

# LIPSTICK and LIES



By Margit Liesche



*“Undercover action in WWII histories usually takes place behind enemy lines in overseas warzones. But Margit Liesche has combined the actual operations of a Nazi spy ring in Detroit with Pucci Lewis, a fictional agent whose OSS training unmasks a plot that could have put America at risk.*

*“This is an exciting, beautifully written documented adventure story that combines fact and fiction into an engrossing drama of spy work and the actual infiltration of Nazi agents into mid-west America.” Elizabeth McIntosh, former OSS agent and author of Sisterhood of Spies —*

**The year 1943: Enemy agents are working to attack the U.S. from within.**

Pucci Lewis, a WASP pilot with a sideline in espionage, ferries planes around the country. Trained by the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), she's unexpectedly seconded to the FBI when she arrives in Detroit. She enjoys working for attractive Agent Dante until she's sent to jail disguised as a jewel thief to try to get close to Countess Grace Buchanandineen, a counteragent who may be double-crossing the Bureau. Next she's disguised as a reporter ensconced in the ritzy Cosmos Club, where she's supposed to be interviewing women contributing to the war effort while keeping an eye on Otto Renner, who's suspected of passing classified information to the enemy from the nearby Willow Run aircraft factory. Pucci wonders if she's caught in another turf war between government agencies or a more sinister conflict. In her reporter guise, Pucci interviews many suspects before her sleuthing rolls up the spy ring.

**T**he first rule I broke upon landing at Willow Run in Detroit was forgetting to dab on lipstick.

“We must exit the cockpit looking like a lady,” my boss, Jackie Cochran, head of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, always said.

It was 0830, 26 September 1943, and I was co-pilot for Clayton Gumble bringing in a B-24 Liberator, one of our military's least reliable four-engine heavy bombers. The runway where we landed was at one end of the sprawling L-shaped factory.

At the other, a pair of water towers probed a pale autumn sky. Judging by what I'd seen from above, the administration building where I was to meet Miss C was adjacent to the towers, nearly a mile away.

On long flights, or in combat, Libs fly with a crew of up to ten. Today's duty, returning a craft to its manufacturer for repairs, required a pilot and co-pilot only. But we'd had a passenger on board as well, Wilbur Twombley. Twombley, a Ford efficiency expert, had been on official business in Newark. In a rush to return to Willow Run, he'd begged a ride. Captain Gumble had seated him in the separate compartment usually reserved for the radioman. But Twombley, a restless chatterbox, had spent the bulk of the trip in the cockpit, consuming much of our two-hour flight dishing up facts and lore about the government-owned Ford-operated Lib manufacturing plant.

He was still in the cockpit bending Gumble's ear when I'd made my exit, following shut down. Between his patter and my eagerness to get away, I had neglected my grooming.

At the tarmac's edge, I paused. Twombley had bragged about the interplant transportation system. Directly ahead a main thoroughfare ran along the edge of the airfield. The passenger shelter was vacant and I didn't see any sign of the buses he claimed serviced the artery regularly.

A ground crew in dark coveralls sporting the Ford logo approached. I cut the end man from the pack. "Where do I catch the next bus heading for administration?"

The crewman removed his cap. Sparse hair combed in wet strands swept a bumpy scalp. He wiped his brow, checked his wrist. "0830 musta just left. Next one's in twenty-eight minutes." He pointed his cap at the shelter. "You catch it there."

A string of detached buildings stood between the roadway and the plant, partially blocking my view of it. A few factory workers and executives in suits hurried among the structures on foot. "Ahh," I said, spying a power-scooter with a sidecar. It zipped past the windowless brick exteriors and darted into a passageway.

The crewman looked me up and down and grinned. "It's a plant delivery vehicle. You gotta be quick, but you won't have trouble flagging one down. Take the alley where he was heading. It's the messengers' main route."

Just beyond the alleyway entrance, an unoccupied scooter waited near a doorway. Its driver was my obvious bet. I slipped through the unlocked entrance, following a short corridor emptying into a dimly lit cavernous garage. Off to my right a door, marked MEN, closed with a click. I assumed the messenger had ducked inside. I panned the shadowy room and waited.



This B-24 Liberator assembly plant in Dearborn, Michigan. Pucci Lewis co-pilots an aircraft to this plant where the action begins. (From the Collections of The Henry Ford)

Company transportation and delivery vehicles in various stages of repair littered one side of the vast section to my left. Perpendicular rows of tall metal shelving crammed with spare parts stretched before me. I ventured a few more feet inside. A string of overhead lights illuminated a small table with a pair of folding chairs in the repair area. One seat had fallen over. On the floor in front of the tipped chair I could make out the raised outline of something. Or was it a someone?

