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A Healing Justice

Chapter 1

Andrea turned her patrol car off the highway and started toward downtown. At last Halloween was over, and for a year she wouldn’t have to contend with injured and malicious trick-or-treaters. Now she could concentrate on drug dealers, domestic abusers, and burglars. Not that there were many. Most people were law-abiding in her community of twelve thousand people. No one had intentionally killed anybody since 1965.

As Andie made her way down Main Street, she waved to a boy whose stolen computer she’d found abandoned at the ferry dock, and to Haluk, whose Oriental rugs were yanked off hooks outside his shop and thrown into the street last March. She headed toward the druggies’ mecca: Mel’s Groceries’ parking lot. In the backseat Justice sensed a hunt for dealers might be on, and he panted with excitement. He was now her best friend and drug-sniffing K-9 partner.

When Andie drove into the parking lot, no dealers were hanging around and looking suspicious—not even the brazen one everybody called the Beast. She was about to check Waterfront Park when her cell rang: “Be Happy” with whistles and finger snaps.

Her friend Stephanie, the station’s senior police clerk, said, “Sorry to tell you, but the Laser Lady just called.”

*Groan.* Every few weeks Evelyn Bastrop insisted that her enemies had aimed lasers at her to annihilate her in a puff of smoke. “I’ll get over there and tell her we’ve turned on the shields.”

“That’s not the problem this time. It’s one of her cats. She’s scared he’s going to attack her.”

“Great. Let the cop get mauled.” Andie pictured claws hooked through her jacket sleeves and shredding her arms.

“We could always send over the SWAT team,” Stephanie joked.

Andie opened a vent to keep Justice’s breath from fogging the windows, drove six blocks, and stopped in front of the Laser Lady’s house. When on a “knock and lock” to serve an arrest warrant, Andie parked down the street so the suspect wouldn’t spot her car and escape through the back door. But the Laser Lady was as benign as the inflated Thanksgiving Pilgrims and turkeys in front of her white clapboard house. She’d hung a cornucopia of wheat shafts on her picket gate.

Andie turned around toward Justice, confined by metal bars to his half of the backseat. The other half was reserved for criminals, at whom he didn’t hesitate to growl. He was sitting in his usual ready-willing-and-able position, his front legs propping up his torso, his isosceles triangle ears alert for trouble.

“Okay, Big Guy, you want to visit the Laser Lady and check out a rebellious cat?” Andie asked.

As always, when about to confront any perp, no matter the species, Justice’s eyes shone. He loved the job as much as Andie did.

“You have to be on your best behavior. No kitty abuse.” Andie got out of the car, opened Justice’s door, and hooked a leash to his collar. When she stepped aside, he leapt to the street. All business, he heeled down the Laser Lady’s sidewalk to her house.

She answered the door in a fuzzy pink housecoat that matched her cheeks. Her blue eyes made Andie think of worn-out denim. Her only sign of what cops called a reality challenge was wild gray hair. Each strand seemed to spew out of her scalp, confused in which direction it should grow.

Andie flashed her shield, though the Laser Lady had seen it many times. “What’s up, Miss Bastrop? I hear something about an angry cat.”

“It’s Alistair. One of my ferals. He’s got a perfectly good home in the shed out back, but this morning I found him in my kitchen cabinet.”

“How’d he get in the house?”

“I must have left the back door open.” The Laser Lady’s hands fluttered like wrens that Alistair would love to catch. “I went to get some tea, and he hissed. Scared me half to death.”

“He didn’t jump out?”

“No, he acts like he intends to sit on my shelf forever.”

“May we see him?”

At “we,” the Laser Lady glanced suspiciously at Justice, as if she thought he might sink his teeth into Alistair’s neck.

“Don’t worry about him. He loves cats. His best friend is a tabby,” Andie reassured her.

Though the Laser Lady looked at him as if he belonged on her paranoia list, she led him and Andie to the kitchen, where he politely stationed himself beside the stove.

When Andie opened the cabinet door wide enough for a peek at Alistair, the cat snarled. His glare informed her, as loud and clear as an ambulance siren, *Open that door another inch and you’re doomed.* He hissed.

He was sumptuous, part Siamese. He had buck fangs. His face’s dark markings made his nose look like it was veering left, and the ragged tears in his ears testified to fights and vanquished foes. But Andie refused to be intimidated. She’d faced down worse than Alistair. If he took her to the mat, she’d win.

Justice also refused to be intimidated. When Andie opened the cabinet all the way, he and Alistair locked eyes, and Alistair snarled again. Justice might love cats, but, to him, trespassers were intolerable. He assumed his most elegant Czar Nicholas posture and gave Alistair an imperious look that let him know, *You are an impertinent little twit.*

Andie rested her fists on her hips and stared down Alistair. “Okay, buddy, you’re guilty of criminal trespassing in the first degree. That can get you ninety days in jail and a thousand-dollar fine. Now out.”

