

# *Secrets Well Kept*

*By*  
**Lynn Ames**

## **SECRETS WELL KEPT**

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## **Dedication**

To James Edward “Ed” Westcott, without whom the world would never have seen the full story of the Secret City—Oak Ridge, Tennessee—and its extraordinary role in ending World War II.

Your dedication and skill behind the camera provided a lens through which history will always remember the men and women who created the fuel for the atomic bomb. Your photographs and generosity in making them available in the public domain brought this chapter in our history to life for me and countless others.

Ed Westcott

January 20, 1922 – March 29, 2019



# Acknowledgments

*Secrets Well Kept* is a work of historical fiction. I have done my best, in every instance, to hew to the truth of what happened in the secret city of Oak Ridge, Tennessee during World War II. I have painstakingly recreated the atmosphere, the living environment, the social life, the timing of events, and the work done by 75,000 individuals who came to a place in East Tennessee to help the war effort. In fact, the only products purely of my imagination are the characters I created, and in all instances, the ways in which they interact with real historical figures.

In order to succeed in uncovering and laying bare the truth about a place that's very existence was meant to be a secret, I needed a lot of help. My deepest gratitude to official Oak Ridge historian, D. Ray Smith, who gave freely of his time, knowledge, and expertise to give me guidance, to check my facts, and to provide me with historical/historically accurate documents and information. To Ruth Huddleston, one of the original cubicle operators at Oak Ridge, my thanks for sitting down for an interview and answering all of my questions so that I could get the technical details and mindset right. To Ed Westcott, to whom this book is dedicated, a posthumous thank you for your remarkable photographs that so richly captured life at Oak Ridge.

Beyond the primary resources, there were many other resources that proved helpful. Chief among these were: *The Girls of Atomic City*, Denise Kiernan, *Now It Can Be Told*, General Leslie M. Groves, *City Behind a Fence*, Charles W. Johnson and Charles O. Jackson, *Ignored Heroes of World War II: The Manhattan Project Workers of Oak Ridge, Tennessee*, Richard Cook, *The New York Times Complete World War II*, The Atomic Heritage Foundation, The American Museum of Science and Energy, and Edward R. Murrow "Orchestrated Hell" broadcast—CBS Radio, December 3, 1943.

To my team... To my wife, Cheryl, who traveled to Oak Ridge with me multiple times and was invaluable in helping me with research and imagining the perfect ending to this book, I couldn't have gotten this right without you. To my first readers, you always make my work better and I am deeply grateful for your time and helpful feedback. To my editor, Ann Roberts, my thanks for adding spit-shine and polish and for your steady hand. To my cover designer, Ann McMan, there aren't enough superlatives in the world to describe your beautiful work; I love you, little sister. To my e-book and web store guru, Toni Whitaker, thank you, thank you.

And to all of you readers, I am most grateful to you. Without you, I couldn't do what I do. Thanks for the love.



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**MARCH – MAY, 1943**



## CHAPTER ONE

Hey, Lindstrom.”

Nora didn't turn around. She grew weary of the taunting, the inappropriate cat calls, and the constant buzz of emotionally stunted sophomoric boys that populated the physics lab at Pupin Hall. No matter, she would be graduating with a doctorate in physics from Columbia soon, and they could just call her Dr. Lindstrom after that.

“Lindstrom. Are you deaf or something?”

“Is there something in particular you want, Dennis?”

“No. But there's something you're going to want.”

This time Nora wheeled around to face her classmate, determined to give him a piece of her mind.

Before she could utter a word, he waved an official-looking letter in front of her. “This came for you. But if you don't want it...”

“Give it here. Right now.” Nora snatched the envelope from his hand. The return address read: E.O. Lawrence, The Radiation Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley.

Nora's hands began to shake. Ernest Lawrence was the Nobel Prize-winning father of the cyclotron. He was a legend. What could he possibly want with her?

“Aren't you going to open it?”