I edged closer. A young man about my age lay face-up on the floor. A dark crimson puddle framed his head and shoulders. I forced myself to look at his face. A ceiling lamp accentuated the pasty-blue tinge of his skin. I thought his eyes were open, but couldn't be sure. Mine clamped shut as my stomach lurched, sending my last meal to my throat in a terrible burn. My heart pumped wildly, but I took a deep breath and looked again, this time focusing on the smear of blood along his neck, tracking it to a blood-soaked collar. The shirt was gray, and for the first time I realized the victim was a plant protection officer.

"*Trouble,*" warned a voice inside my head. "*Mind your own business. Leave now.*"

An intelligence operative who minds her own business would be a contradiction in terms. I leaned closer, scrutinizing the bloodied area while at the same time mentally scrolling through the textbook "Death By—" illustrations I'd studied at spy school a month earlier. There. A dark spot marked the point of entry just below his ear. Stiletto thrust, I guessed.



The dead guard’s uniform cap had landed upside down at the far edge of the puddle of blood. Nearby, an apple, a separated sandwich, and a few cookies spilled away from a tipped-over lunch pail. The guard wore a Sam Browne belt. My eyes traced the belt’s strap across his chest, noting his name tag, Walter Blount, before pausing at the .45 stowed in the belt’s holster at his hip. I kneeled at his left shoulder. My eyes strayed back across the man’s waist. His left hand was bent at an impossible angle. I shifted to see how it had happened. The dead man wore a prosthesis. Its hook jutted out from the cuff of his sleeve.

I started to get up. An envelope peering out from his jacket pocket called me back. If I had excelled in anything at intelligence school it was Flaps and Seals, the art of opening and resealing documents so deftly that no one would ever be the wiser. I plucked the envelope out. A pocket in the lower leg of my flight suit contained a slim leather case of miniature tools. The envelope’s exterior was blank. I selected a razor-thin blade and, flipping it over, slid the blade beneath the flap. The seal gave way and I unfolded the paper inside. My neck prickled. It was a technical drawing, stamped TOP SECRET. In the lower margin, someone had printed: “Night Bombing Gyro.” My hands trembled but I replaced the drawing and resealed the flap. *Was the dead guard a spy?*

I was inserting my razor through the proper slit in the leather case when the sudden press of a hard cold object at my temple interrupted.

“Freeze,” a man’s voice said. The word echoed loudly off the concrete surroundings. Someone tripped another bank of lights. “Get up.”

“Okay, sure.” I blinked, trying to get a fix on who had barked the orders. I saw a tall man wearing a dark suit over a bearish physique.

World War II WASP service women Frances Green, Margaret Kirchner, Ann Waldner, and Blanche Osborn. These pilots were trained to ferry B-17 bombers.



He held his gun straight out in front of him, the barrel trained on my chest. My heart was in my throat, but my gaze met a pair of thick-lashed dark eyes and held.

“Sir...Agent Dante,” a man said from somewhere off to my left. “I got your back.”

An agent? White shirt, dark suit...*FBI?*

The new voice belonged to a second armed man in a dark suit standing beneath the glow of the newly triggered bank of lights. He was in front of a metal door about twenty feet away. It was how they had entered. Why hadn’t I heard them?

Agent Dante wore a felt hat with a pinched crown. He shoved the hat higher up on his forehead and glared.

“What’s the idea? Who asked you to snoop around?”

“Snoop? But I was just—”

“Just what?” Dante asked between his teeth. “Breaching a crime scene. Tampering with evidence?”

“Well, uh...” I stammered.

Everyone at Willow Run was required to wear a badge at all times. A panoply of color-coded options matched bearer with department. Mine, tagged for administration, had been issued in Newark. Agent Dante assessed the badge, I assessed his face. Dante had a sweet mouth, the kind Michelangelo liked to paint on cherubic angels. Finally, he looked up. He was restraining a smile and something in his expression suggested he recognized me. Impossible, I thought, my nerves unwinding a bit as he lowered his gun.

Two men in plant protection uniforms barreled through the door. One of them raced over. “What’s she doing here?” He made a grab for me.

Dante grasped his arm. “Don’t bother. Miss Lewis has a meeting to make. How ’bout finding her a ride?”

The G-man *had* recognized me.

“Yeah, sure, you’re the boss.” The guard ambled toward the hallway. His associate and the dark-suited man I assumed was a plain clothes inspector circled in close.

