

Chapter One

Hello

I met Mrs. Roosevelt in 1928, the year that Herbert Hoover beat the pants off Al Smith.

I was the only woman reporter working for the Associated Press in the New York bureau that year, and I'd been handed a plum assignment: the Democratic ticket. (Not *the* plum assignment: that was Hoover, who was a sure bet to win but about as remarkable as a dead fish.) The wire services didn't fall all over themselves to hire women, but after we got the franchise in 1920 and the political parties began to lobby for the women's vote, the AP did what they had to do. They hired one woman. Me.

At first, the guys in the AP newsroom on the sixth floor at 383 Madison Avenue made me feel as welcome as a stone in a shoe. If they could've, they would've parked me on the society pages. But I had sixteen years of reporting experience to my credit—the Minneapolis *Tribune*, the Milwaukee *Sentinel*, the Battle Creek *Journal*, the *New-York Tribune*, the New York *Daily Mirror*—and I wasn't shy about slugging it out for news assignments. I had spent the previous year at the *Mirror*, stirring the usual tabloid stew of sin, sex, and sensationalism, so when Bill Chapin, the AP day city editor, assigned me to the Democrats and Tammany Hall, it was like coming home. I got out my notebook, put on my walking shoes, and went to work.

I was thirty-five that year, and in my prime. I was tall for a woman (five-foot-eight), deep-voiced, broad-shouldered, hefty. At work, I wore dark skirts and jackets, with white blouses (sometimes maybe a little ruffled or coffee-stained), bright silk scarves, low heels. An AP colleague once described me as “a big girl in a casual raincoat with a wide tailored hat, with translucent blue eyes and a mouth vivid with lipstick,” adding that I managed to be “hard-boiled and soft-hearted at the same time.”

That was cute. But yes, that was me: hard-boiled, soft-hearted. I could crack wise with the guys, but I liked nothing better than a human interest story with plenty of heart. And on the Democrat beat, Mrs. Roosevelt was the story with heart.

It went this way. New York's four-term governor Al Smith, the "Happy Warrior," was the Democratic candidate for president, and a political featherweight named Franklin Delano Roosevelt was aiming at the governorship. But Herbert Hoover was campaigning to the triumphant drumbeat of Republican prosperity, promising a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage—just what the American voter, always a sucker for a slogan, wanted to hear. The smart money was on Hoover.

In the state race, Roosevelt wasn't raising many hopes, either. He was a rich kid from Groton and Harvard with aristocratic good looks, a mellifluous voice, and sterling connections by blood and marriage to Teddy Roosevelt. The word around the AP office was that Roosevelt had idolized his Cousin Teddy and planned to follow his road to the White House, even going so far as to marry Eleanor, TR's favorite niece but definitely no ravishing beauty. FDR (as he was called) had served as assistant secretary of the Navy under Wilson and enjoyed a brief flurry of celebrity in 1920, on another doomed Democratic ticket: James Cox for president, FDR for vice president. FDR might've been a candidate for the presidency in 1924, but that golden dream dimmed when he was crippled by polio. Now, he wore ten-pound metal leg braces and spent months of every year paddling around at Warm Springs, a derelict health resort he'd bought in Georgia. The boys in the AP newsroom, usually pretty good judges of character, wrote him off as a well-heeled dilettante who had a boatload of charm but lacked the political muscle to steer the ship.

But Roosevelt was Al Smith's fair-haired boy and a Tammany Hall candidate, which made him very interesting copy, especially when you added in the connections to TR and the Oyster Bay Republican Roosevelts. So I spent my days loitering in the lobby at the Democratic Party headquarters in the General Motors Building at Broadway and Fifty-Seventh, picking through the flotsam and jetsam of corridor gossip. And the more I heard, the more my gut told me that the story behind *this* story was the candidate's wife, who was doing something political wives just didn't do. She was campaigning for the ticket. Openly, with enthusiasm.

Which, all by itself, was news. In Albany, Mrs. Al Smith hid behind her tea table in the governor's mansion and was off limits to the press. In Washington, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge (formerly a teacher in a school for the deaf) had been ordered by her husband not to talk to reporters. Urged to speak

at a press luncheon, the story went, she had resorted to sign language—a perfect metaphor for muzzled political wives who were told to smile and keep their mouths shut.

Mrs. Roosevelt was an anomaly, and as a reporter, I loved anomalies, especially when the anomaly was a woman doing something that made her stand out as something other than a wife, a mother, and a clotheshorse. This woman went out on the campaign trail, edited the *Women's Democratic News*, wrote magazine articles on women in politics, taught at an exclusive girls' school, and, with two friends, owned a furniture factory on the Roosevelt estate. A furniture factory? Now, *there* was an anomaly for you. But she had a conventional side, as well: she was the mother of four boys and a girl, grown or away at school, and a grandmother.

