

Chapter One

LOOSE LIPS

The June sun felt hot and malevolent on Anne's skin, but she knew the long walk would be worth it, as she'd learned it was always best to look a liar in the eyes.

She'd taken the stuffy train to Harvard Square, then walked through the university campus, not as sleepy in summer as she would have expected, young men in short sleeves and crisp linen pants hurrying to this classroom building or that. A few of them whistled at her as she passed, the eggheads no better than construction workers, but she ignored them.

North of the oasis of Harvard came the rest of Cambridge: the blue-collar neighborhoods, the three-deckers and cramped blocks. Fewer trees, less shade to hide in.

Still a mile away from Inman Square, she seemed to be headed straight into the late-afternoon sun's angry gaze. She felt the sweat at her back after just a few blocks. Halfway there, she was almost regretting the decision not to splurge for a cab. The reporter characters in the movies never seemed troubled by their low pay, she'd noticed. No one in *His Girl Friday* had damp armpits and sore feet.

The address in question was halfway down a dead-end street off Mass Ave, light blue and in need of a paint job. The steps to the door creaked as she ascended.

How had she found herself here? It had taken two days to chase this particular rumor down, but the gist was:

The barkeep in Scollay Square said he'd heard it from a lawyer.

The lawyer had caught wind of it from the secretaries.

The secretaries all blamed Doris, the new one.

Doris told Anne she'd heard it from a friend of hers, Marty.

Marty? He lived in Central Square. He'd heard it from his buddy Joe, who'd heard it from his pal Mikey, who'd heard it from Hank. Good guy, Hank. Okay, actually, maybe not so good. Kind of an oddball, if you know what I mean.

Anne didn't—could you explain?

Mikey explained. Anne asked follow-up questions. Personal histories emerged. Then she understood, and she asked where this oddball Hank lived.

After her subway trip and a long walk, Anne finally knocked on Hank's door. She clasped her notebook to her chest with both hands, adopting her look of professional friendliness.

There were many different kinds of mistruths, she had learned through years of writing and reporting.

Some mistruths were born of ignorance, almost innocent in their lack of understanding about the world. Some were initially harmless, more mistakes than outright lies, until they were repeated often enough to convince a critical mass of people, in which case they became dangerous.

Then there were the deliberate mistruths that all but dripped with venom, sharpened like fangs ready to sink into gullible flesh.

Some lies were well-camouflaged, particularly hard to ferret out, while others were so obvious that only a fool would willingly reach out and touch it.

The good news for her was that each kind of falsehood felt equally rewarding to chase down and disprove. She loved her job.

The door opened and a thin young man gazed at her suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

She offered her most disarming smile. Anne was not vain, but she

knew she was good at appearing harmless and winning people over, a skill that came in rather handy for a reporter.

“Good evening. I’m sorry to drop by so late. I’m not interrupting dinner, am I?”

“No, not yet.”

“Are you Hank Doyle?”

“One of ’em. ’Less you mean my old man.” Thin, sandy hair fell across his forehead. An archipelago of acne traced his right jawline. He might have been nineteen or twenty. “You selling war bonds? I think we bought enough already.”

“No, actually, I work for the *Star*. I was hoping I could ask you a few quick questions.”

He hadn’t been expecting that. His thick brows scrunched up a bit.

“What, for a ladies’ interest column or something? You gonna take my picture?” He grinned. “Writing about all the eligible bachelors left behind?”

How quickly suspicion is replaced with bravado. She’d seen this before.

“Not exactly. I’m looking into some rumors we’ve heard about Fort Gillem, in Georgia. Do you have any friends there?”

A two-second pause. “Yeah, a few, actually. I’d be there too if they hadn’t . . .”

“Hadn’t what?”

He looked away. “Ah, it’s just . . . They gave me this bum news about my heart.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” She put an overly dramatic hand to her own heart. “I hope everything’s all right.”

“Yeah, I’m perfectly fine. Strong as a bull. That’s what I’m saying. Yet they go and say I have a ‘murmur.’ Whatever that is. You believe they won’t let a fellow serve on account of a murmur?”

She’d heard her share of complaints like this from men ruled 4-F due to one health ailment or another. It was a sore subject for most, as if their very manhood was being questioned. It was best not to overdo it with the sympathy, otherwise they’d feel pitied and take offense.

“I’m sure you’re still doing your part. You work at the Gillette plant, right?”

“Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“Your friend Mike Hurley told me.”

“You know Mikey?” He still couldn’t decide how suspicious to be about this strange young woman on his doorstep, she could tell.

“Just met him today, actually.” She’d only spoken to Mikey on the phone, but some of the things he’d said had led her to conclude that her talk with Hank should be in person. Despite that long, hot walk.

“Hank!” An older woman hollered from inside. “Who’s at the door?”

He turned his head and shouted back, “Just a saleslady, Ma!”

The lie intrigued Anne. It implied that he might know why Anne was here. And that he wanted to hide it.

“Tell her we don’t need nothing!” Ma yelled.

Anne retook the conversational reins, “The thing I wanted to ask you about was this rumor we’ve been hearing about Fort Gillem.” She tried to slow her normally rapid-fire voice. “It’s rather a sensitive topic, so I apologize if it makes you uncomfortable, but I really do need to ask.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Okay. What is it?”