“How do you know—”

Dante cut in. “Your questions will have to keep, Miss Lewis. We need to get to the bottom of what happened here. Now step back or I’ll have to ask you to wait outside with one of these gentlemen.”

My chin shot up, but I put it in reverse.

“Poor Walt,” the protection man said, looking at the corpse. “Been walkin’ on clouds last coupla days. Wife’s gonna have a baby.” He nodded to a photo I had missed alongside the lunch pail. The image, a woman’s face, was crossed with a red tongue of blood.

Dante loosened his tie and unbuttoned the stiff collar of his shirt. “Anyone check his pockets?”

The guard gave a low grunt. “Not hardly. We got our orders. Anything suspicious, we ring up the Bureau, direct.”

Dante nodded. “Right. And Headquarters notified me straight away. Lucky break I was on my way here already.” He kneeled beside the body. Using a handkerchief, he pulled the envelope out of the dead guard’s pocket. He slid the evidence inside a folder handed to him by his associate.

“A set of Miss Lewis’ prints is included in her OSS, Office of Strategic Services, record. Make a note. Lab needs to compare those with what they find here.”

I shifted uncomfortably.

Dante reached into the dead man’s pockets. “Keys, some money...”

“Is that something in his fist?” I said.

The plain clothes investigator spoke. “Looks like—” He hesitated.

Dante lifted the man’s stiff right arm. “Looks like what?”

“Uhm, well, it’s something frilly.”

Dante lowered the rigid arm to the ground. “Care to guess?”

The investigator’s expression suggested he would, but he declined. “Medical examiner is on his way. We’ll know soon enough.”

\* \* \*

The protection man had found the scooter’s driver. Folded into the sidecar beside him, I wedged my B-4 bag between my feet. I was about to see my boss. Dipping inside, I found my lipstick tube and swiped some on. It was warm for my leather flight helmet but an open car ride might get windy. I tugged it on.

Normally, I ferry super-fast pursuit fighters from my home base in Long Beach to designated points in the east, usually New Jersey, catch a flight back, start the routine over. Last night, I had been passing through the Ready Room in Newark when the call from Miss C came through, turning routine on its head.



**Grace Buchanan-Dineen:** On August 24, 1943, German agent/FBI counteragent, Grace Buchanan-Dineen, thirty-four, was arrested in Detroit, charged with conspiracy to violate the Wartime Espionage Act.

“You’re needed at Willow Run,” she announced. “I’ve wangled you the co-pilot’s seat in a Lib taking off at 0600. Be there.” “Okay, sure. Except, well, what’s—”

Miss C wasn’t listening. She was muttering something about “those OSS boys playing right into your independent streak.” This from a pilot who refused to set her sights lower than a man’s? A woman who, early in the war, had resolved to prove to U.S. and British officials that women could handle heavy warplanes; and who became, in June 1941, the first woman to ferry a bomber across the Atlantic to embattled Britain? It was on the tip of my tongue to say, “Look who’s talking—” but a distinct tension in her voice as she hurriedly completed her instructions had stopped me cold.

Ten hours later I was in the sidecar of a scooter with a surprisingly capable engine. The messenger got every ounce of speed out of it, careening along the interplant passageways, before shrieking to a halt near a sidewalk leading to the administration building’s entrance.

A black Ford Deluxe was parked near the curb. I walked wobbly-legged to the passenger door, opened it and peered in.

The well-coifed blonde on the driver's side giving me the frosty look was my boss, Jackie Cochran.

I tossed my grip in back, climbed in. "Hi, Miss C. Sorry if I kept you waiting. You won't believe—" I peeled off my helmet.

She laughed. "Good God, Lewis, what's that? Dye and repair job gone haywire?"

A month ago, on the road and bored, I'd decided to jazz up my looks. The purchase of peroxide along with a Silver Screen magazine featuring a Hollywood hairdresser to the stars resulted in my new color: pumpkin orange. A self-trim to lop off the fried ends—a cut aimed to resemble Amelia Earhart's—bore a closer likeness to the pelt of Sarah Bernhardt, my orange tabby. In the weeks since, I'd managed to convince myself that the cropped cut suited my face and hectic schedule.

My mind returned to the real crisis, the horror in the garage. "It was eerie, I tell you. First, I couldn't find a ride. Then—" I stopped. Every WASP knew the drill: Miss C liked having the floor first. She zapped me with a piercing gaze, then turned to observe a dark, sturdy-looking man with thick eyebrows, thick lips, and thin brown hair strolling past her side of the car.

