

# VIGILANTE ANGELS

BY

ROBIN STOREY



Rosie leaned into her Harley Sportster as it hugged the curves of the winding country road. She loved her fortnightly Sunday rides with Jayne and Dee; the sensation of release and freedom, the connection with nature and each other.

She glanced behind her and they gave her the thumbs up. At the next village, they stopped at the cafe and found a table overlooking lush green hills and fat, grazing cattle.

‘You look wrung out, Rosie,’ Dee said.

Rosie nodded. ‘The case I’ve been working on finally went to court last week, and my client got off. But I wish he hadn’t.’

‘Sounds interesting,” Jayne said. ‘Tell us about it.’

Rosie drew in a deep breath. ‘I was instructing solicitor for barrister Justin Fellowes, who was representing Allan Woods, a foreman with Utopia Quality Homes. He was accused of sexually harassing a seventeen-year-old female apprentice carpenter, Tanya Leigh. It went to the Human Rights Commission, but it couldn’t be resolved, so it was set down for the Federal Circuit Court.

‘Tanya alleged that Allan had harassed her over a period of months by groping, lewd comments and questions, dirty jokes, the whole gamut. She said she was too scared to report it because he threatened to get her sacked for poor work performance, and make it impossible for her to get another job. But her parents knew something was wrong; eventually she told them and they insisted she make a complaint.’

Rosie looked at Dee. ‘I’m sure you could empathise with her.’

Dee was a qualified carpenter and builder, and ran her own building and renovation company. 'You bet. When I started my apprenticeship the guys were constantly talking about sex, making provocative comments and calling me No Tits. When I reported it to the boss, he read the guys the riot act and they stopped doing it. They stopped talking to me as well. Not that I cared – I was out of there as soon as I found another job.'

'Allan Woods can be very intimidating,' Rosie said. 'It's easy to see how he would have stood over Tanya. Unfortunately there was no real evidence. She claimed the other workers were often present when he was harassing her, but they denied all knowledge of it in court.'

'The boy's club is alive and well,' Jayne said.

'That's for sure,' Rosie said. 'Justin tore Tanya's story to shreds in court. That's his job, of course, but he had her in tears and I cringed the whole time. The Judge dismissed the case and ordered Tanya to pay half Woods' court costs, which is standard procedure, but she's up for thousands of dollars. And she doesn't even have a job – she resigned once she'd made the complaint, which I don't blame her for at all.'

'Poor kid,' Jayne said. 'I feel for her. I think a lot of women have experienced sexual harassment in some form or another.'

'And I haven't told you the worst of it,' Rosie said. 'I know he's guilty.'

'How?' Dee asked.

'He told me.'

'He admitted it?' Jayne asked.

‘When I was interviewing him for the brief. He played it down, of course. He called it “just tossing a few jokes and harmless comments around,” and claimed if he did touch her, it was just a friendly pat. He said, “If women can’t take a few jokes, they shouldn’t be in the job. They don’t get special privileges; she was the only female so she had to fit in with us.” And all the while he had a smug expression on his face, because he knew that according to client legal privilege I couldn’t disclose what he’d told me.’

‘That bastard!’ Dee said. ‘If only there were a way to make him get his just desserts.’

‘I’ve been thinking the same thing,’ Rosie said.

‘We should form a vigilante group,’ Dee said. ‘Meting out justice to men who get away with stuff like that.’

‘Great idea!’ Jayne said. ‘Sounds much more exciting than doing tax returns for people who haven’t filed one for ten years.’

At that moment the waiter appeared, and the conversation was soaked up in fresh coffee and warm scones.

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Rosie looked up from her desk and out her office window. She hadn’t noticed it was almost dark. She was trying to concentrate on the brief in front of her, but her mind kept replaying two images – Tanya Leigh’s tear-stained face and twisting hands in the witness stand as she stumbled over Justin’s relentless interrogation, and Allan Woods’ smarmy grin as they left the courtroom after his win.

