

*Eyes on the
Stars*

By
Lynn Ames

EYES ON THE STARS

© 2010 BY LYNN AMES

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN: 978-1-936429-00-4

This trade paperback original is published by

PHOENIX RISING PRESS
PHOENIX, ARIZONA
www.phoenixrisingpress.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

CREDITS

EXECUTIVE EDITOR: LINDA LORENZO
AUTHOR PHOTO: JUDY FRANCESCONI
COVER DESIGN BY: PAM LAMBROS,
WWW.HANDSONGRAPHICDESIGN.COM

Dedication

To the WASPs—fearless women who risked their lives in the skies so long ago. They paved the way for all of us who dare to step outside the box.

Acknowledgments

Writing a novel based on actual events in history requires mountains and mountains of research. Much of what I know and learned about the Women Airforce Service Pilots (the WASPs) I gleaned from watching, listening, and reading dozens of interviews with many of the WASPs themselves.

The sources I found for these interviews are too numerous to mention by name. There are, however, two resources in particular I want to single out.

There is an incredible organization dedicated to keeping the memory of the WASPs and their wonderful contribution to the war effort alive. It is Wings Across America, and it was created by the daughter of a WASP. The web site address is www.wingsacrossamerica.org. I hope you will visit the site, and feel free to donate if you are so moved.

Chapter Fifteen contains references to and accounts of actual events that occurred in WASP history. Although I read dozens of accounts of the incidents I describe, my primary source was *Women in the Wild Blue*, by David S. Stallman.

I spent many weeks gathering information about the planes flown by the WASPS and actually seeing the planes in person. My thanks to the patient mechanics and pilots of the World War II-vintage Vultee Valiant for sharing their expertise.

Finally, to those individuals who assisted me along the way with this labor of love by reading/suggesting, or helping me with complicated mathematical calculations, you have my eternal gratitude.

Other Books in Print by Lynn Ames

Outsiders

What happens when you take five beloved, powerhouse authors, each with a unique voice and style, give them one word to work with, and put them between the sheets together, no holds barred?

Magic!!

Brisk Press presents Lynn Ames, Georgia Beers, JD Glass, Susan X. Meagher and Susan Smith, all together under the same cover with the aim to satisfy your every literary taste. This incredible combination offers something for everyone—a smorgasbord of fiction unlike anything you'll find anywhere else.

A Native American raised on the Reservation ventures outside the comfort and familiarity of her own world to help a lost soul embrace the gifts that set her apart. * A reluctantly wealthy woman uses all of her resources anonymously to help those who cannot help themselves. * Three individuals, three aspects of the self, combine to create balance and harmony at last for a popular trio of characters. * Two nomadic women from very different walks of life discover common ground—and a lot more—during a blackout in New York City. * A traditional, old school butch must confront her community and her own belief system when she falls for a much younger transman.

Five authors—five novellas. *Outsiders*—one remarkable book.

Heartsong

After three years spent mourning the death of her partner in a tragic climbing accident, Danica Warren has re-emerged in the public eye. With a best-selling memoir, a blockbuster movie about her heroic efforts to save three other climbers, and a successful career on the motivational speaking circuit, Danica has convinced herself that her life can be full without love.

When Chase Crosley walks into Danica's field of vision everything changes. Danica is suddenly faced with questions she's never pondered.

Is there really one love that transcends all concepts of space and time? One great love that joins two hearts so that they beat as

one? One moment of recognition when twin flames join and burn together?

Will Danica and Chase be able to overcome the barriers standing between them and find forever? And can that love be sustained, even in the face of cruel circumstances and fate?

One ~ Love, (formerly The Flip Side of Desire)

Trystan Lightfoot allowed herself to love once in her life; the experience broke her heart and strengthened her resolve never to fall in love again. At forty, however, she still longs for the comfort of a woman's arms. She finds temporary solace in meaningless, albeit adventuresome encounters, burying her pain and her emotions deep inside where no one can reach. No one, that is, until she meets C.J. Winslow.

C.J. Winslow is the model-pretty-but-aging professional tennis star the Women's Tennis Federation is counting on to dispel the image that all great female tennis players are lesbians. And her lesbianism isn't the only secret she's hiding. A traumatic event from her childhood is taking its toll both on and off the court.

Together Trystan and C.J. must find a way beyond their pasts to discover lasting love.

