

Avenging Angel

By Kristen Ashley

Chapter One

Natural Badassery

“I’m gonna go in.”

“Are you *insane*? You can’t go in!”

“I’m just gonna have a look around.”

“What if you’re right? What if this guy is the actual guy?”

“Then I’ll call the police.”

“What if he sees you?”

I sighed. “Luna, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Exactly!” she cried in a Eureka! tone. “So, yeah, let’s talk about that, Raye.”

Sitting in my car, talking to my bestie on the phone and casing the house in question, I cut her off quickly before she could start in—*again*—about how she felt about what I’d been up to lately.

“I’m just going to wander across the front of his house and look in the windows. No biggie.”

Truthfully, I was hoping to do more than that, but my best friend of all time, Luna, didn’t need to know that.

We’d had chats about what she called my unhinged shenanigans, or my lunatic tomfooleries. Then there were also my deranged mischiefs (Luna read a lot and her vocabulary showed it).

But I did what I did because, well...

I had to.

Luna spoke into my thoughts. “Okay, so if *I* kidnapped a little girl from my church, and *I* was holding her for things I won’t even contemplate why someone would do that, and some woman I’d never seen in my neighborhood casually strolled in front of my house and looked in my windows, what do you think *I* would do?”

“Sic Jacques on them, whereupon he’d lick them and dance around them and race away, only to race back, bringing his toys so they’d play?”

Jacques was Luna's French bulldog. He was gray, had a little white patch on his chest, and I considered myself for sainthood that I hadn't dognapped him yet. I was pretty sure I loved him more than Luna did, and the Tiffany's dog collar I'd splurged and bought him (which she refused to let him wear because she said it was too bougie, like that was a bad thing) proved my case on that.

"This isn't funny, Raye," Luna said softly.

That got to me, her talking softly.

She was yin to my yang, Ethel to my Lucy, Shirley to my Laverne, Louise to my Thelma. Dorothy to my Rose/Sophia/Blanche (and yes, I could be all three, dingy, sarcastic and slutty, sometimes all at the same time, I considered it my superpower).

You get the picture.

We were opposites, but she loved me.

And I loved her.

"I promise to be careful. It's gone okay so far, hasn't it?" I asked.

"Luck has a way of running out."

Hmm.

I struggled for a moment with the use of the word "luck," considering I thought I was pretty kickass, but I let it go.

There was a little girl missing. And I had a feeling I knew where she was.

"I need to do this, Luna."

It was her turn to sigh, long and loud.

She knew I did.

"Call me the instant you get back to your car," she ordered.

"Roger wilco," I replied.

"You don't even know what that means," she muttered.

"It means I heard you."

"Yes, it also means *you will comply with my orders*. That's what wilco is short for."

See?

She totally read a lot.

"Okay, so, samesies, yeah? I heard you, and I'll call."

Another sigh before she said, “You won’t call because either, a, you’ll be tied up in some villain’s basement, and I’ll then be forced to put up fliers and hold candlelight vigils and harass the police to follow leads. This will end with me being interviewed, weeping copiously, naturally, saying you lit up a room in a Netflix docuseries about solved cold case files once some hikers find what’s left of your body at the bottom of a ravine in fifteen years. Or, b, you won’t get anything from the guy, so you’ll start devising some other way of figuring out if it’s him or not. You’ll then immediately begin scheming to implement plans to do that, at the same time you’ll remember you forgot to buy tampons for your upcoming cycle, and you need to pop into CVS, after which you’ll realize you’re hungry and you’ll stop by Lenny’s for a cowboy burger and a malt.”

She was hitting close to home with that first bit, and she knew it. Including when my period was coming, something she always reminded me to prepare for because I always forgot, and as such, was constantly bumming tampons from her. Though, her remembering this wasn’t a feat, since we were together so often, including working together, we were moon sisters.

“I will totally call,” I promised.

“If you don’t, I’m uninviting you to my birthday party.”

I gasped.

“You wouldn’t,” I whispered in horror.

