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# LORNA LANDVIK ANGRY HOUSEWIVES

*Eating Bon Bons*

a novel



"Highly entertaining . . . almost as hard to put down  
as) Mary McCarthy's *The Group*."—*The Seattle Times*

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LORNA LANDVIK



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## PROLOGUE

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*September 1998*

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## FAITH

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I KNEW all about having my life saved. When I was three years old, I broke free of my MawMaw's callused grasp to chase a paper cup skittering across the street at the same time a jalopy full of new army recruits careened around the corner. A sailor coming out of Knapp's Drugs and Sundries, with reflexes I hope served him well in his tour of duty, threw his bottle of Hires root beer to the sidewalk and raced out into the street, scooping me up in his arms. I can still hear the cacophony of squealing brakes, honking horns, and my grandmother's scream, feel the sailor's rough cotton uniform on my cheek and smell the soda pop on his breath. Thereafter, root beer would replace Nehi as my favorite soda, and of course I would forever believe the navy superior to the army because that's what the sailor said, in so many (profane) words, once he found out what field of service the scared young men in the rusty Nash had joined that morning.

When I was eleven, DellaRose Pryne and I had taken a walk along a country road to smoke the Viceroy I'd swiped from MawMaw's pack. When the wind began whipping up and the sky turned green, it seemed a great adventure, until DellaRose spotted the moving black smudge beyond the line of telephone poles and screamed, "Tornado!"

We jumped into a ditch and lay there, arms entwined around each other, as the locomotive of wind roared over us. Even in my terror, I couldn't resist looking up to see the tor-

nado throwing up parts of the earth—and the Dobbsses' chicken coop—all around us.

And then there was the time when I was sixteen and drank too much on Student Skip Day and had to be fished out of the Tallahala River after bashing my head against a rock. I woke up to find myself being given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by Billy Lawler, whose resemblance to James Dean had not gone unnoticed by every girl in the tri-county area. But this was not the way I had fantasized about kissing him, his anxious face mottled with the blood that streamed from my hairline, and I turned my pounding head to vomit in the scrubby grass, embarrassed and ashamed.

I didn't become a teetotaler that day (I hope that I never have to join *that* club), but I did revise my standards as to what social drinking was, and never again drank to the point of passing out. My life may have been saved by that adjustment; certainly excessive drinking had led to my mother's death, and if anything, I did not want a death like my mother's, let alone a life.

I took a sip of the brown swill the hospital claimed was coffee and regarded the four women in the room.

*But it's you, I thought. You who've saved my life more times than I can count. Who forced me to tell the secrets that were eating me up, and still loved me.*

As if hearing my thoughts, Audrey looked up from her knitting, adjusted her reading glasses, and winked.

She was completely silver-haired now, and at least fifty pounds heavier than when I had first thrown a snowball at her, but there was an easy elegance to her that neither age nor weight could diminish. In the days of miniskirts, Audrey could be counted on to wear the miniest, as well as necklines that plunged inches past propriety, but to me, she always looked . . . well, regal. Audrey had laughed when I told her this, had even slapped her thigh and claimed it was nothing but "posture, Faith . . . and an attitude. Good posture and an attitude let you get away with anything."

Audrey, who introduced herself these days as "a former atheist whose wake-up call just happened to have God on the

other end," was the type of person who got away with a lot simply because she refused to ask permission for the privilege of being herself. It was certainly not an attitude I came by easily.

"You've got to start living up to your name," Audrey had told me long ago. "Have a little faith in Faith."

It was as if she had asked me to break the sound barrier on foot.

"How'm I supposed to do *that*?"

"For starters, stop trying so hard to be perfect. No one's perfect—except maybe Donna Reed, and she doesn't count, because she's only perfect on TV."

I smiled at the memory of that conversation and of those gentle television sitcoms. We mocked the beautiful mothers in shirtwaist dresses as they poured milk from glass bottles and dispensed wisdom in their showplace kitchens (in high heels, of course), but at least their kids acted their age. Not like today, when the laugh track is cranked up high in response to every sexual innuendo lisped by some wide-eyed moppet. Don't get me wrong, sexual innuendoes have their place—but not in conversation with a second grader. I guess I'm getting old, longing for those days when kids on TV called their dads "sir" and *Shindig* was considered racy.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" asked the woman who still held the honor of being the loveliest woman—including Donna Reed—I had ever seen.

"I was just trying to remember if you ever wore miniskirts."

"Good Lord," said Merit, closing her book. "I hope so."

"Miniskirts," said Audrey with a long sigh. "How I loved my miniskirts. And hot pants. Remember those white vinyl hot pants I used to wear?"