The Kate and Jay Trilogy

The Price of Fame

When local television news anchor Katherine Kyle is thrust into the national spotlight, it sets in motion a chain of events that will change her life forever. Jamison "Jay" Parker is an intensely career-driven *Time* magazine reporter. The first time she saw Kate, she fell in love. The last time she saw her, Kate was rescuing her. That was five years ago, and she never expected to see her again. Then circumstances and an assignment bring them back together.

Kate and Jay's lives intertwine, leading them on a journey to love and happiness, until fate and fame threaten to tear them apart. What is the price of fame? For Kate, the cost just might be everything. For Jay, it could be the other half of her soul.

The Cost of Commitment

Kate and Jay want nothing more than to focus on their love. But as Kate settles into a new profession, she and Jay are caught in the middle of a deadly scheme and find themselves pawns in a larger game in which the stakes are nothing less than control of the country.

In her novel of corruption, greed, romance, and danger, Lynn Ames takes us on an unforgettable journey of harrowing conspiracy—and establishes herself as a mistress of suspense.

The Cost of Commitment—it could be everything...

The Value of Valor

Katherine Kyle is the press secretary to the president of the United States. Her lover, Jamison Parker, is a respected writer for *Time* magazine. Separated by unthinkable tragedy, the two must struggle to survive against impossible odds...

A powerful, shadowy organization wants to advance its own global agenda. To succeed, the president must be eliminated. Only one person knows the truth and can put a stop to the scheme.

It will take every ounce of courage and strength Kate possesses to stay alive long enough to expose the plot. Meanwhile, Jay must cheat death and race across continents to be by her lover's side...

This hair-raising thriller will grip you from the start and won't let you go until the ride is over.

The Value of Valor—it's priceless.

CHAPTER ONE

Emanicipation Hall in the new Capitol Visitor Center was throbbing with activity. Jessie let it wash over her. The bright lights, the politicians, the young men and women in uniform—it was overwhelming, really. And then there were “her” girls—even so many years later, she had no trouble recognizing them. There was Shirley holding court, like always, and Annabelle, who still was a looker, with her flowing hair, and...

Jessie clutched at her throat and leaned heavily against her cane. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. Sixty-seven years melted away, and she was standing on the tarmac at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, staring at the most beautiful girl she'd ever seen. Back then, her heart had thudded once—hard—and she was a goner. The same was true now. Jessie moved as quickly as her age would allow, threading through the throngs of people.

“Claude? Is that really you? Oh, Claude...” She reached out with her fingertips to touch that smooth cheek, and the woman in front of her flinched.

“Umm. I, I'm not...”

“You must be Jessie.” A woman in her mid-sixties came up alongside and put her hand out for Jessie to shake. When Jessie stood frozen, the woman offered, “I'm Natalie, Claudia's daughter. And this,” she put her hand on the young woman's shoulder, “is my granddaughter, Chelsea.”

Jessie's eyes tracked from the younger woman to the woman who was speaking and back again. “What?”

“My name is Natalie. Claudia Sherwood is my mother. This is Claudia's great granddaughter, Chelsea.”

The young woman who had shrunk from Jessie's touch smiled sheepishly and said hello.

"You're not..."

"She's the spitting image of Claudia, isn't she? I always tell her how lucky she is to favor her great grandma."

"I'm so sorry, what a silly mistake for me to make." Jessie attempted to gather her wits and regroup. "Pardon an old woman, will you, dear?"

Chelsea touched Jessie's hand. "I don't mind. Really. I've always admired Grandma Claudia."

The young girl's smile reached directly into Jessie's heart. "You are very like her. She had a smile like sunshine on a sweet summer's day." Jessie's eyes narrowed as she turned her attention back to Natalie. "How did you know who I was?"

"I've heard so much about you over the years, I feel as if I've always known you. I grew up hearing stories of your bravado and adventurous spirit. For a long time I thought you were the only person my mother knew." Natalie laughed.

"Claudia talked about me?"

"Incessantly. I think I was almost as in love with you as Mom was."

Jessie's eyes widened. "I'm sorry?"

"Grandma!" Chelsea elbowed Natalie.

"What? It's true."

"Claudia spoke of me to you." Jessie tried to wrap her mind around the words.

"Of course," Natalie said kindly. "She loved you with all her heart. Always."

"I don't understand."

"Mmm. Mom said you wouldn't." Natalie frowned.

There was a moment of awkward silence as Jessie took in the women before her. Finally, she asked, "Where's your father?"

"Never had one." Natalie waved her hand as if to dismiss the notion.

"You—"

"Never had a father. Don't even know who he was. Mom would never discuss it with me. She was a wonderful mother, so I never really felt like I was missing anything. She raised me all by

herself. Worked two jobs and never missed a major occasion in my life. I can't complain." Natalie's eyes misted over.

