

HICK

THE TRAILBLAZING JOURNALIST
WHO CAPTURED
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT'S HEART

by **SARAH MILLER**

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A note on language:

In Lorena Hickok's time, words to describe sexual orientation and gender identity were limited, as well as taboo. If Hick ever described or defined these aspects of her identity, that information has yet to come to light. The meaning of the words she did have at her disposal have also evolved significantly in recent years, and will no doubt continue to evolve. These facts have led me to choose the present-day umbrella term *queer* to describe Hick and the other women in these pages who had same-sex relationships. Once a slur, *queer* has metamorphosed into an inclusive term for any and all members of the LGBTQIA+ community willing to embrace it.

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I love you & you've made of me so much more of a person
just to be worthy of you.

—Eleanor Roosevelt to Lorena Hickok



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PROLOGUE

March 3, 1933

Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC

ASSOCIATED PRESS STAR REPORTER LORENA HICKOK—HICK, AS she liked to be called—was just thinking about getting herself some dinner when the telephone in her hotel room rang.

“Franklin is tied up,” Eleanor Roosevelt’s voice said. An endless stream of people were flowing in and out of the president-elect’s room in a flurry of last-minute inauguration preparations, the first-lady-to-be explained. To her surprise, she was alone. “Would you mind coming over and having dinner with me?” Eleanor asked.

Hick didn’t have to think twice. There was no one she’d rather be with, no one in the world she loved more, and chances to be alone with Eleanor Roosevelt—already scarce—would become rarer yet the minute Eleanor’s husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, took the oath of office the following day. Everything about their relationship might be about to change, but here, like a gift, was one more moment to share.

Hick sailed through the swarm of reporters in the Mayflower’s lobby and out to the side entrance, where the Secret Service stood guard. Unlike the other reporters, she slipped past the agents with hardly a murmur. Not only was Hick’s face familiar to the Secret Service by now, but they knew Mrs. Roosevelt was expecting her.

Lorena Hickok was perched at the apex of her career. She had interviewed queens, governors, starlets, explorers, and divas. Her name had appeared above the fold in the *New York Times*, and her articles were hailed as some of the best in the nation. She had covered every kind of beat,

from sports to politics, in an era when most of her female colleagues had been relegated to writing columns on tea parties and wedding gowns. The next day, she would interview the first lady of the United States, in the White House itself—a feat no journalist of any sex had ever pulled off. “I was just about the top gal reporter in the country,” Hick later said of her standing that night. “I was good, I knew it.” It had taken her twenty years to get there.



Outside the Mayflower, the country roiled on the edge of financial hysteria. The crash of the stock market in 1929 had wiped out fortunes of investors and businesses alike, and the intervening three years had only strengthened the crash’s calamitous reverberations. On the eve of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s inauguration, one-quarter of the nation’s workforce was unemployed. Cities like New York and Chicago did not have the funds to pay their workers. Frantic citizens rushed to the banks to empty their accounts, desperate to get enough cash to see them through whatever hardships were still to come. The banks, in turn, had panicked and snapped their doors shut, trapping people’s savings inside. Outgoing president Herbert Hoover had all but begged Franklin Roosevelt to join him in implementing bipartisan actions to stop the downward spiral.

FDR had refused. Any decisions he made to quell the crisis would be his, and his alone. Roosevelt wanted no taint of his predecessor’s disastrous administration upon his own policies, even if it meant subjecting the American people to a few more days of unbearable uncertainty. The risk and the menace of the people’s mounting fear were enormous.

The nation’s mood hung heavily over the presidential suite that night, clouding any hopes Hick had of soaking herself in the companionship and intimacy she and Eleanor had so often shared before.

Dinner arrived and sat mostly uneaten on the table between them.

Both women were fidgety and inclined to pace. Neither of them could focus. Even Hick's feeble attempt to outline their interview for the next day failed. "Anything could happen," Eleanor said more than once. "How much can people take without blowing up?"

Advisors came and went from Franklin's sitting room next door, keeping him apprised of the escalating crisis. Hours after Hick arrived, FDR sent his inaugural address in for his wife to preview. Eleanor read it aloud, including the line that would ring down through history: *Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*

"It's a good speech, a courageous speech," Eleanor said to Hick when she'd finished. "It has hope in it. But will the people accept it? Will they believe in him?"

At that moment, Lorena Hickok stood at a crossroads. "There I was," she recalled long afterward, "a newspaper reporter, right in the middle of what, that night, was the biggest story in the world." Hick could have leaked the highlights of the inaugural address to the Associated Press, informed papers from coast to coast who the president was conferring with and what plans they were preparing to shore the nation up. No reporter in American history had ever had such an opportunity.