Nodding, I tossed my Styrofoam cup into the wastebasket. "I'm sure every man in Freesia Court remembers those hot pants."

Merit frowned, her slight fingers probing the dimple in her chin. "You know, come to think of it, I don't think I ever did. I don't think I was *allowed*. To wear a miniskirt, that is."

Another memory made goose bumps rise on my arms.



"Maybe Kari can sew you up one," whispered Slip, nodding at the dozing woman.

"How about it?" I asked as she opened her eyes. Everyone took turns snoozing during this vigil and had a knack for waking up whenever the conversation called for it. I was the only one who wouldn't sleep. I was used to staying alert; to be awake was to be armed, and if the Grim Reaper even *thought* about making an appearance, he was in for a fight from me. "How about you make us group miniskirts, Kari?"

"I imagine it would take a lot more fabric than it did in the old days," she said, "but sure, I'll get right on it."

Kari was the oldest of the group by a dozen years, but as far as looks went, she had been blessed with an aging clock that was set slower than the rest of ours. We all got older and Kari stayed the same.

"No, I think my miniskirt days are over," said Merit.

"Never surrender," said Audrey, pointing a knitting needle in Merit's direction. "In fact, I vote that we all wear miniskirts to the next AHEB meeting."

The laughter that greeted her nomination was short-lived, as reality reminded us that the next AHEB meeting was in question. The room fell back into a silence muted by the clicking of knitting needles and the rustle of turning pages.

I studied one of the photographs I was considering using for our scrapbook. It was a picture of Kari holding a tray of cookies at one of her annual Christmas parties.

"How are we supposed to stand things?" I had once asked her at the peak of one of the many crises that conspire against anyone with the temerity to be alive and breathing.

A glaze came over Kari's blue eyes, the glaze of a person ready to tell a story.

"Once my mother and I were having lunch in this fancy hotel in Fargo and the waiter served us walleye that was undercooked—honestly, it was sushi before the days of sushi. We had him take our plates back to the kitchen but when he brought them back, the fish was now not only undercooked, but cold. He left us to attend to his other cus-

tomers, completely ignoring us as we called, 'Waiter!' He had absolutely no time for us or our complaints."

Kari's got a wonderful laugh—as deep as Santa Claus with a cold. Looking at my face, she let it rip.

"My point is, sometimes life's like a bad waiter and serves you exactly what you *don't* want. You can cry and scream and order him to take it back, but in the end, you're the one who has to deal with what's finally set before you."

All of us women in the room have had our share of surly waiters serving bad entrees, but for over thirty years, we have helped one another up from the table, passed along antacids and after-dinner mints, offered shoulders to cry on, stiff drinks, and desserts whose butter content was exceeded only by its sugar load. But this . . . this *cancer* thing—could we survive something that seemed so grimly devoted to taking one of us away?

"I remember *you* had a miniskirt," I said to Slip. "We bought it together in the kids' department of Dayton's. You told me your dream was to buy adult clothes you didn't have to alter."

I doubt she was the five feet she claimed to be, but still, Slip was the one you called when you needed help moving something heavy, the star acrobat in the neighborhood circus, the one who daily used the chin-up bar lodged in her son's bedroom doorway. Slip had hard, defined muscles before it was fashionable; she ran back in the days when people thought you were either crazy or being chased, and became a vegetarian when the rest of us were sawing into porterhouse steaks and thought a pitcher of strawberry daiquiris satisfied our daily fruit requirement.

Audrey pushed back her reading glasses and shoved her knitting paraphernalia into the wicker bag at her side.

"I've always envied your body," she said, touching Slip with her manicured, ring-studded hand.

"Yeah, right," said Slip. "You who could fill out Marilyn Monroe's *and* Jayne Mansfield's clothes?"

"Jayne Mansfield," said Merit. "I haven't thought of her in years. Poor thing—I heard she had a really high IQ."

"Slip has such a boy's body," Audrey said, uninterested in debating Jayne Mansfield's Mensa eligibility. "So little and flat-chested and hipless. I've always thought it must be so freeing to have a body like that."

"I'd give anything for your breasts," Slip said. "Just for a day—one day on a nude beach."

"But you'd tip over," said Merit, and the idea of Audrey's mammoth breasts on Slip's tiny little body made us all laugh.

A male nurse with a wispy blond mustache and ponytail came in and began his business of checking vital signs and IV drips.

"You ladies sure like to laugh," he said. "I've never heard so much laughter coming out of a hospital room."

"Really?" said Audrey. "You should have heard us when we visited this one in the slammer." She nodded in Kari's direction. It was an old joke of Audrey's to introduce Kari to strangers as an ex-con.

"Slammer." The nurse nodded. "That's funny. It's nice to hear sisters get along so well."