Jessie swayed, and Chelsea immediately came to her aid.

"Here, we should sit down," Natalie said.

Jessie sat heavily. She worked her jaw, but words would not come. Tears hung on her lashes. She hid her face in shaking hands. When she had composed herself, she said, "Surely Claude married..."

Natalie shook her head. "Never married. Never even went on a date that I can remember."

"Oh, Claude," Jessie whispered. "Dear, dear Claude."

"Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests, please, take your seats. We're ready to get started. WASP members, please take the reserved seats in the first three rows."

Jessie looked around her. She knew she needed to get up and move to the front of the room, but she wasn't sure her legs would hold her. As she struggled to rise, Chelsea took her elbow.

"It would be my honor to escort you to your seat."

Jessie smiled. "I see impeccable manners run in the family."

Chelsea walked Jessie to a vacant seat in the first row and steadied her as she sat.

"Thank you, young lady. You do your great grandmother proud."

"Hey, Jess. Jessie Keaton, is that you? I'll be."

Jessie turned to face the weathered old woman as Chelsea slipped away. "Hello, Rebecca. Good to see you."

"The uniform still looks good on you, Jess."

"Thanks."

A politician Jessie recognized from the television stepped to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, today has been a long time in the making. The one thousand seventy-four Women Airforce Service Pilots served their country with distinction in World War II, freeing up the male pilots for combat. Many of the three hundred surviving WASPs are here with us today to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest civilian honor bestowed by this country. We want each and every one of you to know that you have the thanks of a grateful nation. Your journey began in 1942 in Houston, Texas, and continued in 1943 at Avenger Field..."

The voice faded into the background as Jessie recalled mustering on that first day at Sweetwater, in front of the legendary Jackie Cochran, founder of the WASPs.

“Listen up, you lot. I know the fly suits are ill-fitting, the cattle truck is uncomfortable, and it’s hotter than your oven on Thanksgiving day. I know you had to pay your own way here, the parachutes are heavy, and the living arrangements are Spartan. I know that there are many men who want to see you fail. But I also know that you’re here because you love to fly, and because you want to do something substantial to help the war effort...”

Jessie wiped her brow and looked around her. There were young women of all shapes and sizes. She was grateful the fly suit she’d grabbed fit her relatively well. Of course, she was as tall as most men, which helped considerably, since the suits were designed for the male combat pilots. Her eyes lit upon a tiny wisp of a woman—a girl, really—a few rows back and to her left. The suit swallowed the woman whole.

Jessie tried not to laugh as she watched her surreptitiously fuss with the sleeves, pull at the yards of extra material around her waist, and tug on the pant legs on which she was standing. Still, she wore a look of determination that told Jessie she was not easily discouraged.

“Okay, ladies, get settled in your assigned bays, stow your gear, and report back here at 0930.”

Jessie and the other twenty-two women in her class broke ranks, hoisted their gear, and set off to find the assigned quarters where they would spend the next six months while they trained to fly every aircraft in the US Army Airforce fleet.

After several false starts, Jessie located her bay in the row of old Army barracks. Since she was first in, she had her choice of the six beds—cots, really. She peeked in the adjoining bathroom and was shocked to realize that the single commode, sink, and mirror would have to accommodate not only her bay but also an identical one on the other side of the bathroom.

“Well, this ought to be fun.”

“I’m sorry, did you say something?”

Jessie whirled around to find the same tiny woman from the lineup. Her head was cocked inquisitively and, up close, Jessie

could see that her eyes were startlingly green. Her hair, a pretty shade of auburn, hung in waves and shimmered in the dusty light from the only window.

Jessie dimly became aware that she was staring. “Um, I was just... Well, you see...” Jessie stopped talking. She had no idea what she wanted to say, which was a completely foreign experience for her. She knew her cheeks must be red because her face was hot.

The woman threw back her head and laughed. The sound was like birds singing in the early morning. “I’m Claudia.” The woman put out her hand for Jessie to shake.

“Jessie.” *Her hands are so soft.* After another awkward pause, Jessie realized she hadn’t released Claudia’s hand. “Oh, sorry.” Jessie dropped her hand to her side, then, not knowing what else to do with it, stuffed it in her pocket.

“You were here first, you should get first pick. Which bed do you want?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, you go ahead.”

Claudia’s smile was brilliant. She turned in a full circle as she surveyed the room.