“Well, it’s about the WAAC. And, you know, some of the things going on with the ladies down there.”

She left it at that. It was always best to let people fill in the conversational blanks themselves.

Yet Hank seemed in no rush to fill in anything. He silently assessed her.

She saw the understanding behind his eyes: he knew what she was talking about. He just needed the right invitation to admit it.

She asked, “Do you know any women serving in the WAAC?”

He scratched at his neck and looked away. “Yeah, sure. A few.”

Thousands of women had joined the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, added after Pearl Harbor to fill noncombat roles. Though some found work near their homes, most had to relocate, exercising a degree of female independence not appreciated by everyone.

Anne played dumb: “It’s great that so many young women are doing their part to serve, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.”

“I thought about enlisting myself, but I decided I could do more good here.” She tapped her notebook. “Who is it you know in the WAAC?”

“Well, just this one girl, actually. Grew up across the street. She went down to Fort Gillem a few months ago.” He scratched at his neck again. “You don’t need to know about her for your story, though, do ya? I wouldn’t want her name in print or anything.”

“That’s so good of you to want to protect her. No, I don’t need to print her name. Have you heard anything from her since she got down there?”

“Yeah. Got a letter from her.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” She’d had a hunch from the start, but now this made even more sense. “Do you write to her, too?”

A shrug. “Yeah.”

“That’s good of you. So many men don’t know how to express themselves in writing. It’s always nice to get a letter from a sweetheart.”

“Well, she’s not my . . . I mean . . .”

“Just a friend, then.”

“Yeah.” The dejection plain.

“I won’t tell anyone her name, but . . . could you tell me?”

He considered for a moment. “Cindy. Cindy Byrne. Her folks are in 12B there,” and he motioned across the street.

“So is Cindy the one who told you about . . .” And here Anne pretended to have trouble with it, even looked down at her notebook as if she were too embarrassed. When he didn’t volunteer the answer, she finally looked up and said, “About the doctor?”

He exhaled. The itch at the back of his neck really seemed to be troubling him.

“Yeah, look. About that . . .”

Another pause. Being a reporter, Anne had learned, meant being comfortable with long pauses. Awkward silences. *Don’t fill them*, she had been taught. *Wait for the other person to offer something*. Being an inveterate conversationalist herself, this had been one of the journalistic skills she was having the most trouble perfecting.

She told herself to wait, wait.

“Hank.” The hell with it—waiting was for the lazy. “I told you I wouldn’t use Cindy’s name in my story. And I won’t use yours either. *If you cooperate.*”

Short pause to let it sting.

“Because here’s what I think: I think you got angry at Cindy for

something. For what, I don't know, and I don't need to know. Whatever happened between you"—or whatever *didn't happen* between you, is what Anne figured—"isn't any of my business. But it *is* my business, and it's my readers' business, to know the truth about what's happening with our military and our soldiers."

She was staring into his eyes now, trying to look empathetic but firm, and he hadn't broken her stare. He looked like just another schoolboy getting the talking-to he knew he deserved from the teacher he most hated to disappoint.

The long hot walk had been worth it.

"I think that you were angry at Cindy, and so you said something about her to your friends. Something that wasn't kind and wasn't true."

He finally broke the stare and looked away, out to the street. The street where he and Cindy used to play together, no doubt, where he must have developed his crush, his unrequited love for a girl who went off to have exciting adventures without him.

He shook his head, and she saw that his eyes were watering.

Anne continued, "You said something unfair about her, and word got around, and it's really amazing how quickly word gets around these days, especially about that sort of thing, and you really didn't mean for it to get out of hand like that, but it did, and that's why I'm here. And I don't think you *really* feel that way about her, do you?"

"I..." His voice tiny. A long exhalation to check the tears. "I shouldn'ta said that."

His mother's voice again: "Hank! Dinner's ready! Where's your sister?"

"In a minute, Ma!" With the yell, his face flushed red. All the sadness and guilt in his eyes a moment ago turned into a fresh anger. That moment of vulnerability gone, hidden once again behind false toughness.

"Okay?" His voice more forceful now. "It was wrong of me. But what's the big deal?"

"So, just to be clear, and for the record: Cindy *didn't* write to you that she got pregnant from one of the soldiers down at Fort Gillem, and she *didn't* say that her girlfriends down there got pregnant too, and she *didn't* tell you that they all got abortions from a staff doctor at the base?"

He stared at her for an extra few seconds. "No. She didn't."

"But you said that to some friends."

He folded his arms. “Yeah. I made it up.”

“She rejected you,” Anne said, her veneer of reportorial disinterest now fading, “and because she dared to do that, you decided to call her a whore and make up stories about not only her but about all the patriotic young women in the WAAC supposedly getting abortions.”

“I said I was sorry, okay?” Not that Anne remembered—no, actually, he hadn’t apologized. “Can you leave now, lady?”

She nodded to him and said good evening. She was down the steps and had taken a few triumphant strides toward Mass Ave when he called out, “Hey!”

She turned and he asked, “What was your name, again?”

“Anne Lemire. You’ll see the byline in the *Star* on Thursday.”