Alistair did not budge.

“If you don’t get out of here, I’ll ad loitering to your crimes, and that will bring your fine up to thirteen hundred dollars.” Andie walked across the kitchen and opened the back door to provide an escape. “You’ve got a good home out there. Now beat it! Scram!” Andie clapped her hands to make sure he got the idea.

Anyone would have expected him to make a run for it. But Alistair’s scowl and defiant eyes informed Andie, *You want me out, you make me go. How would you like being ripped to confetti?*

“He’s brave.” The Laser Lady tugged nervously at a bathrobe sleeve.

“Let’s try Plan B.”

Plan B called for a bowl of Meaty Treat, heated in the microwave for an irresistible smell and set outside the doorway—and a line of Pounce leading to it like crumbs leading Hansel and Gretel out of the forest. As Andie readied Plan B, Justice’s nostrils flared and let her know he’d love a snack, but, for a Czar Nicholas dog like him, lunging at lures would be unseemly.

When they were in place, Andie urged, “Come on, kitty. We don’t have all day. Give us a break.”

So that Alistair would feel safe—not that a rabid boar could frighten that cat—Andie, Justice, and the Laser Lady went to the living room of chintz sofas, organdy curtains, and cat figurines. Andie asked the Laser Lady about her Thanksgiving plans. Andie brought up the weather. Justice looked back toward the kitchen and chuffed frustrated breaths that asked, *Why are you mollycoddling that ill-mannered peon?*

The Laser Lady was unaware of Justice’s contempt toward Alistair. She was more concerned about her enemies. “Thank goodness no lasers are aimed at me today. Alistair is all the trouble I can handle.” She swiped at her nose with a crumpled tissue. “Usually communists are behind the attacks. Or Republicans. Lately I’ve been wondering if the man down the street might be involved. He dropped a piece of green string on my sidewalk last summer.”

“Green string, hmm?” Andie asked tactfully. “How about we check on Alistair?”

In the kitchen, Plan B had worked its magic. The Pounce had disappeared, and on the porch Alistair was smacking Meaty Treat. Andie closed the back door.

When she signed up to be a cop, she’d thought she’d be chasing criminals, not squatter cats. But, whatever the task, she’d been put on earth to do her work. Like father, like daughter. Andie took pride in wearing his shield.

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Andie’s headlights shone through heavy fog as she and Justice traveled down her driveway through the woods. The moon hid behind clouds and made the night feel gloomy. She was glad to get home after a long day of Alistair, a man whose chicken statue had been stolen from his yard, and a couple who’d come upon a vagrant hiding in their basement. Just as Andie had been about to leave for home, an Iraq vet’s wheelchair batteries had gone dead in a crosswalk, and he and the dachshund who rode in his lap had kept her at work an extra hour.

Now at nine fifteen it was time to leave behind her work and hang up her Kevlar vest and duty belt, to which were attached twenty-seven pounds of equipment. She’d build a fire in her potbellied stove, fix Justice his kibble and canned Chicken Supreme, and reheat white bean soup for herself. After dinner, she’d whip up a batch of Bad Guy Macaroons for her colleagues, then cuddle up with Justice under her Courthouse Steps quilt. They’d watch *Wild Kingdom* on Animal Planet, his favorite channel, and he’d rest his head on her lap and get his bliss expression—his eyes half-closed, the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile.

As Andie anticipated this peaceful evening, her headlights shone on her birdfeeder, tossed out of the plum tree by marauding raccoons. She pulled up to the parking area in front of her house, and the motion-detection light did not turn on. Yesterday she’d forgotten to change the bulb. *Drat. Another chore for the morning.* She turned off the ignition, got out her flashlight, and climbed out of the car.

Eager for freedom, Justice whimpered as she opened his door. The instant his paws touched the ground, he changed from a responsible K-9 to a joyful puppy. He pranced around her legs, swished his tail, and whined. *Whoopee! No leash! We’re home!* He dashed to the rhododendrons, where Rosemary, Meghan’s cat and his best tabby friend, often sprang out at him like a jack-in-the-box.

Andie expected Justice to sniff around for Rosemary, and if she wasn’t there he’d bound up the stairs to the porch. But he froze. He pricked his ears. Every muscle in his body tensed, alert. He stepped forward and, growling, peered toward the woods. Barking low-pitched rumbles from deep inside his chest, he shot into the darkness.

He could be after a coyote, or raccoons might be snooping around for more birdseed—plenty of wildlife roamed the island. Andie called, “Justice, come! Come back here!” For the first time since his K-9 graduation, he didn’t come back. *What’s going on*?

Wind swayed the firs as Andie shone her flashlight toward the woods and started after him. When she scanned the underbrush, the light’s beam passed a man crouched in jeans and a black hoodie that concealed his face. Her breath caught in her throat. *Who is* that*?! What’s he doing here?* When she aimed the light directly at him, he rose from the bushes. Justice closed in, snarling, then stopped, as if he recognized who was there.