The windows were open against an Indian summer heat. The muted step-slide sound of shoe leather scraping rough concrete penetrated the hush of the car's interior. My boss remained absorbed in the man's passing, or maybe in his slight limp, and I watched along with her. He looked hardy enough, but his suit was baggy, its collar gaping at the back of his neck. Something about his cheery expression didn't fit quite right either. He turned and started up the main sidewalk to the entrance.

At last, pulling her gaze from the receding executive, Miss C adjusted the rearview mirror, checked her reflection. She appeared to be sorting through something troubling her. I tapped my nails on the leather arm rest, waiting.

My boss' interest in appearance bordered on the obsessive, her 1938 victory at the prestigious Bendix Race from Los Angeles to Cleveland a classic example. The grueling annual event, open to both male and female pilots, always drew a big crowd. That year, the competition fell on my eighteenth birthday and my dad, feeding my passion for flying, took me there as his gift. The throng on the tarmac was thick but we were near the front, cheering as she landed. Eager to catch my first glimpse of a female ace, I wormed in closer. She did not disappoint. After flying eight hours, ten minutes, and thirty-one seconds under rigorous conditions, she kept us all waiting, including Mr. Bendix, while she touched up her face before exiting the plane to accept her trophy. Gutsy woman, I thought, knowing in that moment that I would one day follow in her slipstream.

Her shoulder dipped and the large rosette diamond at the center of her trademark propeller-shaped pin winked at me from the lapel of her plum-colored suit. The chic getup and glitzy adornment made me think of another runway incident.

Uniforms, like so many other things, were in short supply. Miss C, presented with cast-off WAC suits to outfit her new unit, pronounced them "hideous," and promptly headed off to Bergdorf Goodman's in Manhattan. With her own funds, she authorized the design of a WASP uniform. She'd run them prototype, a Santiago blue suit with a cute beret, by me, but I wasn't enrolled to help sell it. For this, she recruited a Pentagon employee who might otherwise pass for a fashion model, and had someone less alluring don a WAC hand-me-down. The trio marched, Miss C in the lead, directly into General Marshall's office, demanding he choose.

"Well, I like the one you're wearing, Miss Cochran," he said.

"You can't have this one," she replied, explaining the simple but expensive suit had been purchased in Paris before the war.

"The blue one is best," Marshall then admitted. "You'll get your uniforms."

Now, inside the Ford, Miss C jutted out her prominent jaw, examining its reflection in the rearview mirror as if searching for a flaw. "You said you couldn't find a ride when you got here?" she asked archly. "What's that about? Part of a cover you're practicing?"

"What?"

"Sure had me buffaloed. Never would have expected someone so dedicated to country and to flying would"—she fluttered a hand—"run off, take an extended break from her duties like that."

I bit my lip. She hadn't yet bothered to explain why I'd been summoned, but surely she had not dragged me here to slap my wrists for the OSS training stint?

Another angle hit me like a severe blow. Was she jealous that I'd been singled out for the specially tailored course? That our government had in mind giving me the occasional home front undercover girl assignment? I looked over at her. All the while I'd been thinking she'd summoned me here to discuss a mission. Was the opposite true? Did she hope to toss a monkey wrench into the government's plans?

"I wasn't away for long," I said, a little too sharply. "It was a condensed course. I was out of action for just three weeks."

With the lift of an eyebrow, she returned to the mirror.

Diplomacy was not my strong suit. I'd learned to live with the effect my directness had on some, but Miss C had never been among those unstrung by it. Not hardly. She respected standing up for your rights and was bothered by women who were "blahs." So what had her so peeved? What was my sin?

Life as a PK, Pastor's Kid, can be tricky. There's a pressure, especially in public, to maintain an image. But I was always more chaff than seed. And trying to be what I wasn't wore on me. In my teens, I started imagining scenarios from my future life as a commercial pilot. We lived in Chilton, a one-horse suburb of Cleveland, and dreaming big in a small town was not that easy. At least until Civilian Pilot Training came to our community college. Eventually I earned my pilot's license, but while I'd always pictured myself one day ferrying passengers to Africa or Alaska, too soon I discovered that, as a woman, my dream to fly professionally was just that: a dream. A degree in journalism was my hole card. With it, I planned to make a living the way other lady pilots did, by writing for magazines about flying.

A position knocking out spec sheets at an aircraft factory followed. I had begun to accept that I would be eternally chained to a desk, when along came the WASP. I owed my luck to Miss C, the program's founder. In hindsight, how could I have been so thick-headed as to miss why she was so upset?