It had been my experience that the fastest way to a candidate was through the candidate's secretary. In this case, the candidate's wife had a secretary—Malvina Thompson—so I knocked on her door and invited her for a late-afternoon coffee and sweet.

We met at Veniero's, on East Eleventh between First and Second Avenue, over a slice of Italian cheesecake for her and a Napoleon for me. (I knew even then that I was diabetic but didn't quite believe it. Yet.) I had stumbled onto Veniero's a decade before, during a short-lived stint on the old *New-York Tribune* during the uneasy days before the United States entered the war in 1917. I had come to the *Tribune* from the Milwaukee *Sentinel*, fired with the hope of getting credentialed as a foreign war correspondent and heading for France and the front. That's where the action was. That's where I wanted to be.

But the *Trib* editor laughed at me when I told him what I wanted to do. "Just who the hell do you think you are?" he demanded, loud enough to be heard across the newsroom. "Stick to your knittin', girlie. Females don't cover wars." Laughter stuttered from one typewriter to another as the reporters, male to a man, shared the joke.

In my anger at yet more evidence of bias against female journalists, I spouted off to the editor and got the boot for insubordination. But I had found Veniero's. When I returned to the Minneapolis *Tribune*, I missed its Napoleons. Now, a decade later, I was glad to be back.

Malvina Thompson was a dark-haired, firm-jawed woman in her mid-thirties, well-informed and politically savvy. By the time our order appeared, we were Tommy and Hick, trading Tammany Hall gossip and shaking our heads over Mayor Jimmy Walker's latest grubby, greed-stained scandal. I asked a few wary questions about what was going on at Democratic headquarters, using her answers like channel markers showing whether she'd give me access or block my way. It didn't take me long to decide that Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary knew the score, all of them. She was a source worth investing in.

Tommy asked me questions, too—where I'd been before I got to the AP, how I felt about women in politics, how I felt about the ticket, about FDR, about Mrs. R. Before I finished my Napoleon, I'd realized that she was sizing me up, vetting me in order to decide just how much access *I* should have. Each of us was using the other in the way we had learned to operate in the political universe. Neither of us could know, then, that we would be steadfast friends for as long as we lived, Tommy loving and defending her boss in one way while I loved and defended her in quite another.

Sweets finished, we both lit cigarettes and leaned back, regarding each other while the conversations from nearby tables eddied around us like smoke and the rumble of the Second Avenue El rippled the coffee in our cups.

"I think," Tommy said finally, "that you ought to meet the Boss."

The Boss. I had to smile at that. "You think so?" I didn't want to seem too eager.

She was slightly miffed. "Hey, she's doing good things. Those are her editorials you've been reading in the *Women's Democratic News*." She narrowed her eyes. "You *have* been reading them, haven't you? And her *Redbook* article? You need to read that, if you want to know what she stands for."

"I read it," I said. The article was titled "Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do." Not even Mrs. Roosevelt's stiff, pedantic style could mask her fuming outrage. "I agree with her basic premise. Women in politics are being exploited." Women were wooed into politics, Mrs. Roosevelt had written, because men needed their organizational talents and coveted their votes. But the minute a woman reached for real political power, her hands were slapped and she was sent back to her kitchen. Mrs.

Roosevelt was not a good writer, by any measure. But she had plenty of passion and the chutzpah to go with it. That was what I admired.

“It goes beyond politics, of course,” Tommy said. “Mrs. R is committed to ending exploitation for *all* women. An eight-hour day, better working conditions, the right to strike—”

“How many hours a day do you work for *her*?” I countered, amused. I’d heard the stories. “Twelve? Fourteen? Nights? Weekends?” Tommy was rumored to be married to a high school teacher named Frank Schneider. But nobody had ever seen her husband and she never seemed to leave the office before nine or ten at night. He was widely believed to be a fiction.

She had the grace to chuckle. “I do it because I want to. Because I believe in her.” She became earnest. “You’ll see, Hick. The Boss is just about the biggest woman in the world. Big dreams. Big heart.”

I shrugged with a practiced show-me cynicism. “If you say so. When?”

“I’ll set it up.”

“Exclusive?”

“I’ll ask.”

“*Before* the election,” I said firmly. Because the Happy Warrior and Franklin Roosevelt were going to lose the election. There would be no point in talking to FDR’s wife after the Democratic ticket was shot down. And if he won (he wouldn’t), she would be the governor-elect’s wife. Muzzled, off-limits, out of the picture. If she had anything to say, she’d have to learn sign language. I had no idea then how wrong I was. How could I? She was an anomaly. There had never been anyone like her before.