Nora frowned. She'd forgotten Dennis was standing there. “When I'm ready.” She adjusted the settings for the mass spectrometer for what seemed like the thousandth time. If she could find the sweet spot, she could produce the results her male counterparts had failed to achieve the entire semester and prove what she'd known all along—she was every bit as smart and capable

as they were. Naturally, as a woman in a man's field, she had to work ten times as hard simply to be taken seriously.

"Women." He shook his head and walked away.

When Nora was sure she was alone, she carefully slit open the envelope and teased out the single sheet of paper.

*March 23, 1943*

*Dear Dr. Lindstrom (please excuse the presumption of title, as I know you will not officially receive your doctorate until May):*

*My colleague and friend, Robert Oppenheimer, says he met you recently at Columbia and he has apprised me of your work in Pupin Hall. He tells me you have some interesting theories and a keen understanding with regard to uranium-isotope separation using electromagnetic fields. Dr. Oppenheimer also tells me you are a scientist of the highest integrity.*

*As it happens, I have need of someone meeting your description, especially a female. While I cannot relate more details, I wonder if, upon your graduation, I might entice you to embark upon an important scientific assignment that will be of utmost importance in the war effort.*

*I assure you that the pay will be more than you can imagine and that the work will be tremendously satisfying. The assignment will require your relocation to a new, secret environment. All of that will be disclosed at a later date should you choose to accept this offer of employment.*

*Time is of the essence, so if you could please respond to this letter as soon as practicable, I would be most appreciative.*

*Thank you for your consideration, and congratulations on your upcoming graduation.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ernest O. Lawrence*

Nora blinked. The inventor of the cyclotron wanted to hire her. She wasn't due to graduate for another two months, and already she was a sought-after scientist. She re-read the letter twice more, returned it to the envelope, and tucked it away in her locker. Was she interested? You bet she was!



“Mary Elizabeth Trask, you’d better have finished your homework!” Mabel Trask hollered from the yard where she was hanging the laundry to dry.

“I’ve got to go. Mother is on a rampage,” Mary whispered into the telephone.

“Can I see you tonight? We could go for a drive.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sam, I told you, I need to study for my English test. I’ve simply got to do well. Graduation depends on it.” Mary gazed furtively out the window. “She’s coming. ’Bye.” She hung up the phone without waiting for a reply.

Her mother poked her head in the doorway. “Well? Have you finished all your assignments? I thought I heard you on the phone. Was that Samuel? He’s such a nice boy. He’ll make a good husband.”

“That’s it, Mother.” Mary’s nostrils flared. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, I’m too young to get married. For gosh sakes, I’m only eighteen. I’m not even out of high school yet and you’ve already got me married off.”

Mabel pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips. “I married your father the day after graduation; God bless him and bring him home safely from the war. That’s worked out just fine. When a good man shows interest and wants to marry you, thank your lucky stars and say yes.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you, Mother. I have a test to study for.” She stomped out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her room, where she slammed the door and flopped down on the bed.

For the past eighteen months, ever since her father had enlisted in the Army and gone off to fight, Mary’s mother had been pressuring her to hitch her star to Sam. Yes, he was a nice boy, but she wasn’t ready to settle down. There was a great big world out there she hadn’t explored yet. If she married Sam, she’d never get farther than the Philadelphia city limits. She was sure of it.

She imagined herself nursing an infant and pregnant with another. The image turned her stomach. Motherhood and domesticity weren’t for her. Then again, schooling wasn’t for her, either.

“Mary, Mary quite contrary, what in the world are you going to do?” She sighed dramatically and sat up. “Crack open that school book and try to make sense of it, that’s what.”

She grabbed the book out of her satchel and turned to the bookmarked page. Despite her twenty-twenty vision, she squinted at the words to help her focus. She blinked, and then blinked again, but the letters still jumbled together. That familiar feeling of helplessness washed over her. How was she going to bluff her way out of this one?