“Before you make up your mind,” Jessie rushed ahead, “you’ll probably want to know that there’s only one commode for twelve of us.”

“Oh. In that case, I think I’d better take the bed closest to the bathroom.” Claudia shrugged. “Weak bladder.”

“Ah,” Jessie murmured, not knowing what to say to that. She put her duffle bag on the bed next to Claudia’s, trying for nonchalance. “Guess I’ll just bunk here.” She watched as Claudia struggled to lift her suitcase onto her cot. Jessie noted that the bag likely cost more than her entire wardrobe. “Here, let me get that.” She reached over and hoisted the suitcase onto the bed, and was rewarded with another laugh from Claudia.

“You make that seem so easy, when I know full well how heavy that bag is.” Claudia swept an errant strand of hair out of her eyes. “I had no idea what to pack.”

“I can see that.”

The door flew open and four other women burst in, all laughing and talking at once. Jessie winced at the noise level. Growing up

in rural upstate New York, she was unused to a lot of extraneous chatter.

“They are a loud bunch, aren’t they?” Claudia whispered conspiratorially.

“Wha?”

Claudia smiled. “Your expression gave you away. Remind me to play poker with you.”

Before Jessie could respond, Claudia crossed the room and introduced herself to their new bunkmates. “That’s Jessie over there.” Jessie waved weakly as the other women followed Claudia’s gaze to where she still stood rooted to the spot.

“I’m Janie.”

“Rebecca.”

“Shirley.”

“Annabelle.”

Jessie nodded in each of their directions, hoping she’d be able to keep them straight.

“Goodness,” Shirley said, or was it Rebecca? “Look at the time. We’d better get going. Don’t want to be late for ground school.”

As quickly as they’d rushed in, Janie, Rebecca, Shirley, and Annabelle flew back out, leaving Jessie alone with Claudia once more.

“Whew, they’re going to be a handful, aren’t they?” Claudia remarked. She crossed the room and hooked her arm through Jessie’s. “C’mon. We’d better get going.”

“Right.” Jessie looked down at their interlocked arms, and warmth spread through her. What was it she was being asked to do, again? Oh yeah, walk.



“Please come with me, Jess? Please?” Claudia stood at the foot of Jessie’s bed, looking pretty as a peach in a sleeveless sundress and slingback, medium-height heels. Her hair framed her face like a picture, and her makeup reminded Jessie of one of those big movie stars.

They’d been training for three weeks solid without a day off. It was Saturday night, and some of the girls were going into town to

check out the action at the Blue Bonnet Hotel. Jessie's stomach twisted painfully as she envisioned some young buck putting his paws on sweet Claudia, even just to dance. She sighed heavily. "Okay, I'll go, but there's no way I'm setting foot on the dance floor."

"Deal." Claudia put her hand out and they shook on it, as had become their custom whenever she got Jessie to give in on something, which, Jessie noted, was often.

Jessie ran a comb through her hair and grabbed her jacket.

"You're going like that?"

Jessie frowned and looked down at her standard WASP-issued white shirt and khaki slacks. "What's wrong with this?"

Claudia smiled and patted her on the arm. "Not a thing. I think you look incredibly dashing. But I expect you might get hassled for wearing slacks."

Jessie shrugged. "Too bad."

"Okay, then. Let's go," Claudia said brightly, linking their arms.

The contact sent a shiver down Jessie's spine, as it always did.

When they arrived, the crowd at the Blue Bonnet was raucous and the music was loud. Cigarette smoke wafted through the air, men and women danced to the latest tunes, and others congregated near the bar.

"Want something to drink?" Jessie yelled close to Claudia's ear to be heard.

"Oh, I'm not much of a drinker. Just some pop, please."

"Okay, I'll be right back." Jessie fought through the throngs to get to the bar. By the time she'd gotten the drinks and returned, there was an enlisted man standing close enough to Claudia to count the dusting of freckles on her nose. Jessie's jaw set.

"No, I really don't want to dance."

"Come on, sugar. A pretty thing like you? We'd look perfect together."

"Thank you, but I'm just not interested."

The man took Claudia's wrist and pulled her toward the dance floor...and ran directly into Jessie, whose eyes showed fire.

"The lady said she wasn't interested."

"Yeah, but she really didn't mean it."

“Actually, I believe she did.” Jessie didn’t give any ground as the soldier tried to push past her. “Now let go of her and go on your way.”

“Who do you think you are?” The man made a show of examining Jessie’s shirt and slacks. They stood eyeball to eyeball.