Yes, you guessed it. Luna threw great parties, especially when she was celebrating herself.

“Try me.”

“I’ll call. I’ll absolutely call. Long distance pinkie swear.”

“Lord save me,” she mumbled, then stated, “If you hit Lenny’s, *definitely* call me. Since I brought Lenny’s up, I now realize I need a malt.”

After that, she hung up on me.

I leaned forward and put my phone in the back pocket of my pants, my eyes on the house that was just right of the T at the end of the street where I was parked.

There was a light on to the right side of the front door.

He was home.

He was home, and he might be the kind of guy who grabbed little girls to do things it wasn’t mentally healthy to contemplate.

Maybe Luna was right. Maybe this was madness.

Though...

Her name was Elsie Fay. She was six years old. She had a cute-as-a-button face.

And she'd been missing for nine days.

What could happen, even if he saw me?

He wasn't going to storm out of his house and confront a stranger who was out for an evening stroll.

I was just getting the lay of the land.

I was correct in what I said to Luna.

No biggie.

That said, better safe than sorry.

I leaned across to the glove compartment, opened it and nabbed my stun gun. I then got out, locked the doors on my bright yellow, Nissan Juke (not exactly a covert car, I needed to consider that on upcoming operations) and shoved the stun gun in my free back pocket.

I'd dressed the part. Navy-blue chinos and a navy-blue polo shirt with a yellow badge insignia at my left breast.

Sure, under the yellow badge it said PUPPY PATROL, and this was my uniform when I did moonlighting gigs for an online dog walking/pet sitting service. But if you didn't look too closely, it appeared official. If someone asked, I could say I worked for code enforcement or animal control or...something.

I'd seen in an episode of *Burn Notice* that the best way to do something you weren't supposed to be doing, somewhere you weren't supposed to be doing it, was to look like you were supposed to be there doing what you were doing.

And if a burned TV spy couldn't guide me in a possibly, but not probably, dangerous mission, who could?

Okay, so I was seeing some of Luna's concern.

Nevertheless, I walked up the sidewalk toward the house in question like I'd personally designed the neighborhood. I hooked a right at the T, walked down the street a ways, crossed, then walked back up on the possible perp's side of the street.

And then across the front of his house.

Good news, his window shades were open.

More good news: I was right, he was there. And as I'd already ascertained, and this cemented it, he was sitting, watching TV, and he looked the nondescript everyman version of your not-so-friendly local kidnapper. The image of a man whose neighbors would appear on TV and say, "He gave us a bad vibe, but he was quiet and didn't cause any trouble, so..."

I kept walking, thinking she could be in there.

In that house.

Right now.

Scared and alone and so much more that, for my mental health, I refused to contemplate.

Not many homes in Phoenix had basements, and his place was a one-story ranch. I couldn't imagine he'd be stupid enough to keep the shades open in a room he was keeping a kidnapped little girl in, but who knew? Maybe he was.

I couldn't call the cops and say, "Hey, listen, hear me out about this guy."

I had to have something meaty.

At the end of the street, I turned right, then hooked another right to walk down the alley. It was dark, impossible to see the words PUPPY PATROL on my shirt. I was counting the houses in my head at the same time coming up with a plausible explanation of why I was wandering down the alley should someone stop and ask.

I hit his back gate without seeing anyone and tried the latch.

Of course, locked.

If I owned a home, I might lock my back gate to deter intruders. But it'd be a pain in the ass when I took out my garbage.

If I was holding a little girl I'd snatched, I'd definitely lock it.

Hmm.

The dumpsters and huge recycling bins were just outside his gate.

Perfect.

This meant I could get into his yard to look in the back windows, though I might not be able to get out.

I'd figure that out later.

I climbed on top of the dumpster (not easy and all kinds of gross), stood and looked over the top of his fence.

Clean landing on turf.

He should xeriscape. We were in a water crisis. No one should have lawns anymore in arid climates.

Right, I totally needed to learn better focus.

I looked at the house.

