeling on concrete. Leaning my back in an awkward and painful position, and giving the whole class a view of my butt, I blew into the dummy’s mouth twice. Its chest raised and John started in again.

“Okay. That’s good.” Jeff said.

John and I scrambled to our feet. I brushed the debris off the knees of my jeans and shook my sleeve trying to dislodge the fake blood. No luck. I was marked. The rest of the class of city employees stepped back and gathered around Jeff.

“They did pretty well,” Jeff said. “What did you notice?”

Grant Russell eagerly raised his hand and spoke, “Kaitlyn killed the guy while she complained about not wanting to breathe, then did it wrong.”

Thanks for pointing that out. I glared at Grant, an overweight nerd who worked in Public Works doing data entry and other computer stuff, but fancied himself a field worker. John and Grant were my co-workers. Usually I made a point to get along, but today I found it a challenge.

The Mayor of our fine city was the one who decided all city employees needed to re-certify in first aid. The Mayor based his wise decision on direction from the real power, the City Manager. No one was very happy to be here.

I had no problem listening to the presentation, looking at gory pictures and discussing scenarios. But I found the hands-on practice--in the City Hall parking lot--corny and humiliating.

“Team One did very well. Always make sure the wound is taken care of—before you start compressions. It’s a lot of work if you’re just pushing blood out his leg,” Jeff said. “However, if Seattle has the 8.5 earthquake that’s sometimes predicted, you might have several people with multiple injuries from fallen debris. You’ll have to make choices on who to handle first—or at all. ”

“What would you do if the victim has big boobs?” asked Marcus Trask, another co-worker, as he ogled me like he wanted to open up my shirt and start compressing my chest.

“Push ‘em out of the way,” Jeff said not taking the bait.

I reflexively crossed my arms over my triple-D chest and glared back at Marcus. *You wish, you creep. You wish.*

“Who can remind us what triage means?” Jeff said.

And on it went. Luckily we ran out of time before Team One had to run another scenario. No more mouth-to-mouth on dummies today. I threw away my gloves, packed up my things, and prayed I’d never have to do it on a live person—ever.

I actually enjoy my job working for the City of Cedar Grove, Washington. I drive around in a city truck picking on citizens. I’m a CEO--Code Enforcement officer. Being youngish (38 and holding), a woman, and a well-endowed blond isn’t what most people picture when they think of code enforcement. But most of the time, I like the work. I put up with the riff raff like Marcus and Grant (the allure of government benefits, I guess. If I was in HR, I’d be more discerning in who I hired).

Sharon Stone patted my shoulder as we walked back toward City Hall, a long one-story former grocery store building. “Ignore them guys, Kaitlyn,” twanged Sharon. “That’s the only way to survive.” Sharon is no relation to the actress and no resemblance either. She’s a large black woman with a deep voice who sings perfect alto. Rows and rows of orange colored braids covered her head.

I picked discouragingly at the stain on my shirt, not feeling my usual cheery self.

“And don’t worry about that either. I’m sure fake blood comes out in a cold rinse.”

“Thanks, Sharon. Sorry I’m in a crabby mood.”

“It wasn’t so bad.”

Sharon is the kindest person I know. She’s the one I go to when I feel beat up because she could put a smile on my face on the worst day. She was also the one you wanted with you on a job when an angry homeowner decided they didn’t like your last posted notice. She was big and tough and didn’t take crap from anyone. Came from having ten siblings and now five kids.

“You weren’t the one with your butt up in the air,” I said.

“Nobody’s wantin’ to see my ass,” she replied. “I just had to whack that little rubber baby on the back. Shit. In my old neighborhood that was called child abuse.”

“It still is if the kid isn’t choking.”

We walked out of the parking lot and into City Hall. I needed to pick up my messages and make sure there weren’t any emergencies before going home. Usually about half of the little pink slips Cheryl left me contained abbreviated swear words. She’d come up with a very creative short hand for our messages. For example: *AH w/ rst-v wts U*. Some others in the office (Grant) didn’t get it, but I did. An asshole with a rusted vehicle in his yard wasn’t happy about his citation and request to move the car.