“I’ll give you a call,” Tommy said and stubbed out her cigarette.

The AP political reporter and the Democratic political operative smiled at each other with a cautious respect. Then we gathered our things and went back out into the noise and hubbub and hurly-burly that was East Eleventh Street.

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Ah, New York, New York, how I loved it!

At the end of the Twenties, the Big Apple had it all. Wheeling and dealing on Wall Street, Park Avenue for puttin' on the Ritz, Delmonico's for cocktails and dinner, followed by the theater on Broadway or the Cotton Club and the Apollo and the Savoy in Harlem. The Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge and Central Park, the Plaza Hotel and Carnegie Hall and the Met. Yankee Stadium and Ebbets Field for baseball and Greenwich Village for intimate parties, where we played phonograph records of Bessie Smith's blues and sang Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Me": *Went out last night with a crowd of my friends. They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.*

But it was also the Bowery and Chinatown and the Lower East Side and Mulberry Bend and Penitentiary Row and Bandits' Roost. And sweatshop workers and street urchins and prostitutes, all dolled up, and drunken bums on the down-and-out. Prohibition had been the law since 1920, but the Volstead Act was a joke. All it took was a bottle and two chairs to make a speakeasy, and there were thirty thousand of them in the city, all under the great, greasy Democratic thumb of Tammany Hall. The good thing was that booze was as easy to get as water. The bad thing was that you never knew what the hell you were drinking. You could order Dewar's or Gordon's at one of the dollar-a-glass clubs with brass rails and crystal chandeliers and get pretty much the same poison you got at the dime-a-shot dumps along the wharfs.

As a working reporter, I saw it all, every day, every night, and there was plenty to see, plenty to love, plenty to hate. Which suited me, because I loved and hated with equal passion and had a tough time observing the AP's cardinal rule: *Stay out of the story.* I had grown up in tiny railroad towns on the featureless prairies of South Dakota, where the wind-worn people talked only of crops and the weather and never saw a new face or heard a strange voice from one end of the month to the other.

In New York, I sometimes simply stood and *gawked*. The city's energies were hectic, electric, frenetic, chaotic. The cacophonous streets were packed curb to curb with automobiles and taxis, bicycles weaving crazily among the electric trolleys and double-decker busses. The Empire State Building was pushing up the sky at Fifth Avenue and West Thirty-Fourth, and the New York Central Building would soon straddle Park Avenue like a gray stone colossus capped with glowing gold and copper. In the Times

Square district, Paramount had recently opened its thirty-six-hundred-seat movie palace, with a grand Wurlitzer theater organ that shivered my bones and turned my insides to a quivering jelly.

Those rip-roaring days were good for women, and I've always had a yen for women who aren't afraid to go for broke. The year before, Leonora Speyer had won the Pulitzer for poetry, following Amy Lowell and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Helen Wills would hold the Number One world ranking in women's tennis for eight years, not losing a set from 1927 to 1933. Fourteen-year-old ice skater Sonja Henie won her first Olympic gold in 1928. That same year, seventeen-year-old daredevil Elinor Smith became the first pilot—the only one still, so far as I know—to fly a plane under all four East River bridges. Amelia Earhart went farther and faster, becoming the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, as a passenger in a Fokker piloted by two men. When I interviewed her, she set her jaw and said firmly, "Next time, I'm gonna do it *myself*. Alone"

I set my own records in those days, too, and I was proud of them. I was the first woman reporter in the AP's flagship office. I was the first woman political journalist in the country. I was the first woman bylined on the front page of the *New York Times*, with a story about the sinking of the steamship *Vestris*. (I beat all the guys to the dock and got a survivor's story before the others figured out what was happening.) I was the first AP reporter assigned to the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, and the only woman. What's more, my stories were carried around the country via the wire service's nearly fourteen hundred subscriber newspapers. On any given day, a quarter to a third of them would be carrying a story with my byline. "The AP's front-page girl," they called me. I resented "girl," but I damn well earned the praise and the raise—to sixty-five dollars a week—that came with it. People knew my name. Lorena Hickok was *somebody*.

And Lorena Hickok was having the time of her life. My AP colleagues and I hung out after work at Lindy's, Leo Lindemann's restaurant and deli on Broadway just below Fiftieth. Lindy's—known for its cheesecake—was the headquarters of gangster Big Arnie Rothstein, remembered by F. Scott Fitzgerald as Meyer Wolfschein, who fixed the 1919 World Series. Big Arnie collected his booty at a table in the farthest corner, where he could keep his back to the wall—but that was then. One dark night, somebody

gunned him down on Seventh Avenue, where he died in a puddle of blood. For a long time, nobody would sit at his table.