The man raised his arm. Andie’s flashlight glinted off something metal in his hand. *A Gun? A flashlight? A cell phone?* Andie squinted into the shadows and strained to make out what it was. Her heart sped up as her training kicked in. “Police! Who are you? I see a knife!”

Her shouts seemed to startle the man. He dropped his hand to his side. Justice growled and barked again.

Andie yelled, “What are you doing here? Put down the knife!”

The man raised it above his head. He lunged at Justice and stabbed him. A shriek echoed through the woods—a sound Andie would never forget. Another stab and shriek. Whimpering, Justice sank to the ground

*No! NO! Not Justice!* Fury heated Andie’s face. Her pulse pounded at her temples. She screamed, “Stop! Drop the knife! Put up your hands! Do it *now!*”

The man came toward her. When the knife flashed, it looked like a machete, smeared in blood. Her vest stopped bullets, but not blades. He could slash her to pieces. Terror zigzagged like lightning through Andie. *Justice can’t help me. I’m alone.*

She had no time to run behind the car for safety. It was too late to Tase or Mace the man. If those defenses didn’t stop him, he’d stab her before she could get out her gun and shoot. *She* had to stop him. Now. By herself. *I don’t want to die.*

Andie pushed the red emergency-call button on her radio and drew her GLOCK from its holster. Her hands trembling, she took aim. “Get on the ground, or I’ll shoot. Do you hear me? Stop! Or I’ll shoot.”

He was deaf, or bullets didn’t scare him. He raised the knife above his head and charged.

*Shoot or don’t shoot. I don’t want to do it. Decide. He’s going to kill me. I don’t want to hurt him. Decide!*

Andie gritted her teeth, steadied her aim. A running target. She fired. He kept coming. *This can’t be happening!* She shot again. Not eight feet from her, the man fell to his knees, then topped onto his chest.

Andie tried to control her voice’s shaking as she spoke into her radio. “Eight-two-two.” Her police ID number. She realized that she was panting. She could hardly swallow. “Shots fired. I need help at my house. One on the ground at gunpoint. Eight-one-five just stabbed.” *Please, Justice, my beloved eight-one-five, don’t die.*

She riveted her eyes on the man, sprawled on his face in front of her, his arms outstretched like he was crucified. She hated him for hurting her dog. *The man could be pretending to be shot. He could jump up and come at me again.* “Stay on the ground!” she yelled so hard her throat burned.

With slow, cautious steps, she approached him. She nudged his foot with hers. “Can you get up?” she demanded.

When he didn’t respond, she stepped over to his knife and kicked it out of reach. She saw Justice dragging himself across the grass toward her. To his dying breath, he’d try to protect her, and everything in her wanted to run to him. But their safety required that she secure the man. She ordered him, “Put your hands behind you.”

No movement. *He might be waiting for the right second to attack again.*

“Now. Hands behind you *now!”* she shouted. *Maybe he* is *hurt.*

She holstered her gun and cuffed his wrist, then yanked the other wrist behind his back and cuffed it too. When she rolled him on his side, she saw a pool of blood, then his ashen face. He moaned and fluttered his eyelids.

Andie gasped. *It can’t be. It just can’t.*

“Christopher, what are you *doing?!”* A kid from down the road. Years ago she’d bought a Cub Scout raffle ticket from him, and countless times she’d waved to him, pedaling along on his dirt bike, his knobby knees sticking out at odd angles, his baseball hat backward. That was her image of him, not this brute who was sprawled at her feet.

Andie checked his pulse. He was alive, but blood was seeping from his thigh. She ran to her car, got a towel, and wrapped it tightly above the wound. As she tied it for a tourniquet, she urged him, “Hold on. I’m with you. We’ll get you to a hospital. You’re going to be okay.” Now was not the time to demand, *Why did you stab my dog and try to kill me?*

Justice had reached the parking area but could not marshal strength for the last few feet to Andie. He was whimpering, and his blood was oozing onto the ground. When he tried to raise his head, he couldn’t.

Feeling sick to her soul, Andie ripped off her jacket, bent down, and pressed it against Justice’s wounds. She stroked his ears. “Please, Sweet Boy. Stay with me. Help is coming. We’ll take care of you.” Pressing harder, she blinked back tears.

But then she reminded herself, *Cops don’t cry. Cops build a wall between their feelings and the outside world.* But this was not the outside world. It was Justice, her family and partner.

In the distance, sirens were approaching from every direction on the island. Some were crossing the bridge from Nisqually County’s mainland. The sounds were eerie in the darkness. Andie glanced at Christopher and noticed that she was covered in blood. She squeezed her eyes closed and begged, *Please, help us. Let Justice be okay. Let Christopher live.*