Light on in the kitchen with no one in it (did this man *not* hear about climate change?). No lights on in the other side of the house. I couldn't tell from that far away, but it seemed like no blinds were closed over the back windows, because I could see the light shining in from opened doorways to a hall.

Except the last room, but it might just be the door was closed.

This could mean he had nothing to hide.

It could also mean he was an idiot.

Well, I was currently harboring fifty thousand forms of bacteria on my hands and clothing from my climb onto the dumpster. In for a penny, in for a pound.

I put one foot to the top of his fence then leaped over. I landed on soft knees and it still jarred me like a bitch.

Ouch.

Right away, I set the pain aside and returned my attention to the house.

No movement in the windows. I didn't think I was making that much noise, but, if he could hear it, I hoped my climb onto the dumpster sounded like someone taking out their trash like people often did at seven at night.

Though it appeared I was good.

Sticking to the fence, I moved left, forward, then crouching, I went in.

Coming up from the crouch just enough to see over the windowsill, I noted it was a window to the dining room, through which was a galley kitchen, through which was the living room and him sitting in a recliner watching the Diamondbacks on TV.

Okay, good. He hadn't heard me and come to investigate.

Onward.

Crouch-walking under the window, I hit a back patio. The first window there, from the dim light shining in from the rest of the house, I saw was a bathroom.

The next room, door open from the hallway, more light shining in, appeared to be an office.

The next room, there were blinds, they were down and closed.

“Shit,” I whispered.

I went around the side of the house, which was rife with mature trees, not a lot of room to move. I shimmied my way in, but the blinds on the window on that side were also closed.

Open windows everywhere else, except this room.

That was fishy.

Right?

Still not enough to call the cops.

I couldn't now say, “I have a feeling about this guy, and the blinds on one of his rooms are closed, though I can't tell you how I know that. So obviously, that's cause to break down the door and search the house ASAFP.”

They weren't going to rush an urgent call to assemble the SWAT team on that intel.

Time for tampons, Lenny's and scheming some plan to find a way to get into that house and check that room.

I was thinking a trip to a T-shirt printer and some time on my computer creating a bogus notice from the city for a mandatory visit from pest control.

Gophers.

I'd heard gophers were a sitch in the Valley.

Though, not so much inside houses.

Again, I'd figure it out.

I was about to move out of the trees, hoping the lock on the gate was easy to navigate from the inside, when I noticed movement at the window.

I froze.

I'd brushed against the trees, but I didn't think I'd made much noise. Surely not enough he'd hear me three rooms away over the TV.

That was when she appeared.

Just her head.

Dark hair: messy.

Cute-as-a-button face: terrified.

Lips: moving with words anyone could read, even in the dark.

Help me.

Adrenaline surged throughout my body, making it tingle top to toe.

Tears flooded my eyes, making them sting.

My heart clutched and memories battered my brain, trying to force their way in.

I couldn't give them free reign or they'd paralyze me.

It took mad effort, but I held them back using the aforementioned adrenaline and the sight of her face in that window.

I was right.

She was there.

I had to call the cops.

Now.

I put my hand to the window, nodded to her, tried to smile reassuringly, my mind cluttered.

Should I call from where I was? Would he hear me? If he did, what would he do with her? He had access to her. I did not. He had access to his garage. I did not. And I was at least a five-minute run away from my car, and in my current situation, couldn't even easily get around to the front of the house to see which direction he'd have gone. Had a neighbor heard me, one who would maybe warn him someone was lurking on his property, or they'd called the cops and their sirens would do it? Would me being in his backyard, trespassing, mess up the investigation?

I had to get to the alley and make the call.

Pronto.

It's going to be okay, I mouthed back to her. *Someone will be here soon.*

Panic filled her little face. Even if I suspected she couldn't read my lips, my guess was she knew I had to leave. She shook her head.

I pressed my hand into the window, not that she could notice the added pressure, so I got closer and mouthed, *Promise. Hang tight.*

She kept shaking her head, but I was on the move.

