

Among the Branded: A Novel

By Linda Smolkin

Excerpt

Chapter 1

It all started with the Moo Shoo Chicken, wreaking havoc on one of the moms in the upstairs bathroom. I felt for Jane, but had no desire to wear the shaggy costume meant for her. Svetlana stood next to me while the kids ran around, some playing tag, others spilling punch on the kitchen floor.

“Hey, guys,” she said, “put down the juice boxes, or somebody’s going to get hurt.”

She grabbed a sponge and bent down to clean up the mess.

“Rockin’ party,” I joked.

“More like raucous. Put a bunch of four-year-olds together, and I’m having a love fest with the linoleum.”

Sveta, as I’d called her for years, stood up and gave me a mischievous look, as if she was about to share some juicy gossip about a neighbor on her cul-de-sac. Instead, she asked me to take Jane’s place and dress up as Ripsie the Retriever. She asked twice then begged. It brought me back to when we first met, and she insisted I tag along for a Thursday-night Happy Hour.

“Why can’t you wear it?”

“Because I’m reading the book. And you’re taller—it’ll fit better.”

I washed my hands and reached for some pretzels. “Uh-huh, great excuse.”

There wasn't enough birthday cake to make me agree. *I'm claustrophobic*, I could say. *I'm allergic to dogs*, crossed my mind, even though I had my own version at home, a German Shepherd named Ginger. But the more I thought about it, I couldn't disappoint Sveta's grandson, Evan, on his fourth birthday. So on a Sunday afternoon, I became Ripsie.

I went to a spare bedroom overflowing with Evan's toys—a half-built spaceship near the door, coloring books and markers on the desk, an unfinished puzzle on the floor. I stepped over a train set, slipped my legs into the costume, and pulled it up and over. I looked pretty cute as a retriever, I admitted to myself in the mirror, even if I was bright yellow and already sweaty.

I took one last look then stepped over the train set again and waited in the hallway for Sveta's cue. First, she read *Ripsie Goes to the Bakery* then *Ripsie Makes a New Friend*. After finishing *Here Comes Ripsie*, Sveta said, “Well, kids, does anyone see Ripsie? Where could she be?”

From around the corner, I came out on all twos, waddling along as I waved both hands and wiggled my tail. A kid stood up and stopped in front of me.

He stayed there for a moment then shouted, “That's not Ripsie! That's some guy in a costume.”

It was Evan.

He shouted some more. “Take off your head and show us your face!”

I was horrified and couldn't move.

Sveta walked over to whisper something to him. He sat down while a few kids came up to hug me and sit on my lap. “I love you, Ripsie,” said a sweet girl. “You're so soft and fluffy,” said another.

After a few more sweaty minutes and several waves goodbye, I walked back to the bedroom and changed out of the costume. I opened the door, startled to see Evan waiting there.

“Ha! I knew it!” he roared with laughter.

“Knew what?” I brushed the top of his hair then pushed softly on his nose. Evan reminded me of Jack when he was that age—so clever, so opinionated.

“You were Ripsie!”

“No, I wasn’t!” I bent down to get a better look at his brown eyes then tickled him so he’d laugh a little harder.

“Yes, you were!” he shouted and took off with a mad dash when Sveta yelled, “Pizza’s here. Come and get it.”

As I put Ripsie back in the closet, it dawned on me that our little Evan could not be fooled. A few months earlier, he figured out his dad was the tooth fairy by comparing the fairy’s letter to a grocery list on the fridge. When Evan was three, he knew Sveta was Santa after recognizing her ring accidentally left next to the glass of milk for hardworking Claus.

And because he couldn’t be fooled, it crossed my mind to borrow Evan, to bring him home with me to see if Greg, the love of my life, was being honest or diplomatic. First, I’d ask Greg the not-too-serious questions, while Evan stood on the sidelines to give me a sign, a nod for yes, a cough for no.

Does my butt look big in these jeans?

Is my cooking really better than your mother’s?

If that went well, we could move to some more serious questions.

Will you love me the same way in twenty years? Or, more pressing, Will I be able to hold it together when Jeremy leaves for college?

“Mom, I can’t believe you dressed up,” Jack said as I closed the closet door.

“Did I embarrass you?”

He gave me that what-do-you-think look.

“Who knows, maybe I found my calling,” I said.

He picked up the half-started spaceship and looked through pieces on the floor to add to it, pushing aside rejected colors. “All the kids keep following me around.”

“That’s because they like hanging out with older kids. You did, too, when you were that age.”

“Yeah, when I was young.”

I laughed hard. That was one of Jack’s favorite phrases, as if he were a seventy-year-old man remembering the days of his youth. The laughter stopped, but my smile remained. How and when did my twelve-year-old grow up so fast? Was it the time I blinked to let him win our staring contest over winter break?

My phone pinged, and I grabbed it from my pocket. These days, I had to put all my reminders in the phone or I’d forget to take care of them. Everything was in there. Change the sheets. Take Jack to taekwondo. Pay the bills. Water the plants. This time it was a more interesting reminder about our getaway.

We decided to take a short trip after dropping Jeremy off at college, and Jack would choose the place, within reason. For the past few months, we’d been so busy finalizing college plans, shopping for supplies, stockpiling food for Jeremy, and now it was Jack’s turn for attention. I cleared the reminder from my phone and asked if he’d made a decision.

“Let’s go to the Bahamas, to that resort in the commercials.”

“Sweetie, it’s hurricane season, and I can’t take that much time off work. What if we hit a few theme parks?”

“That’s boring.”

Sveta walked in, overhearing our conversation. “Since you like costumes so much, why don’t you go to Valor of the ’40s?”

“What do costumes have to do with it?” I asked.

“You were so good as Ripsie. Maybe you’ll want to reenact a war.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re joking, right?”

“Only about dressing up. Jack would love it. They have World War II planes, tanks, all that cool stuff. And it’s near Jeremy’s college.”

“Mom, can we go?”

“Sounds interesting. But maybe something more relaxing?”

“You just said theme parks. How’s that relaxing?”

Jack had a point. He always had a point. He was twelve after all, and he was onto me like my expression lines.

“Okay, I’ll talk it over with Dad. But learn more about it so you can teach me something new.” I wasn’t much of a history buff but could be convinced. Besides, the trip had to be Jack’s choice, as we’d promised.

We followed Sveta back into the kitchen. Evan blew out his candles, and we passed cake around the table. Some asked for seconds, and I thought, *Why the heck not? You’re only four once.* I handed out more slices, scooped out more ice cream, and began to imagine Valor of the ’40s. Did I really want to go to some World War II event to see a bunch of guys pretend-shoot at

each other or planes take off and hope they wouldn't crash down because of their age? Hell, I was hoping I wouldn't crash down because of my age, and I was only forty-three.

Jack sat in front of Sveta's computer and scanned the event's website while reading the schedule of activities out loud. Maybe it would be interesting and at the same time take my mind off Jeremy's departure. I took a piece of cake and loaded ice cream on top.

"How come she gets three scoops? I only got two," whined one of the little girls who loved me for my soft and fluffy exterior a few minutes ago.

I ignored her, giving my ice cream the excessive attention it deserved. *I'm allowed to have three scoops*, my cute little friend with blonde pigtails. I'm sending my first kid off to college in just a few weeks.

Copyright © 2017 by Linda Smolkin.
All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-9986171-1-4 (paperback)

*This excerpt may not be reproduced or scanned without written permission from the author. For more information about *Among the Branded*, please visit lindasmolkin.com.*