She could well understand how the harassment had progressed as far as it did. The first couple of incidences probably took Tanya by surprise; not knowing how to react, she let them pass. Maybe the first few times she decided to ignore them, hoping Woods would stop if he didn't get a reaction. But he undoubtedly interpreted her silence as a tacit invitation or an unwillingness to fight back, causing him to accelerate his behaviour. The more she didn't say anything, the easier it was not to, especially as he was threatening her, and so continued the conspiracy of silence and distress.

Rosie put her head down and started scribbling on her notepad.

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'You know, I've been thinking of that case of yours, Rosie,' Dee said.

They'd ridden to the national park and were sitting under a clump of pandanus trees, overlooking the sparkling ocean.

'So have I,' Jayne said.

'Me too,' Rosie said. 'I've even thought up a plan to make Allan Woods atone for his sins. Just a fantasy, of course.'

'Hit us with your fantasy plan,' Dee said.

Rosie opened her backpack, pulled out a notebook and opened it.

'There are three aims: he must apologise to Tanya, offer to resign if she wants to reapply for her old job – which she won't, of course, but it's the principle of the thing – and pay her compensation for her suffering.'

'Brilliant!' Jayne said. 'How would we make him do it?'

'Shout him a beer and ask him very nicely,' Dee suggested.

Rosie made a face at Dee.

'You did say it was a fantasy,' Dee said.

'It just so happens,' Rosie continued, 'I have thought of a way. Someone like him is bound to have done similar things before. He doesn't have a criminal record, but that doesn't mean to say he's clean. We'd dig around, find some dirt and present him with it. Anonymously of course. We'd threaten to divulge the information to the police if he didn't comply with our demands.'

'Last time I heard, blackmail was a criminal offence,' Jayne said.

'Who'd know? He'd hardly report it to the police and get himself into trouble. And we'd make sure our investigations couldn't be traced back to us.'

'How would we dig up the dirt?' Dee asked.

'We'd question people who know Allan. Not his workmates, they'd be too much on guard. But his wife, or his workmates' wives. We'd find a way to befriend them, ask a few subtle questions, and maybe they'd inadvertently reveal some clues. Tanya herself would be a good one to talk to; I'm sure there's a lot that didn't come out in court.'

'You've put a lot of thought into this so-called fantasy,' Jayne said.

‘There’s a lot more,’ Rosie said, tapping her notebook. ‘I was hoping I could persuade you two to help me turn it into reality.’

Dee and Jayne looked at each other and then at Rosie.

‘What would we be?’ Dee asked. ‘A sort of feminist Charlie’s Angels?’

‘Vigilante Angels,’ Jayne said.

‘Are we all in then?’ Rosie asked.

‘Only if we can have our own TV show,’ Dee said.

‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

Rosie looked at Jayne. She hesitated, then nodded. They ordered more coffees and put their heads together as Rosie outlined her plan.

‘Don’t forget,’ Rosie added as they got up to leave, ‘all communication must be in person. We mustn’t leave any trail – paper or electronic.’

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At smoko, Dee sat down on the lawn next to Tanya.

‘You’re doing a good job,’ she said, nodding towards the front veranda they were re-building.

‘Thanks.’ Tanya smiled shyly. ‘And thanks for employing me. I’m really enjoying it.’

As part of Rosie's plan, Dee had approached Tanya and offered her employment. Not only would it help her regain her self-confidence, but Dee could also do some gentle probing when the time was right. Over the two weeks since she'd started with Dee Bee Building and Renovations, Tanya had gradually come out of her shell and started talking and joking with the others.

'It's very different from your previous workplace.'

'That's for sure.'

'It must have been very traumatic for you.'

'Yeah.' Tanya's hand shook as she unwrapped her sandwich.

'Don't talk about it if you don't want to.'

'It's okay. My counsellor says it's good to talk about it.'

'I can't believe those other workers said they didn't know anything about it,' Dee said. 'Surely that can't be true.'

'It's not. They joined in as well. They asked me all these personal questions, like was I a virgin and did I use a vibrator, and cracked jokes about what I could do with my tools. And when Allan walked behind me he'd pinch me on the backside, and when I asked him to stop, he threatened me with the sack.'

'What a revolting man,' Dee said.

'Yeah, he was horrible in lots of ways.'

‘What ways?’