I didn't stick to the fence. I ran right to the back gate.

The latch locked from the inside, but with an easy twist and lift, the door opened.

On instinct, I looked back to the house and froze yet again.

I saw a shadow moving through the hall across the door of the bathroom, headed toward the back bedroom.

“*Shit!*” I hissed.

I sprinted back to the dining room window and didn’t bother crouching.

I looked right in.

I was correct about that shadow.

He wasn’t in his recliner anymore.

He was headed to her.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I chanted, panic creeping in, attempting to take a firm grip.

To force it out (because that would paralyze me too, and no way could I let that happen), acting fast, even though I was not able to think as fast, I had to go with it.

I went to the patio door and knocked, loud.

And I kept doing it until he showed at the door.

Okay, good.

Or, also, bad.

What the heck did I do now?

The door was made of glass.

Through it, he looked at me.

He looked at the patio beyond me.

He looked at me again.

And I looked at him.

On the wrong side of middle age, my guess, closer to sixty than forty. His shoulders were broad. His hair was thin. He had a little gut. He needed a shave. And he had to be four or five inches taller than me.

I had a stun gun and thirty years less than him.

But he could probably take me.

Expressions chased themselves across his face. Shady. Incredulous. And regrettably, he ended on angry.

He opened the door and demanded, “Who are you and what are you doing on my back patio?”

“Hi!” I exclaimed. “I’m so sorry.” I pointed to the badge on my chest. “I work for Puppy Patrol?” I told him in a question, like he could confirm I did. I didn’t wait for his confirmation, I babbled on. “And I was walking one of your neighbor’s dogs. He slipped the leash and ran off. I’m trying to find him. He’s a little Chihuahua. I’m freaked! He’d be a snack for coyotes.”

“We don’t have coyotes in the city,” he informed me.

“Yes, we do,” I contradicted. And we did. I had a Puppy Patrol client (actually, it was a Kitty Krew client, same company, brown uniform, whole different ball of wax) who’d learned that the hard way. “They come down from the mountains and in from the desert, easy pickin’s for people who let their cats go outside and stuff.”

RIP Gaia.

“How did you get in my backyard?”

“Your gate was unlatched,” I lied. “And I could swear I saw little Bruiser dash in here from the alley.”

He leaned out to look toward his gate.

I leaned back, my hand moving toward my pocket and my stun gun.

When he looked back at me, I knew he saw through my story.

And it was on.

I didn’t have time for the stun gun. Not now.

He lunged.

I tried to evade.

He caught me anyway and pulled me right inside.

Totally knew he could take me.

Damn it!

We grappled.

I went for the gonads with my knee and hit his inner thigh.

This caused him not to let me go, but instead grab my hair and pull, *hard*.

Jerk!

I went for the instep, slamming down on it with my foot, and that was better. He yelped, his hold loosened, I ripped myself away from him (pulling my own hair, because his grip hadn't loosened that much, *ouch!*), and I yanked out the stun gun.

He recovered too quickly, nabbed me, and even if I knew he could take me, I was still surprised at his strength when he wrenched me around at the same time throwing me down to the floor with such force, I hit the tile and skidded several feet. My head then struck a corner of his kitchen cabinet.

Worse than the hair pulling. Seriously.

While I blinked the stars out of my eyes, he came after me, reached down to grab me again, and I remembered I had my stun gun in my hand.

I turned it on, heard it crackling, his attention went to it, and ill-advisedly in our current positioning, I touched it to him.

He went inert, then dropped, all two hundred some-odd pounds of him landing square on top of me.

"Oof," I grunted.

Fuck! I thought.

I dropped the stun gun to try to shift him off, when my breath that had just come back stopped because he was suddenly flying through the air.

He landed on his back several feet away from me, his head cracking against the tile with a sickening sound.

But I didn't have any attention to give him.

I didn't because there were two men standing over me, and these two dudes could totally take me. I didn't know who they were. They might be associates of the bad guy. But they were so gorgeous, for a split second, all I could think was that I'd be okay with that (the them taking me part, that was).