“Jess, it’s okay,” Claudia said, putting her free hand on Jessie’s arm. “Don’t make a scene.”

“Do you want to dance with this...person?”

“N-no, but...”

Jessie continued to stare daggers at the soldier. “Then it’s not okay, is it?”

“Jess...”

Jessie heard the desperate, nervous plea in Claudia’s voice but chose to ignore it. To the soldier she said, “Take your paws off my friend and go find someone else to pester.”

The soldier hesitated, clearly weighing the blow to his ego against the effort this conquest was taking. Finally, he released Claudia’s wrist and, with a disgusted look in Jessie’s direction, faded into the crowd.

“Whew. Goodness,” Claudia chattered, “I wasn’t counting on that kind of excitement.” She fanned herself. “Is that for me?” She pointed to the Coca Cola Jessie held in her hand.

Jessie wordlessly gave Claudia the drink as she tried to wrestle her temper under control.

After an uncomfortable silence, during which Claudia sipped her soda and swayed to the beat of the music, Jessie said, “I’m sorry, Claude. I shouldn’t have come.” She turned on her heel and hurried to the exit.

When she got outside, she took several deep breaths and stared at the stars. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she mumbled to herself as she strode away from the hotel.

“Hey! Hey! Jess, wait up.” Claudia came up alongside.

“What are you doing, Claude? Go on back inside and have a good time.”

“It won’t be a good time without you there, silly.”

“Nonsense. You were looking forward to dancing and letting your hair down.”

Claudia shook her head and chuckled. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“What I was looking forward to,” Claudia linked her arm through Jessie’s in a now-familiar gesture, “was spending time off-base with you, getting to know you better.”

Jessie stopped short. “What?”

“For someone as sharp as you are, you can be so dense, sometimes.” Claudia glanced around at the crowded parking lot. “Let’s go for a walk, shall we?”

Jessie made a show of looking at Claudia’s feet. “You’re not really wearing the appropriate footwear for that, are you?”

“God, you can be so pig-headed.” Claudia reached down, slipped her shoes off, and dangled them from two fingers. “Come on.” She pulled Jessie forward, away from the lights of the town.

After a little while, Claudia stopped them and looked around. Jessie wrinkled her brow. They were in the middle of nowhere, inky darkness enveloped them, and there was not a soul in sight.

“This will do.”

“For what?”

Claudia sighed exasperatedly. “You really are dense, you know?” She turned to face Jessie, stood on her tiptoes, and softly kissed Jessie on the mouth.

Jessie’s brain froze, then melted, as Claudia slipped her arms around Jessie’s waist and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. When they broke apart, Jessie’s eyes were still tightly shut.

Claudia cleared her throat and took a step back. When Jessie dared open her eyes, Claudia was smiling at her dreamily. “For that. This spot will do for that, which is something I’ve been wanting to do since the first time I saw you.”

“Um. You did?”

“Yes, silly. Gosh, you are the dreamiest.” Claudia chewed her lip. “You didn’t mind, did you? I mean, if you did...”

Jessie tried to get her mouth to move so that she could speak, but her lips were still tingling. So instead, she pulled Claudia back to her and kissed her, gently at first, and then with more urgency when Claudia melded to her body.

“I guess that means you were okay with it, huh?”

Jessie laughed. Claudia linked their arms and began walking again. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you laugh. I like it. I’ll have to work on getting you to do that more often.”

About the Author

An award-winning former broadcast journalist, former press secretary to the New York state senate minority leader, former public information officer for the nation's third largest prison system, and former editor of a national art magazine, Lynn Ames is a nationally recognized speaker and CEO of a public relations firm with a particular expertise in image, crisis communications planning, and crisis management.

Ms. Ames's other works include *The Price of Fame* (Book One in the Kate & Jay trilogy), *The Cost of Commitment* (Book Two in the Kate & Jay trilogy), *The Value of Valor* (winner of the 2007 Arizona Book Award and Book Three in the Kate & Jay trilogy), *One ~ Love* (formerly published as *The Flip Side of Desire*), *Heartsong*, and *Outsiders* (winner of a 2010 Golden Crown Literary award).

More about the author, including contact information, news about sequels and other original upcoming works, pictures of locations mentioned in this novel, links to resources related to issues raised in this book, author interviews, and purchasing assistance can be found at www.lynnames.com.

You can purchase other Phoenix Rising Press books online at www.phoenixrisingpress.com or at your local bookstore.



Published by
Phoenix Rising Press
Phoenix, AZ

Visit us on the Web: www.phoenixrisingpress.com