‘Once they sent me to the shop for coffee, and I couldn’t remember whether Allan had sugar in his coffee, so I went back to ask him. They had their backs to me and they were talking about dogs and training them and I was waiting for a chance to interrupt. Then Allan turned around and saw me there, and went off his head at me for sneaking up on them.’

Dee’s ears pricked up. ‘What sort of dogs?’

‘I don’t know. Brett said he was getting a couple of dogs from Victoria and Neil said he didn’t think his dog had enough condition for Saturday night. Allan said something about his dog being a sure bet and that’s all I can remember. But sometimes they’d be talking and stop as soon as I came in. I didn’t know whether they were doing it to upset me, or whether they were talking about that dog stuff they didn’t want me to know about.’

Dee gave Tanya a hug. ‘You don’t have to worry about that anymore. You’re safe here.’

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Jayne knocked on the front door of the neat suburban home, heart hammering. She hated approaching strangers and wasn’t good at small talk. Perhaps Leone Woods wasn’t home. She heard footsteps. No such luck. The door whipped open and a dumpy, middle-aged woman stood before her.

‘I’m from Freedom For Animals,’ Jayne stammered. ‘Would you be interested in signing a petition against factory farming?’

She thrust a clipboard at Leone, who looked at the four signatures she'd collected from neighbours to make it look authentic.

'I've only just started,' Jayne said. 'I need as many signatures as I can get. Have you seen the videos of factory farming?'

'No, but I'll sign it anyway,' Leone said. She signed her name and address with the pen attached to the clipboard and handed it back to Jayne. She was about to close the door when Jayne quickly thought of the time she had to give a speech at a tax conference and said, 'Could I have a glass of water? I'm feeling a bit faint.'

Leone peered at her. 'You're as white as a ghost. Come in.'

Leone fetched a glass of water and Jayne sat on the couch, sipping it slowly.

'Do you do this full-time?' Leone asked.

'No, I'm in between jobs at the moment. I had to leave my previous job because my employer was making sexual advances towards me.'

'Oh, how horrible. Did you report it?'

'I haven't plucked up the courage yet. But I know I should do it.'

Leone looked at her as if trying to decide whether or not to trust her, then blurted out, 'My husband was accused of that and he had to go to court.'

'How terrible for him. And you.'

'I was in court with him. I felt sorry for the girl. I know Allan can be a bit crude at times, and I think she just misinterpreted his remarks. Even though he won the case,

the whole thing has been such a drama. There've been all sorts of rumours going around about him, and because he'd let his union membership lapse, we had to foot the bill for a solicitor and barrister. She's supposed to pay half of that, but she's not even working, so God knows we'll probably never see that money, and it looks like I might have to go out and get a job.'

'It must be very hard for you,' Jayne said, trying to sound sympathetic.

A text message pinged from Leone's phone on the table. She picked it up. 'Can't do dinner tomorrow night, it's my card night,' she read out.

She sighed. 'Him and his card nights. Some friends asked us out for dinner. Looks like I'll be going by myself.'

'What sort of cards?' Jayne asked.

'I don't know. I thought he might be going to one of those illegal casinos, but he assures me he's not. But the other night I got a call to say his father had had a stroke. He wasn't answering his mobile phone, so I got in the car and drove around to the mate's place where he said they were playing cards. But his mate wasn't there and his wife knew nothing about it. When I asked Allan about it, he said they'd changed the venue at the last minute.'

She shook her head. 'Men! Are you married?'

'No.' Jayne stood up. Now was the time to go, before Leone expected a reciprocal heart-to-heart. 'I have to go. Thanks for the water.'

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'I've got muscles hurting I didn't even know I had,' Rose groaned to the trim, pony-tailed woman beside her, as they rolled their fit balls back to their racks.

Lisa grinned. 'The first time is a killer. I had to beg my friends not to tell me any jokes because it hurt when I laughed.'

Lisa was the wife of Brett Hartley, one of Allan's co-workers who had given evidence in court. Unlike those of the other wives, her Facebook profile was public, and she'd posted a photo of herself doing a Saturday morning Pilates class at her local gym. Rosie had attended the class, striking up a conversation with Lisa beforehand.