Nora virtually floated on air as she let herself into her parents’ well-appointed Greenwich, Connecticut, home. “Mor? Far? The prodigal daughter has returned.” She could hear voices in the living room, so she headed in that direction.

“Dr. Tompkins. I didn’t know you made house calls.” Nora glanced from the family doctor to her parents on the sofa and her brother, Bill, sitting in the Queen Anne chair. Which one of them was ill?

“In this case, I was happy to stop by, young lady.” The doctor winked. “Oskar, Elsa, William,” he said, ruffling Bill’s hair. “I know you’re going to do great things. I’ll be seeing you.” On his way out, he patted Nora on the shoulder. “Nice to see you, Nora.”

Nora frowned. “What was that about? She addressed her parents. Are you sick? Mor? Far?” Neither of her parents appeared ill.

“We’re fine.” It was her mother who answered. “Dr. Tompkins stopped by as a favor to your father.”

“He wrote me a ‘Get out of service’ letter,” Bill said.

Nora bristled at his smug expression. “What are you talking about?”

“Far had Doc write a letter saying I have a chronic condition that prevents me from serving in the military.”

“You’re perfectly able-bodied. You had him concoct something false just so that you don’t have to go fight for our country?” Nora glared at Bill and then at her father. “You encouraged that?”

“You watch your tone, young lady,” Elsa Lindstrom warned.

“I’m proud of it. Now I’ll never have to go to those God-forsaken places and get my head shot off.”

Nora barely restrained herself from cold-cocking her brother. “No. You’ll leave that for the courageous boys and men who aren’t busy frittering their lives away.”

“That’s enough, Nora.” Oskar Lindstrom finally spoke.

“Far, you can’t be serious about this. You’re perpetrating a fraud.” Nora pointed at her brother. “He’s nineteen and fully capable of going to war. Boys much younger than him are willingly lining up outside recruiting stations all over the country for the honor of representing our country.”

“Your brother is destined for big things, Nora. You should be grateful that he’ll be spared.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, Mor. That boy,” she said the word derisively, “isn’t anything more than a sniveling coward, and you’re enabling him. I should think you’d want him to serve his nation with pride and dignity. Maybe he would come back a real man.”

Bill stepped threateningly in her direction, but his father positioned himself between them. “Both of you, stop it. Bill will come to work for me in the shop, and one day he’ll take my place. There will be no further discussion of this, not now, not ever. It is done. Do you understand me?”

Nora’s hands balled into fists. Her chest heaved with unspent anger. Bill’s eyes flared dangerously. Finally, he blinked first and backed away to stand by the large bay window.

“Why are you here?” her mother asked.

“Nice to see you too, Mor.” Nora unclenched her fists. “Actually, I came to share some really exciting news with all of you. Given what I just witnessed, though, I imagine you’ll be less enthusiastic than I hoped.”

“Nonsense. What is it? What’s the news?”

“Sit,” Her father’s tone softened. “Tell us.”

Bill continued to stare sullenly out the window, and Nora debated whether she should simply leave without further comment. Her parents looked at her expectantly. *Tell them. Don’t let that yellow-bellied sapling ruin your moment.*

“All right.” Nora squared her shoulders. “I’ve got a job offer and I’m going to take it.”

“What? That’s fabulous!”

“I didn’t realize you were applying anywhere.”

“I wasn’t. I received a letter from Dr. Ernest Lawrence from the University of California, Berkeley.”

“California is so far away.”

“I don’t think I’ll be going to California, Mor. I don’t really know where I’ll be going. I only know that whatever it is, it’s important, and it’s for the war effort. Unlike Bill,” she practically spat out his name, “I can’t wait to do my part and make a difference.”

“What do you mean you don’t know where you’ll be going? How can you accept an offer if you don’t know where it is?”

“What will you be doing for this Dr. Lawrence?” her father asked.

“I’m not really sure.”