When I started in Code Enforcement I thought I was helping my community, cleaning up the streets. But lately it seemed more like a game. I tag something. Not an official ticket but a notice. The homeowner is ‘it’ and back and forth we go.

“I never got the notice.”

“What’s wrong with my fence?”

“I don’t see any trash in my yard.”

“You tryin’ to tell me how to run my own home?”

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Cheryl was back at her desk, a rounded counter inside the main entrance of the Public Works division of Cedar Grove City Hall. She perked up and waved a form at me as Sharon and I entered. “I got a live one for you, Sharon.”

Sharon looked at her watch. It was almost 5:00 PM. “Can I put it off until tomorrow, honey? I’ve got two kids home sick, one with a school project due, and two I need to track down and drag out of whatever trouble they’s in.”

“I don’t think so,” Cheryl said. “Guy sounded pretty pissed off and wanted action now. You’re up in the rotation.”

I glanced at Sharon. I saw the struggle between work and home in her face.

“I gots to get home to the kids,” Sharon said. “And if the homeowner’s that riled, it won’t be a short call.”

Cheryl, an average-looking 25-year-old brunette, looked like a quiet, shy wall flower. Not so. Her phone started to ring. She waved the piece of paper across the counter. “Sharon, take the frickin’ lead and go! I got stuff to do here.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, reaching over Sharon to grab the slip. “I’ll do it for you.”

Sharon looked relieved. “Really? You’ll do it?”

“Sure.” I nodded.

Cheryl hummed *We get by with a little help from our friends*.

“Cheryl, log me out to that address,” I said. “I’ll take the truck, then go straight home. Tomorrow I’ll stop back by the Tolefson’s and look at their dying tree.”

The Tolefson’s were personal friends of our Mayor and were quick to call him if we didn’t respond to their complaints right away. The tree in question was really on their property and therefore, their responsibility to remove. But they continued to argue it was on City property and we should pay for the removal.

I took the paper. Cheryl grabbed the phone, looking like she was about to scream at someone. Instead, she smashed the receiver against her ear and in an ultra calm, sweet voice said, “Cedar Grove Customer Service, how may I help you?” She paused and stuck her tongue out at me. “Absolutely, sir. Hold just a moment and I’ll transfer you.” She mouthed “go.”

“I’m going,” I whispered. “See ya round, Sharon.”

“Thanks again, K. Ciao.”

I headed for my portable office in a white Ford pick-up and my stash of Gummi Bears and Diet Coke. After the day I'd had, I could use some comfort food.

The address on the complaint form I'd wrestled from Sharon was on the west side of town, just a bit more than a mile from city hall. The neighborhood was a few blocks from the main drag, probably close enough to be zoned commercial or mixed use when the city grew. Just a few blocks away, I saw a small law office, a quilt shop, and an insurance agent in what looked like converted homes.

The street where the complaint came from was devoid of sidewalks. Houses sat on medium-sized lots with small patches of grass to pass for front yards. The houses were decent size; about 1,800 square feet each and were obviously built by the same builder. Even though they had different paint, different shutters, some with garages, some with carports, the basic design was all the same. Rambler-style, probably three bedrooms, one bath. Not mansions, but certainly bigger than my 900-square-foot cottage.

I pulled my truck in front of the address on the form and killed the engine. The blue sky we'd enjoyed the past few days was being overpowered, as if someone was painting over it with gray paint. A storm was a 'brewin.' September had come; summer's over. Sometimes the Northwest got another month of 'Indian Summer,' but it didn't look promising today. I could feel a nip in the air as the day sank toward its end. Before long, I'd have to dig out the coat, the hat, the gloves, the boots...