Damon Runyon, then a columnist for the Hearst papers, claimed his table by Lindy's front door, where he collected characters like baseball cards—The Seldom Seen Kid, Harry the Horse, Dream Street Rose, Nicely Nicely. And big-mouthed vaudeville comedian Milton Berle, Uncle Milty even then, bounced from table to table, collecting laughs from the bit players, actors, and journalists who drank there. Lindy's didn't sell booze, but friends and friends of friends passed their flasks under the table, so we were always well served.

I shared my friends and my apartment with Prinz, my German shepherd and companion. At seventy-five dollars a month, Mitchell Place was pricey. But it was new and midtown, just off First Avenue and Forty-Ninth, and roomy enough for the two of us, with a little kitchen where I could practice cookery and a balcony where Prinz could stretch out and lust after the pigeons and seagulls winging it over the East River. Evenings and Saturdays, Prinz and I ran together along the river. On the Sundays when it was my turn to monitor the AP news ticker, he went to the office with me and curled up under my desk. On off-duty Sundays, when my AP friends came over for a brunch of bacon and eggs and croissants and my notorious Stingers, Prinz played the ham, clowning for my friends' attention.

Yes, friends, my friends—women and a few men, too, passing through my days and nights. I was young then, and I had a young person's passions, a young person's desires. But I was often lonely, and in those days, before Eleanor filled the emptiness of my heart, I was lonely for Ellie Morse.

Oh, Ellie, Ellie. We lived together for eight years back in Minneapolis, where both of us worked at the *Tribune* and shared a three-room apartment on the top floor of the swank Hotel Leamington, on Ellie's wealthy father's tab. The war was over, the times were good and getting better. At the time, Tom Dillon was the *Trib*'s managing editor. He started me on night rewrite, then moved me to the copyedit desk, and then to news and features. Mr. Dillon—the Old Man, we called him—liked my smart mouth and my moxie and assigned me to crime and politics, strong stuff for women in those days. Sports, too. I was the first woman in the country to cover a major college football team—the Minnesota Gophers. I

loved the noisy crowds, the crazy excitement, the brute force of bodies against bodies. I loved being out at the field, a woman covering a man's game, a woman journalist making the news in a man's business.

And I loved coming home to Ellie. My Ellie, a wispy thing, thin, fair-haired, not at all pretty, but whose large and generous affections erased all the losses in my life. My mother had died when I was thirteen, Ellie's mother had died giving birth to her, and we two motherless daughters learned to mother one another. My alcoholic father had abused me, but Ellie's father was extravagantly loving. She shared his lavish gifts with me, so that both of us were fathered (although I'm sure that the dear, good man had no idea of the nature of our relationship). When he died and left her a potful of money, she proposed that we spend a year in San Francisco.

"You can write your novel and get a nice rest," she said. "And when that's done, we can go to Europe and have a grand romantic adventure."

"But my newspaper job," I protested. "I've invested eight years in the *Trib* and—"

Ellie might be wispy, but she knew her mind. "The doctor says stress is bad for you, Hick. If we were living a quieter life, maybe your moods wouldn't be so . . ." She hesitated, then put it diplomatically. "So up and down."

I had just been diagnosed as diabetic, which explained my moods. Stress pumped me up, then brought me crashing down. I hated leaving my newspaper work, but I loved Ellie, I wanted to try my hand at a novel, and the idea of San Francisco was tempting. So I took a year's leave of absence and we went.

It didn't last. Ellie had never stopped liking men and she married one of them, damn it. She didn't have the nerve to tell me what she was doing—just eloped to Yuma with Roy Dickenson, a widower she had met years before at dancing class in Minneapolis. They had their grand European adventure together, leaving me to scabble up the pieces of my broken heart. The disaster was total, for I couldn't make myself work on the novel, which probably wouldn't have been worth much anyway. I'm a teller of true stories, and fiction feels flabby to me. I finally gave up trying.

But I couldn't face the idea of moving back to Minneapolis without Ellie, where our friends would know how utterly I had been betrayed. I needed to fill my life with new work and new people in a

new place, so I took the train to the Big Apple, fast-talked myself into a job on Hearst's tabloid *Daily Mirror*, and after six or eight months, moved up to the AP. I allowed myself to be lonely now and again—who isn't? But I had Prinz and good friends and good work. If there was any lingering self-pity, I blotted it out with a romantic fling or two, and by the afternoon Tommy Thompson and I had our little talk at Veniero's, I was back on track again.