“That’s rich,” Bill interrupted. “You’re taking a job someplace, to do something, and you have no idea what, or where it is. That’s my brainy sis. Head in the clouds and no idea how to navigate the real world. Do yourself a favor. Keep your head in the books you love so much and leave the living to those of us who know how to do it.”

“You mean cowards like you? No thanks. I’m happy to do my part, whatever, wherever that takes me.” Nora strode out of the living room, through the foyer, and out the front door without so much as a backward glance.

Why she’d ever thought they’d understand or want to celebrate with her was a mystery. It wasn’t as though they’d encouraged her to seek higher education. That had been her high school science teacher, and later her college and graduate school physics professor, Enrico Fermi. Well, she’d show them. By golly, she’d show all of them.



“How is your father? Any word from the Front?”

Mary skipped over the sidewalk crack as she cradled her books against her chest. Phyllis’s dad also was in the Army, and that bond had brought them closer together. They lived around the corner from each other and often walked home from school together.

“Mother and I listen to the news every night for a mention of the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Nothing so far. We did get a letter from him



last week. He didn't say where they were, just that the bugs were horrible, the ground was so muddy his boots sunk in all the way to his calves, and the food was awful."

They reached Mary's street—Larchwood Avenue—and came to a halt. "How about your father? How's he doing?"

"Hard to say. Mom and I haven't gotten a letter from him in three weeks." Phyllis bit her lip and Mary feared she might cry.

"Don't worry about it. There are dozens of reasons you might not have heard from him. He could be in some remote outpost, or maybe his company is on the move. I'm sure you'll hear something soon."

"I hope so."

"I'm certain of it." Mary nodded, as if the matter was settled. "I've got to get going. Mother is expecting me at home."

"Okay. See you tomorrow?"

"You bet." Mary waved as she headed down the sidewalk and through the gate into her front yard. She bounded up the steps and into the house. As she placed her books down on the foyer table, Sam's unmistakable voice wafted from the sitting room. The sound made her irrationally angry.

"Thank you for the refreshments, Mrs. Trask. This was mighty nice of you."

"You're welcome, Samuel. Feel free to stop by anytime. I'm always happy for your company, and I expect to see a lot more of you going forward. I'm sorry Mary's not here yet. I can't imagine where she could be. She should've been home by now."

"She is home." Mary strode into the room. There was Sam, sitting comfortable-as-could-be on the sofa, drinking a soda. Her mother was in her customary rocking chair. Following First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's lead, she was knitting a sweater for the boys at the Front with yarn procured from the Red Cross.

"There you are. Samuel dropped by a little while ago and he and I were having a wonderful chat."

"I can see that. He looks right at home."

"Hi, Mary." Sam stood. "You look very nice today."

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you at work?"

"Mary, where are your manners? Samuel came all the way over here to see you."

Mary continued to stare at Sam. Of course, her mother was right; she was being unreasonably curt. Still...

His gaze flitted back and forth between Mary and her mother. "I missed you. I thought maybe we could go for a walk or something."

"I have homework to do."

"That can wait until after dinner. You two run along."

Mary opened her mouth to protest. Her mother, the one who constantly nagged her to get her homework done from the moment she walked through the door after school, wanted her to fritter away an hour or more with Sam.

There was nothing for it. If she continued to resist, she'd catch heck from her mother later. "Give me a minute to freshen up. I'll be right down."

She fixed her makeup, checked her breath, combed her hair, and was back downstairs within five minutes. "I'm ready."

Sam beamed at her. "You look fetching."

"Thank you. I'll be back in time for dinner," she called over her shoulder to her mother.

"Don't rush. Samuel is welcome to join us."

"Sam has better things to do." She fairly shoved him out the door in front of her. When they turned the corner and Mary was sure her mother could no longer spy on them from the living room window, she stopped short and rounded on him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What are you talking about? Can't a guy miss his girl?"

Mary sighed. "You know I'm working my tail feathers off to pass this English test. I can't be gallivanting around with you when I should be studying." She resumed walking, adjusting her pace to match his uneven gait, a remnant of his bout with polio as a child.