I took a few moments to peruse the complaint before I got out to investigate. It had been called in by a 'concerned neighbor' who asked to be left unnamed. They complained of strange noises and an odd smell coming from the backyard of house number 23505. The house in question, painted an ugly barn-red, had large windows in front looking out toward the street. They were swathed in drapes, so I couldn't see inside. A sizeable Douglas fir filled the corner of the front yard towering over a neatly tended patch of grass lined by beauty bark-covered flower beds. A few scattered weeds and grass patches poked through the bark. The backyard of the

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house pushed up against a green-belt; a gully that ran through this part of town and was our official watershed area.

The complaint form was brief. Not a lot recorded. A smell? That really didn't sound like my area of expertise. Unless they were storing garbage. Or toxic waste. I mostly enforce rules about how a property looks and how that look reflects on the neighborhood and the city. Abandoned cars, RV-type vehicles parked on non-approved surfaces, disputes about trees bordering city property or blocking sidewalks, ugly falling down fences, that kind of thing.

Most of our complaints tended to stem from the street-side of a property, but here nothing out of the ordinary was visible from the front of the house. I saw no cars in the cracked driveway so it was a safe bet to say the owners were not at home. All the better to investigate, my dear.

I slipped on my official City of Cedar Grove orange vest. It didn't come close to covering my boobs. I'd tried the men's XXL size, but it hung almost to my knees and the arm holes were huge. Cheryl teased me that they just didn't make them in a full-busted size. She's had sent one to a tailor for me, but it wasn't back yet. The vest was ugly but looked official and that was the point. I grabbed my clipboard and climbed out of my truck.

Around me, the world was still. An almost imperceptible breeze slid down the street blowing the first fallen leaves of the season into the storm drain. None of the houses on this block had children's toys in the front yard, so I assumed it was probably a neighborhood of working adults or older folks. Maybe most of the residents were still at the office. The house one over kitty-corner across the street had an SUV in the driveway but otherwise looked empty.

I walked slowly up the driveway of 23505. The house was a bit run down. A couple of gutters were crooked and one down spout hung loose away from the main gutter. The red paint on the house was faded in a few spots. The front windows didn't appear to be double-paned. That's an expensive heating bill. But those who couldn't afford the heating bill probably couldn't afford new windows. It was a vicious cycle I'd heard before from many people I called on. Our town, a suburb of Seattle, attracted mostly working-class folks who couldn't afford the big city. They stretched to buy a home then had trouble keeping up the repairs.

As a courtesy, I knocked on the door. No reply. I spotted a door bell button off to the left of the door, half hidden by an overgrown Rhododendron. I pressed it. A chime rang through the quiet house. No dogs barked. No cats jumped onto the windowsill to see who was calling. I

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walked to the north side of the house and tried the gate that presumably lead to the back yard. Locked. I sniffed. I did catch a whiff of an odd odor. Dirty? Rancid? What did they do, just leave their garbage in the backyard? That would be easy pickings' for the raccoons that lived in the gully.

Being the trained observer that I am, I sniffed again. And listened. We were near the freeway and I could hear the dull sound of traffic passing. In the very far off distance, I heard the echo of a ferry horn bouncing up from the waterfront ten miles away. And then the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood at attention. A weird feeling crept over me causing my neck to tingle and, for some reason, known only to my sub-conscious, my heart began to pound. I heard another noise. A whine. No. More like a moan.

Scanning the length of the house, I guessed there might be a gate at the other end. I jogged across the front yard and followed a stone path around the corner of the property. There was another gate. It stood wide open. One gate locked, one open. Odd.

Okay, so looking back I probably should have returned to my truck, picked up the radio, and called someone. We really aren't supposed to enter the back yard without permission.

But what if someone was injured? I should hurry to help them, right? Never mind I had just learned in class that you should always call 911 first in an emergency. But I didn't know what I was dealing with yet. I was on a first name basis with many of the local cops and I didn't want to humiliate myself by calling them in to rescue a cat in a tree.

So I went into the back yard. I sure wish I hadn't.

Behind the house, the backyard was rectangular and spread the length of the lot. Tall evergreens at the back of the property line created a green wall separating the yard from the gully. An enormous cherry tree, just starting to drop its dark red leaves, leaned across from the next-door-neighbor's property. Much of the ground was tiled with bricks. The ground I could see anyway. Other than a small walkway, the space was crammed with wire cages of all shapes and sizes, many stacked on top of each other.

