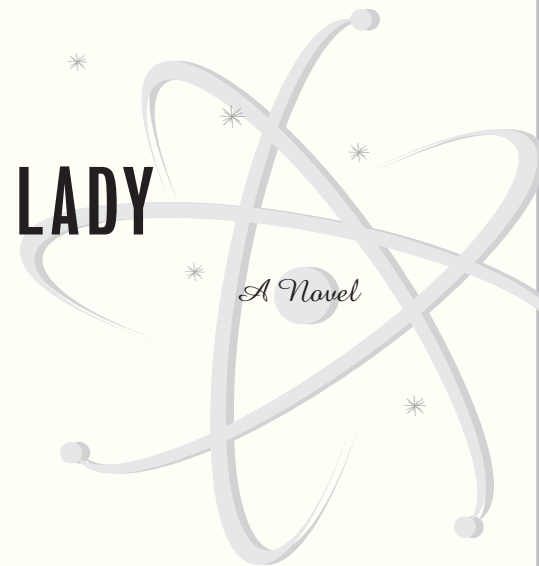


The Revenge of the

RADIOACTIVE LADY

A Novel



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A cluster of approximately ten small, light gray asterisks is positioned in the upper right corner of the page, partially overlapping the name 'Marylou'.

Marylou

By the time Marylou Ahearn finally moved into the little ranch house in Tallahassee, she'd spent countless hours trying to come up with the best way to kill Wilson Spriggs. The only firm decision she'd made, however, was that proximity was crucial. You couldn't kill someone if you lived in a different state. So she flew down from Memphis to Tallahassee and bought a house on the edge of Wilson's neighborhood. Doing so had been no problem, because she had a chunk of money left from the government settlement as well as her retirement and social security. She furnished her new place quickly with generic BIG WAREHOUSE SALE furniture. Back in Memphis she rounded up a graduate student couple she'd met at church, a husband and wife who both needed to give their spectacles a good cleaning, to housesit, and then she transferred her base of operations to Tallahassee, informing friends only that she'd be taking an extended vacation.

Completing her task in Florida, unfortunately, was taking a while. Every morning when Marylou and her Welsh corgi Buster left their house at 22 Reeve's Court and set out on their walk toward Wilson Sprigg's house at 2208 Friar's Way, Marylou chanted to herself: *Today's the day. Today's the day. Today's the day he'll suffer and die.* Every morning she fully believed that by the time she'd walked the three blocks to Wilson's house she'd have figured out how to do him in, despite the fact

CHAPTER 1 * *Suzi* *

Q: How many times had Suzi been warned?

A: Every time she turned around.

Every time you turned on the TV or opened up a newspaper there were stories about perverts who scooped up children, locked them in closets, tortured them, raped them, strangled them and buried their bodies in crawlspaces. What *was* a crawl space? And those were just the stories she found on her own, trolling the internet. She was also warned directly by her parents, by the plastic chick on the evening news, by an Officer Friendly visiting their school who wore a protective puffy suit like a Michelin man and encouraged the kids to attack him with fury. If someone tries to grab you, yell fire and run! Kick and punch and poke. Even adults you know might have bad intentions. Teachers, scout leaders, ministers, even Father himself. If an adult makes you uncomfortable, get the hell out of there. Tell another adult, hopefully not another child molester. Don't be fooled by the ploys: *Your mother sent me. Help me find my lost puppy! Want some magic dust? Come to my house and drink beer and watch a dirty movie! Want to sleep in my tent?* Don't walk to school, or wait for the bus alone. Don't ride your bike alone. Never be alone.

But who would've suspected that an old woman living in her own neighborhood, a woman who walked her corgi dog morning and night, who would've thought that this white haired, slightly hump backed old

in flip flops, and by the time she got home, where her mother was out in the yard, hands on hips, waiting for her, she'd mostly forgotten about Nance, but she was in a good mood the rest of the day.

* * *

Suzi's life went by in a blur of soccer practice, soccer games, school, homework, texting Mykaila and Sienna and Sierra and ignoring texts from Davis, pretending to ignore Dylan B., fighting with her sister Ava, and the dog walking thing, of course, took up just a tiny fraction of her day, and it was the most boring part, something she protested about having to do, but mostly on principle. It was a relief being alone, watching Parson sniff the same bushes with the same intensity, not taking her cell phone with her even though her mother wanted her to, not having anyone expecting great things from her, or even little things. And she found she looked forward to meeting up with Nance, the dog lady, whom she ran into now nearly every time she walked Parson, and who always asked her questions and seemed so pleased with the most mundane information.

Nance wanted to know all about her family, so she told them that her father worked at Florida Test Development and her mother, right now anyway, was a stay-at-home mom, and Nance nodded approvingly. For some reason Suzi kept talking, revealing things she'd never tell most people, had only told Mykaila before, that both Ava and Otis had what is called Asperger's Syndrome, which was bad enough in itself, but what made it worse was that Ava took up *all* of her mother's time. Got more pity than anyone ever had in the history of time. Their mother was always taking Ava to counseling and different therapies, trying to turn her into a normal person who was going to go off to college and get a job and get married, which was never going to happen in a million years but her mother refused to admit it.

"I see," said Nance, and nodded as if she did see. She didn't ask

what Asperger's Syndrome was, thank God, because it was nearly impossible to describe. "What about your brother?"

And Suzi told her how Otis was a science geek who did experiments in his shed out in the back yard and nobody ever paid any attention to him except for Granddad, who gave him advice and things to read about science.

Granddad seemed to be the one Nance was really interested in.

Nance asked how long Granddad had been living with them—two years—and where he'd lived before that—Iowa, until his wife, Suzi's step-grandma, died.

Oh, Nance seemed puzzled, knocked off balance. Where did he live before Iowa?

Memphis, Suzi said, wondering why she cared.

"Oh," Nance said, now in a totally different way. "Memphis!" she seemed thrilled, and then revealed why. "I lived in Memphis for long time myself." She looked at Suzi expectantly. "I'd love to meet your Granddad and talk about Memphis sometime."

"You should stop by. He's always home." Suzi wanted to howl with laughter. The poor woman had crush on Granddad! It was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. Should she tell Nance that Granddad was in early stages of Alzheimer's? Three people in her house had some kind of official label, given to them by doctors, but Suzi could label the others, too. Her mother was a helicopter parent, hovering around Ava. Her father had turned into a workaholic, and when he was home all he did was watch for hurricanes on the internet. He was also a soccer-holic. He went to all Suzi's games and gave her advice on how to be a good goalie, and most embarrassing of all he coached her from the sidelines. Like he knew anything about soccer. Sometimes it seemed like he cared more about Suzi being a soccer star than she cared herself. Everyone expected her to be the perfect one, the one with no problems, the athletic one, since Otis and Ava were so uncoordinated