As they left the exercise room, she said, 'Have you got time for a coffee? I'm thinking of joining this gym and I'd like the lowdown from a regular.'

Lisa checked her watch. 'Sure, I've got time before the kids go to soccer.'

Over coffee in the café next door, Lisa launched into a detailed account of the classes and facilities at the gym.

'I'll give it some serious thought,' Rosie said. 'I'm in a high stress job and I need some sort of release.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm an accountant.' Divulging her real occupation might make Lisa less inclined to talk. 'This week has been particularly difficult – one of my co-workers has been accused of sexually harassing a female graduate, and because he's a friend I've been trying to give him some moral support.'

'Do you think he did it?' Lisa asked.

‘He doesn’t seem the type, but who knows? People can do things that are totally out of character.’

‘That’s true. My husband’s boss was accused of sexual harassment and he went to court, but the case was dismissed due to lack of evidence.’

‘Were there any witnesses?’

‘Apparently not. But I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he was guilty. I’ve met him socially a couple of times and I don’t like him. He can act very charming, but underneath he’s a sleazebag. And he treats his wife like shit when he thinks no-one’s watching.’

‘So your husband didn’t know anything was going on?’

‘He says not. I guess Allan was clever enough to do it when no-one else was around. He was really cocky after the court case; he shouted all the boys and their partners dinner at a swanky restaurant. I didn’t go. I said to Brett, “You go and have dinner with him and your card nights and whatever else, but leave me out of it.”’

She picked up her gym bag and stood up. ‘I’m glad I don’t have to put up with that shit. I’m a hairdresser and the only guy in the salon is as gay as a Christmas fairy.’

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They compared notes over lunch in a country pub after their ride.

‘What we have so far,’ Rosie said, ‘is that both Allan and Brett go to regular card nights, which could be suspicious given that Allan lied to his wife about where he was that night.’

‘He could be just having an affair,’ Dee said.

‘And Brett as well?’ Jayne said doubtfully.

‘And Tanya’s story about the dogs doesn’t give us much to go on,’ Rosie continued. ‘They could be greyhounds, and there’s nothing illegal about greyhound racing.’

‘But why did Allan get so angry with Tanya for overhearing their conversation?’ Jayne said.

‘Allan said something about his dog being a sure bet,’ Dee said. ‘Perhaps they’re part of an illegal gambling ring.’

‘If only we could access his Facebook page,’ Rosie said. ‘Not that he would post anything about illegal activities, but there could be some clues there we could follow up.’

‘We could ask Gabe,’ Jayne said.

The others stared at her. Gabe was Jayne’s sixteen-year-old stepbrother.

‘He’s a computer nerd, he can hack anything. In fact, he’s told me he’s hacked his friends’ Facebook pages and posted stuff on them for a laugh.’

‘It’s a risk bringing someone else into it,’ Rosie said, ‘particularly someone so young. Can we trust him not to tell anyone?’

‘I’m sure we can,’ Jayne said. ‘I won’t tell him why we want the info, and I’ll swear him to secrecy. He’ll do anything I ask if I buy him a ticket to the Sticky Insects concert.’

'Great idea,' Dee said. 'We can make him an honorary angel.'

'Okay,' Rosie said. 'Talk to Gabe and see what he can do.'

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A message pinged on Rosie's phone. It was to her and Dee from Jayne.

'Exciting news. Can we meet tonight?'

'Six o'clock at Grandma's,' Rosie replied back, naming one of their favourite inner city bars.

As soon as they'd bought their drinks and sat down, Jayne burst out with, 'Gabe hacked into Allan's Facebook page. There was nothing revealing there, but from his profile, Gabe was somehow able to track him to an encrypted online membership group. Don't ask me how, I don't want to know. This group is top secret and its members are into dog fights.'

'I knew we'd get him!' Rosie did a fist pump.

'What sort of dog fights?' Dee asked.

'The sort where they rip each other to pieces, often to the death. They breed the dogs especially, and the guys, because it's all men, bet on them – big money, too. They had some videos of fights on the site; Gabe watched a couple and it really upset him. So I had to buy tickets for his mates to go to the concert as well, as a consolation.'