The cages were filled with animals.

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Mostly cats and dogs. As I stepped farther in, the stench was suddenly overwhelming. Feces, wet animal hair, and something else. Something worse. All I could do was stand and stare. I think my mouth dropped open in shock, but I had to close it right away because the disgusting odor seemed to rush in. I gagged and put my arm over my mouth. Some of the animals noticed me and jostled in their cages trying to get my attention. Some never moved. Sleeping? Doubtful. My stomach clenched and my chest felt tight.

I took a few more tentative steps forward. One small gray dog in a cage to my right let out a feeble bark. The cat in the cage to my left hissed. The animals that weren't sleeping looked at me through milky eyes. They all had thin coats and skin covered in mange. A few more steps and I saw a caged ferret, then a gigantic raccoon. He was very much alive and his beady eyes followed me as I moved, his striped tail swishing menacingly. Deep breath—yuck.

It was by far the worst thing I had ever seen in my life. And I'd seen some gross things on this job. How could this filth, this cruelty be happening right here in my city? How had no one known? And why? What would possess someone to do this?

A movement on the ground caught my attention and the creepy prickly sensation on my neck was back. Something alive was not in a cage. My heart pounded wildly.

Oh, shit. I needed to get out of here. I started to back away but bumped into a cage. I grabbed at the wire frame to keep it from tipping. Inside, a thin gray cat hissed. I quickly let go and wiped my hands on my jeans.

I turned to escape when something caught my eye. It was a boot. Poking out from behind a cage. I twisted to see around the corner. Yep, a boot. Attached to a human foot. *Damn.*

Fighting the overwhelming urge to run away, I took a step forward, breathing shallowly through my mouth to avoid inhaling the revolting smell. I moved around a five-foot high, double-decker cage that held two small coffee-colored dogs, both lethargic. One tried to raise its head as I passed. The corners of its eyes were filled with yellow goo. It tried to look at me but seemed to decide I wasn't worth the effort.

"I am not getting paid enough for this," I said to the little dog. He turned his head slightly and looked at me with beseeching eyes.

I didn't want to look but something pushed me on. I peered around the end of the cage, my heart banging against my ribs. A man was attached to the foot, sprawled on his back; his left

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arm flung sideways, his right bent under his body. He had a red stain on his shirt and a lot of blood on the ground around the body. An acrid metallic scent drifted from the ground. My training from earlier in the day kicked in.

“Sir?” Pause. “Sir, are you okay?”

No response. My heart did cartwheels inside my chest. I wondered if I would have a heart attack and someone would have to come and do CPR on me. My stomach clenched as I squatted beside the body. The man appeared to be Hispanic, with a thin mustache and dark hair that fell over his ears. His skin looked pale and gray. I started to reach out and touch his neck when a white ball streaked past me. I was so startled I fell backward onto my butt. “Crap!”

Then... “Oh, Shit!”

One of the animals was loose! I scrambled to my feet, and looked around for the wild thing. Nothing. I thought it had been a cat, but I wasn't sure. If the thing was starving it might try to bite me. It could have a variety of unknown and disgusting diseases!

“I've got to get out of here,” I said to the guy who was obviously past the need for first aid. I hurried around the cages of dead or dying animals and made for my truck. I hadn't quite made it when my guts decided this experience was about as much fun as drinking paint thinner. I up-chucked into a flower bed.

Not a pleasant experience. My throat hurt and the after-taste was horrid, like battery acid with a backwash of curdled milk. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve (the sleeve already covered with a red stain from the fake blood earlier in the day).

I walked to my truck on shaky legs. When I pulled the door open, I saw my package of Gummi Bears on the passenger seat. I just about lost it again. I grabbed a water bottle from the little cooler behind my seat and took a swig and spit it out. Then I reached for my radio and contacted City dispatch, asking them to call the police.