"We're not sisters," I said.

"Really?" said the nurse.

"Nope, just friends," said Merit.

"Really?" said the nurse again. "Because—wow—you sure look alike."

"I'll take that as a compliment," said Kari, smiling.

"I won't," said Audrey, who then looked imperiously, as only Audrey could, at the nurse. "It's just that you're young and male and blinded by a culture that says the only females worthy of attention are eighteen-year-old nubile pinups." She paused to take a breath. "So naturally, you think every woman over the age of fifty looks alike."

"No . . . I . . . my mother . . . it's . . .," stammered the nurse, whose blush was the color of boiled shrimp. His brow furrowed and he looked at the chart like an actor staring at a script whose lines he doesn't know. "Uh, Dr. Sobota will be here in about a half hour if you have any questions." He hustled out of the room, holding his ponytail as if he feared we'd pull it.

"Holy diatribe," said Slip, trying not to smile. "The poor guy makes a little observation and he gets treated to one of your *rants*."

"Aw, I was just having some fun," said Audrey, picking up her knitting again. She giggled. "I guess this is sort of a sisterly scene. Right out of *Little Women*."

"I'm Jo," I said, putting my dibs in first.

"I want to be Jo," said Kari.

"You're Meg," said Audrey. "And Merit's Beth."

"But Beth dies," said Merit. "I don't want to be Beth."

Audrey shook her head. "You're the sweet one. Beth was the sweet one. Therefore you're Beth. And Slip, you can be Marmee."

"If I'm Marmee," said Slip, "then that makes you Amy. Spoiled, blond, selfish . . ."

Audrey returned Slip's smile with one of her own. "So I'm not blond."

"I don't want to be Beth," said Merit softly.

We bickered a few minutes over who was most like what character—hardly the only time we'd argued about a book—and then Slip asked if anyone had a quarter.

"I think we should flip for Jo," she said, giving me her famous I'm-right-and-you're-wrong look.

"Let's call in the nurse," I said. "We can ask him who'd make a better Jo."

"As if he'd know," said Audrey. "He doesn't strike me as a man conversant with *Little Women*."

"Yeah," said Slip. "He looks like a man conversant with where to score the best dope."

Merit nodded. "He reminds me of those Deadhead friends of Melody's."

"Get you!" said Audrey.

"What?"

"Well, that you even know what a Deadhead is! You've come a long way, sister."

"Remember when we threatened to burn her Mitch Miller and Mantovani records?" I asked.

"Someone had to drag her into the swingin' sixties," said Slip.

"You guys dragged me into a lot more than that," said Merit, and we all sat for a moment, reflecting on how true the statement was for all of us.

"Hey," said Audrey finally, "while we're waiting for Dr. What's-His-Face to give us the latest verdict, refresh my memory: what's this month's book?"

"*To Kill a Mockingbird*," I said. "My choice for our greatest-hits year."

"I love rereading all our favorites," said Kari. "I can't wait to dive into Jane Austen again."

Slip looked at Audrey. "You're not planning to do *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* again, are you?"

"That," said Audrey with a smile, "is one subject I can honestly say I know enough about." She looked at the clock next to the TV mounted on the wall. "Say, wasn't Grant going to stop by?"

"He'd better," said Slip. "He said he was bringing chocolate." She yawned into her closed fist. "Hey, while we're waiting, how about a song? A nice cowboy song?"

It was Slip's little entertainment lately—she thought it cheered everyone up—to request group sing-alongs.

"Let's sing something a bunch of cowboys would sing around the campfire. And if any of you wants to throw in a yodel or two, feel free."

"'Home on the Range'?" asked Merit, and after we shrugged our consent, she hummed a note we all tried to match.

Even though Merit sang for a living now, her voice was always a little too trembly soprano for my tastes; I preferred Kari's clear and strong alto. Slip could carry a tune, but not very far, and Audrey was more a brayer than a singer. I was the Rex Harrison talk-your-way-through type of vocalist, but still, we all sang "Home on the Range" gamely, happily, even joyfully.

Grant tiptoed in and started singing with us, and I wished that there really was a place in the world where discouraging

words were seldom heard and the skies were not cloudy all day.

"Faith, are you all right?" Grant asked.

Shaking my head, I brushed away a tear with my finger. "Are any of us?"

"No, but at least we're all here together," said Audrey. "And that's something."

Nodding, I whispered, "I guess," and even in my grief, I didn't have to guess: we *were* all together and that *was* something.

A few years back, when I finally got smart enough to go to a therapist, she asked me how I had held things together all these years.

It didn't take long to come up with an answer. "That's easy. I belong to a book club."



PART ONE

*1968-1970*