‘Poor Gabe,’ Rosie said. ‘I haven’t had any cases myself, but I’ve heard about dog fighting. It’s hard to find the perpetrators because they’re good at operating under the radar, and the maximum fine if they’re caught is \$50, 000. And it’s often associated with illegal firearms and drug dealing.’

‘Apparently all their equipment is demountable,’ Jayne said, ‘so they can pack it up and be gone in a few minutes if they have to.’

‘How do we get proof of this?’ Dee asked.

‘But wait, there’s more!’ Jayne said. She took out a crumpled piece of paper from her jacket pocket and smoothed it out on the table. ‘They had a map on the site of the location of the fights, so Gabe downloaded it and printed it out. They hold them once a fortnight, so I’m guessing that’s where the guys go when they’re supposed to be playing cards.’

The map was of a circuitous route from the highway on the outskirts of the city into the bush, the road dwindling to a bush track with an X marked at the end of it.

‘One of the members has a property not far from there, and he hires it out to the others to keep their dogs there, to feed them up and train them for the fights.’

‘It’s obvious what we have to do,’ Rosie said. ‘We go out there, find somewhere to hide, and take some photos of Allan participating in the fights. Do you know when the next one is?’

‘Saturday night next week,’ Jayne said.

‘Either of you got a night vision camera with a telescopic lens?’

Dee and Jayne shook their heads.

'Looks like I'll have to buy one. I've always wanted to do photography.'

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They'd been ensconced in the bushes for a good two hours when darkness started closing in. Crickets chirped and unseen creatures rustled the leaves. They'd hidden their motor bikes in thick scrub a kilometre back. Two hundred metres in front of them, below a small ridge, was a large clearing, where presumably the fights took place.

'This is so freaking boring,' Dee muttered. 'Now I know why I'm not a private detective.'

'I'm dying for a pee,' Jayne said.

'I told you not to have any coffee,' Rosie said.

'I didn't, it's nerves.'

The distant rumble of an engine broke the stillness, then headlights pierced the gloom. A utility truck approached and parked in a small cleared area in front of the ridge. Two men got out and started hauling spotlights and metal bars from the tray, carrying them over the ridge into the clearing.

Then several four wheel drive vehicles and utility trucks arrived at once, filling the small area. Men got out, greeted each other with ribbing and back slapping and hauled coolers down to the clearing.

A frenzy of barking started from within the vehicles. A heavysset, balding man with a moustache strode over to the parking area.

'Quiet!' he thundered, and the barking stopped for a few seconds, before starting again.

'That's Allan Woods!' Rosie whispered.

The other men returned to their vehicles and released their dogs. Most were pit bulls or Rottweilers – snarling and mean-eyed, all muzzled and straining at their leashes. Powerful muscles rippled under their fur. Some had not a mark on them; others were scratched and scarred. Allan was holding a pit bull with an ear missing.

The girls exchanged anguished looks. The men disappeared over the ridge with their dogs. The crack of cans opening and raucous laughter floated through the night air. A chorus of cheers rang out, followed by a volley of growling and snarling. The fight had started.

Rosie's plan was to sneak over to a thicket of forest closer to the ridge, where she could get an unobstructed view to take photos. But one of the men had remained behind in the car parking area, smoking a cigarette and pacing up and down. In the reflected glow of the spotlights he had the appearance and bearing of a security guard. Damn, they hadn't counted on that.

'I'm going to make a run for it when he's up the other end,' she whispered. She felt in her jacket pocket again for her can of pepper spray. They all had one, just in case.

Once the guard was at the furthest car with his back to her, Rosie took off into the thicket, her new state-of-the-art camera around her neck. She shinned up a

eucalypt and perched on a branch, where she had a perfect view of the proceedings, illuminated under the spotlights.

In the makeshift ring, a fight had just finished. Two men were dragging the mangled body of a pit bull out of the ring, while another slipped a muzzle and a lead on the victorious dog and led it away.