"Miss C," I began softly. "I hope you don't think I applied for intelligence school behind your back. I would never do that. There was an oversight, wasn't there? My orders came through OSS channels, direct. They ought to have come through you. I'm sorry. I should have realized sooner."

Her dark eyes bored into mine. She didn't speak, but I knew I'd hit home.

She smoothed a wave in her perfectly permed hairdo. "Forget it, Lewis. Not your fault. There was no clear line for you to follow. But you're right. I *should* have been involved." She leaned back with a shrug. "Well, boys will be boys. Guess one of them wanted to be sure I remembered it's still the men who run the show."

A company bus pulled up at the sidewalk in front of us. The doors parted and our attention momentarily shifted to watch the passengers, all of them factory workers, spill out. The flow stopped while a small man, around four feet tall, making a slow descent, hopped off the bottom step.



Top: Women worked long hours contributing to the war effort in many facets, including aircraft construction. (From the Collections of The Henry Ford)

Above left: Former WASP member Peggy McNamara Slaymaker

Above right: Betty MacDonald McIntosh, former OSS operative

Note: Both Peggy and Betty shared experiences and historical perspectives with the author.

This must be one of the dwarfs Twombly had told us about while describing an early production problem involving the Lib's main wing. The interior space was so cramped, he'd said, that an average-sized person could not get in there to buck the rivets needed to fasten the outer wing to the center section near the end of the assembly process. He had solved the problem by creating a highly specialized team made up of a mix of women and dwarfs, recruited mainly from the entertainment business.

The small man yawned and stretched out his arms before starting down the sidewalk. Fair-skinned, his blond hair trimmed in a bowl cut, he was clad in dungarees and a short-sleeved chambray shirt. He vectored toward a side entrance to the factory and I stared after him, wondering if I might recognize him from a movie.

Two men, one with a pug nose and small protruding ears, the other with prominent nostrils and a scouring-pad

mustache, got off the bus last. “Hey, Chaplin, wait for us,” one of them called, racing to catch up with the small man.

Miss C had been eyeing the dwarf, too. “Where were we?” she asked, turning to me. “Oh yeah, the cloak-and-dagger stuff. Did you enjoy it, then?”

*Did Tuesday follow Monday?* Microfilm, invisible ink, ultraviolet light, secret weaponry, disguises, codes—what could be more exciting?

“It was swell,” I said delicately. “I liked it fine, thanks.”

Modesty had its rewards. “Let’s cut to why you’re here,” she said. “Day before yesterday, I was in Washington planning my trip back to the ranch. Decided to break up the flight, surprise my girls at Romulus Field. Got in yesterday. Had barely touched down when a call came in, asking me to route you here.”

“Really? Who called?”

Miss C had raised her voice to counter the noise of an approaching Lib. I was nearly shouting, too, but it was hopeless. We cranked up our windows. The sound was still deafening. While we waited, Miss C began twisting the cord of a two-way radio mounted on the dash between us. The radio’s presence startled me. That I hadn’t noticed it before seemed to underscore just how on edge I had been since entering the Ford.

A St. Christopher medal and a horseshoe charm hung from a chain looped over the rearview mirror. Odd enough to be meeting in a car in the first place, but *whose* car was it? For sure not Miss Cochran’s.

Quiet again, we rolled down our windows. My queries about the caller went ignored. “You won’t regret not going overseas with the others?” she asked.

OSS was responsible for intelligence work behind enemy lines. It was why candidates accepted into the program had to meet a foreign language requirement. It was also why I had been surprised when OSS approached me. I’d never mastered a second language.

“Who wouldn’t want to go to the front?” I replied honestly. “But going in, I knew it wasn’t an option.”

My walk on the shadow side had opened up an entirely new approach to life in which suddenly everything that had once been forbidden now became a way of thinking in wartime. Heady preparation, but I had never been tested under fire. For that, I needed an assignment. A *home front* assignment. The dead spy with a knife wound in his neck lying on the floor of the garage at the opposite end of the factory was a ready-made prospect. “Miss C,” I blurted, exasperated. “I’m happy staying stateside. I feel lucky and proud to be a WASP, but—”

Miss C appeared to reach some kind of resolution.

“Good. You’re an excellent pilot. I need you. But for the moment, the FBI needs you more.”

My heart pounded. “Oh?”

“They handle domestic intelligence.”

I knew that.

“They’ve got trouble here. Something to do with German spies operating from inside this plant.” A movement outside the car drew her attention. “Ahh, here’s Agent Dante. We drove over together. He’ll do the explaining.”



Margit Liesche and her book  
Lipstick and Lies

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