The thought never crossed her mind.

All Hick could think about was Eleanor, and the magnitude of what lay before this woman she loved above all others. The weight of Eleanor's worry, not only for her husband, but for the people of the United States, occupied every atom of Hick's concern, rendering Hick oblivious to the professional dilemma staring her in the face.



It was sometime close to three or four o'clock in the morning when Eleanor's son Jimmy came in. "They've all left," he said. "Pa's going to bed." Eleanor excused herself to say good night to her husband. Even

then, with no one in the room to hinder her, Hick did not tiptoe to the telephone to report all she'd heard. Instead, she slipped off her dress and shoes, put on the dressing gown Eleanor had lent her, and lay down on one of the twin beds. By the time Eleanor returned, Hick was asleep.

“That night,” Hick later reflected of herself, “Lorena Hickok ceased to be a newspaper reporter.”

PART ONE
LORENA

CHAPTER 1

NO HEADLINES PROCLAIMED HER BIRTH ON MARCH 7, 1893. Alice Lorena Hickok was one of a thousand or so babies born in the United States that day and attracted no particular notice outside her own family. There was not one single reason to suspect that this baby girl—born over a creamery in East Troy, Wisconsin, to a butter maker and his wife—would one day reside at the White House.



From the very first, Lorena proved herself a keen and quiet observer. Even as an infant, she watched and listened, slowly, carefully absorbing the sights and sounds that orbited her. As she thought of it years later, she was acclimating herself to the world, learning how things felt, moved, smelled, tasted, the way babies of every species must. But Lorena seemed to do it more deliberately—so deliberately, in fact, that she managed to hold on to some of her earliest babyhood experiences tightly enough to keep them from fading away entirely.

Light was her first memory, “warm and yellow.” Light, and then music. It had no form or melody. Just a vague and gentle humming, accompanied by the soft sway of the rocking chair where Anna Hickok often tucked her baby daughter into a nest of pillows while attending to the household chores.

Perhaps Lorena’s mother hummed as she worked. Or perhaps the music came from the baby herself. “Ever since I can remember, through almost every waking hour,” she would muse as a grown woman, “music has run through me, somewhere in the back of my throat.” The sounds

were like a current, as constant as the movement of blood through her veins.

She took her time learning to talk—so long that her mother’s family began to whisper their worries among themselves. Here was a child who would rather have inaudible conversations with cows than talk with people, a child who secretly believed the animals could converse among themselves just as humans did. She seemed more intent on deciphering the language the hens spoke than on bothering with English, and snuck about the chicken yard, trying to surprise the birds into divulging their gossip.

Human companionship offered little to Lorena, compared to the raptures of the natural world. “In the memory pictures of my very early life there seem to be no people at all,” she recalled. “No real people—only here and there a shadowy figure.” The earth, the grass, the tiny insects crawling through it—these she would remember vividly. She regarded trees with the same fondness that most children reserved for a beloved parent, “wide-spreading trees that sang to a child and might sometimes reach down and pick her up in their strong, rough arms.”

It required a near cataclysm to make Lorena take notice of the living, breathing people around her. One day she stood in the kitchen doorway during a thunderstorm as her grandfather navigated the wooden walkway that led to the barn. The narrow planks were slick with rainwater and shone faintly blue each time the sky flared. Suddenly, her grandfather slipped. At the same instant, “a sizzling flash” and a ground-shaking crack of thunder rattled out of the sky as the old man hit the ground.

Then and there, Lorena said, “I first knew terror.”

“I do not remember what my grandfather looked like, except that he had bushy white whiskers, but I can still see his shadowy form, so gigantic to a three-year-old, as he collapsed in the blinding light.” Loud noises or sudden flashes of light sent bolts of terror through her forevermore, whether it was Fourth of July fireworks or the flashbulb of a camera.

The arrival of her sisters, first Ruby and then Myrtle, went largely unnoticed in Lorena's realm. Cows and horses, dogs and cats, and even her uncle's pigs were the living things whose company she sought. "When I was hardly more than a baby I sensed the truth that an animal's estimate of you is based on something deeper than what you look like, how you are dressed, or how you rate with your fellow humans," she explained. Unlike other children, she did not feed her doll with a bottle, instead preferring to leave it in the pig trough to dine with the pink and squealing piglets. Dolls that were made to look like people were dull playthings anyway, as far as Lorena was concerned. "A doll was just a doll," she scoffed. "You couldn't pretend it was anything else."