Men clustered around a card table not far from the ring. Through her telescopic lens, Rosie saw a man she recognised as Brett taking and giving out cash, and another writing out tickets. She spotted Allan with a bundle of notes in his hand. Switching the camera on to movie, she filmed him as he stuffed the notes in his wallet and then panned around the area, taking in the fighting ring and a group of pens in the far corner of the clearing. The occupants, still leashed, paced and barked and bared their teeth through their muzzles.

Allan walked over to the pens and released the one-eared dog. He led it to the ring, shoved it in a holding pen, took off its lead and muzzle and slammed the gate. Another man, whom Rosie recognised as his workmate Neil, led another pit bull into the opposite holding pen. He grinned at Allan and gave him the thumbs up.

Rosie continued filming, using a combination of movie and stills. A shout went up and a man holding a red flag aloft lowered his arm. Allan and Neil slid up a panel on the holding pens and the dogs bounded into the ring.

The crowd had moved to the ring, shouting and gesticulating as the dogs lunged at each other, biting and rolling on the ground. The back of Rosie's neck prickled, and she looked around to see the guard running towards her, gun in hand.

'Get down and put your hands up!' he shouted.

Rosie scrambled down. As soon as her feet hit the ground he was in front of her, gun aimed at her chest.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? Give me the camera.’

Playing for time, Rosie slowly unlooped the camera from around her neck and handed it to him. *Come on, girls, where are you?* She dared not look in their direction.

He glanced around him. ‘Is there anyone else with you?’

She was aware of movement in her peripheral vision, but kept her gaze fixed on his belligerent face.

‘No, just me.’

He jabbed the gun at her chest. ‘Don’t lie to me. You sheilas always travel in groups.’

Jayne and Dee both came sprinting out from behind him. Jayne leapt on to his back and he tumbled forward to the ground, taking Rosie with him. As he tried to get up, Dee aimed her pepper spray at his eyes. He let out a howl. Rosie scrambled out from under him. Jayne grabbed the gun lying beside his hand and jabbed it into the back of his head. ‘Shut up and don’t move.’

The camera had been flung out of his hands as he fell. Rosie picked it up. The lens was smashed, but the rest of it was intact.

‘Dee, give me your belt,’ she said.

Dee unbuckled and slid off her belt. Rosie tied the guard's ankles together.

'You bitches,' the guard said, his voice muffled. 'You won't get away with this.'

'What are you going to do?' Dee said. 'Call the police?'

Jayne kept the gun pressed into the back of his head while Rosie and Dee took off their jackets, then their T-shirts. They tied his hands behind his back with one T-shirt and the other around his mouth.

Rosie and Dee put their jackets back on, and leaving the guard squirming on the ground, the three of them sprinted back to their bikes.

'Hey!' Jayne panted. 'What do I do with this gun?'

'We'll get rid of it on the way home.'

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Rosie popped the cork and poured the sparkling wine into three plastic glasses. They were sitting at a picnic table in the national park enjoying the clear-skied tranquility.

'I would love to have seen Allan's face when he received our letter,' Jayne said.

They'd sent him a letter by post, demanding that he apologise in writing to Tanya, promise to resign if she wanted to reapply for her old job and send her a bank cheque for \$20,000 compensation for emotional and financial distress. If it wasn't done within seven days, the enclosed images would be passed on to police.

Accompanying the letter was a flash drive containing the videos and photos Rosie had taken of the fight, in which Allan was clearly visible. Once Allan had complied with their demands, Rosie phoned Crimestoppers anonymously and passed on the information about the dog fights.

‘As soon as Tanya arrived at work on Monday, I knew he’d done it,’ Dee said. ‘She couldn’t believe it. She kept saying, “Why would he do that?” And I had to look all innocent and say I had no idea. I made her go off and put the cheque in the bank straight away. Needless to say, she didn’t take up his offer of her old job. I think she’s found her niche with us.’

‘I’m glad it had a happy ending,’ Jayne said. ‘But that was the scariest thing I’ve ever done. I’ve never held a gun before, and I was terrified the whole time I was holding it to his head.’

‘You did good,’ Rosie said. ‘We all did.’ She raised her glass. ‘Here’s to the successful first case of the Vigilante Angels.’

Jayne looked at her and Dee over the top of her glass.

*‘First case? Just one moment...’*

THE END