"Come on. You know deep down you're happy to see me."

"I know deep down that if I don't pass this test, I don't graduate." She kicked a stone on the path. "So, why aren't you at work?"

"I got off early. Old man Bailey said some sprockets we needed to fix Mrs. Hadley's watch hadn't come in yet, so I didn't have anything to do."

They walked along in silence for a time, and when Sam interlaced his fingers with hers, she allowed it.

"Your mom says you're going to start a full-time job at Meyer's after graduation. Do you know what your hours are going to be?"

Mary groaned. "I don't want to talk about it. That whole thing depresses me."

"Working a steady job right out of high school depresses you? Do you have any idea how lucky you are? Meyer's Drug Store is a staple in town. You could have a job for life."

Mary disentangled their fingers. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life working behind the counter at a drug store. Working there part-time on weekends is bad enough."

"What do you want, Mary? Because I don't understand you. You're super smart, but you're not good enough at school to go to college, and even if you were, how would you pay for it?"

"I want to go places and see things. I want to shake off the dust and live a little." She twirled in a circle with her arms outstretched.

"Now be realistic. Work at Meyer's for a year, and then we'll get married. I'll take care of you for the rest of your life."

"On a watchmaker's salary? No, thanks. I don't want or need you to take care of me. I want to take care of myself."

"You're crazy, you know that? Stop daydreaming. There are plenty of girls who would jump at the chance I'm giving you."

"Then go date them!"

"I don't want to date them. I love you!"

They'd stopped walking and were face to face, both of them breathing heavily. Sam pulled Mary to him and kissed her sloppily on the mouth. She planted both hands on his chest, shoved him away, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Are you nuts? People will see."

"What if they do? You're my girl. Folks expect me to kiss you."

"Not in broad daylight out on the sidewalk, and not as though you want to swallow my tonsils. You're embarrassing me." She checked her watch. "I'm going home now. I'll be late for supper."

"Go to the diner with me Friday night?"

"We'll see. I have to work early on Saturday."

"Can I call you?"

Mary waved without answering and hustled down the sidewalk. She couldn't explain it, but every time Sam kissed her, she wanted to wash her mouth out with Listerine. Her mother was right. Sam was a nice boy, he didn't mind her working, and, because of his disability, she was never going to lose him to war. She should be counting her lucky stars. So, why wasn't she?



## About the Author

Lynn Ames is the best-selling author of *The Price of Fame*, *The Cost of Commitment*, *The Value of Valor*, *One ~ Love*, *Heartsong*, *Eyes on the Stars*, *Beyond Instinct*, *Above Reproach*, *All That Lies Within*, *Bright Lights of Summer*, *Final Cut*, *Great Bones*, *Chain Reactions*, *Secrets Well Kept*, and one of five authors of the collection *Outsiders*. She also is the writer/director/producer of the history-making documentary, “Extra Innings: The Real Story Behind the Bright Lights of Summer.” This historically important documentary chronicles, for the first time ever in her own words, the real-life story of Hall-of-Famer Dot Wilkinson and the heyday of women’s softball.

Lynn’s fiction has garnered her a multitude of awards and honors, including five Goldie awards, the coveted Ann Bannon Popular Fiction Award (for *All That Lies Within*), and the Arizona Book Award for Best Gay/Lesbian book. Lynn is a two-time Lambda Literary Award (Lammy) Finalist, a Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award finalist, and winner of a Rainbow Award for Lesbian Romance. *All That Lies Within* was additionally honored as one of the top ten lesbian books of 2013.

Ms. Ames is the founder of Phoenix Rising Press. She is also a former press secretary to the New York state senate minority leader and spokesperson for the nation’s third-largest prison system. For more than half a decade, she was an award-winning broadcast journalist. She has been editor of a critically acclaimed national magazine and a nationally recognized speaker and public relations professional with a particular expertise in image, crisis communications planning, and crisis management.

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