One was tall, very tall, with black hair, green eyes and an age range of thirty-five to a very fit, healthy-living, great-genes forty-five. He also looked familiar, but I couldn't place it in my current predicament. And last, he'd had some goodness injected in him from, my guess, a Pacific Islander parent.

The other one was also tall, very tall, just not as tall as the other guy. I'd put him in the thirty to thirty-five age zone. He had dark-brown hair, full, short, but the top and sides were longish and slicked back in a stylish way. He had a thick brown beard that was trimmed gloriously and gray-blue eyes.

For a second, I thought he was Chris Evans.

Then he spoke.

Angrily.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Wait.

What *was* I doing?

Oh yeah.

Suddenly confronting a Chris Evans doppelgänger, I'd forgotten about Elsie Fay (that sounded really bad, but trust me, with these guys, who wouldn't?).

I shot to my feet and dashed through the kitchen.

That was as far as I got before I was whipped around with a strong hand on my arm and Chris Evans was in my face.

"Again, what the fuck are you doing?" he asked.

"Who are you?" I asked back.

"I asked first," he returned.

"Do you know that guy?"

"What guy?"

"The one who owns this house."

"No."

Okay, I was going with he was a good guy. Maybe a cop. Maybe they were onto this guy like I was.

Yeah.

Anyway, if they were in cahoots with the bad guy, they wouldn't have cracked his head on the tile.

So I was going with that because there was no more time to waste.

"Elsie Fay," I said, tore my arm from his hold and raced through the house.

I made it to the door to the room at the end of the hall and was in such a rush, when I turned the knob, I slammed full-body into it because it was locked.

I then grabbed the knob and jostled it and the door violently, like that would magically open it.

I was pushed aside with an order of, “Stand back.”

I did as told.

“Are you a good guy or a bad guy?” I belatedly asked in order to confirm.

“Even if I was a bad guy,” he said while positioning in front of the door, his eyes aimed at it, “I’d tell you I was a good guy.”

Excellent point.

He lifted a beefy (those thighs!), chocolate-brown-cargo-pants-clad leg and landed his boot solidly by the door handle.

The door popped open.

I slipped in front of him to enter the dark room.

I immediately tripped over something, but stopped, righted myself and called into the darkness, “Elsie Fay?”

No movement. No sound.

Chris Evans entered behind me, *close* behind me. So close, I could feel his heat and the natural badassery that wafted off him (this apparently happened with guys who knew how to bust open doors with their boot), and I felt him move.

On instinct again, I spun and whispered, “Don’t turn on the light.”

The other guy was standing in the doorway.

I turned back to the room, and gingerly, my eyes adjusting to the dark with weak light coming in from down the hall (trying to ignore the fact this room would be pitch black without the door open, and how that would affect the mind of a little girl), I called, “Elsie Fay? It’s me. From outside? You know, the window? You’re okay. We’re gonna get you out and call the cops and your parents and—”

I didn’t finish because a six-year-old hit me like a bullet. She slammed into my legs so hard, I nearly went down. And I would have if I didn’t run into Chris Evans and his hands didn’t span my hips to hold me steady (told you he was close).

I didn't have time to consider how those hands felt on my hips.

Elsie Fay was clawing up my chinos.

I bent and pulled her into my arms. She was heavy, as six-year-olds were wont to be, too big to be held, too young to realize it, though in this instance, she needed it, and I didn't have time to consider her weight as she clamped onto me with arms and legs. She, too, fisted her hand in my hair and she did it tighter than the bad guy. She also shoved her face in my neck.

"It's okay," I whispered to her. "You're okay. You're safe now. Okay?"

She said nothing.

I turned to Chris Evans and his hottie partner.

"Is he neutralized?" I asked.

"Yes," the hottie partner answered.

"Then let's get her out of here," I stated, and didn't wait for their response.

I pushed through them and got that little girl the hell out of there.

***Avenging Angel* will be unleashed on April 2, 2024 in all formats!**

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