

46

By
Lynn Ames

46

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Dedication

To all those who believe that love is the strongest force in the universe. Keep shining light until the darkness recedes.

Acknowledgments

The idea for *46* was born of my meditations on how we as a country and part of a global community could heal from this extraordinary time of divisiveness, polarization, suspicion, and darkness. I knew what part I would play to be a difference-maker: it would be my job to shine light in the darkness, to give readers hope. *46* is my love letter to all of you. I hope that in Emma McMasters, I've given you the president your heart yearns for—the kind of leader who will unite us and restore our faith.

In order to write the most authentic, realistic, accurate tale for you, I relied on an incredible “Who’s Who” of content experts. The depth and breadth of expertise is breathtaking. Any factual errors in this book belong solely to me.

My most sincere gratitude and thanks to the following extraordinary people. I'm blessed to have your input and your friendship. To Brigadier General Deborah Shea, whose bravery and experience is unparalleled and who breathed life into Palmer Estes' career and character. To Major General Tammy Smith, whose insights and careful attention to detail were invaluable to the accuracy of my portrayal of Palmer and military protocol. To Brigadier General Rose Loper, the first female test pilot in Boeing's history, for teaching me how to virtually fly a Black Hawk. To former Press Secretary to the President of the United States Ari Fleisher, for forty years of friendship and for ensuring the detailed accuracy of presidential/White House protocol. To State Department expert Dana Francis, one of my oldest and dearest friends, for help with issues of diplomacy and State Department protocol. To Doctor Christopher Stark, whose real account of emergency room trauma blew my mind and ensured heart-stopping accuracy. To retired criminal defense attorney Carsen Taite, who helped me dot my “i's” and cross my “t's.” To Tracey Hepner, whose detailed first-person account of attending a State of the Union infused my story with realism. To my first readers, Doctor Jenni Levy and retired Lieutenant Commander Elaine Roberts for taking every ride with me. To the best cover designer in the history of cover designers, my little sister of choice, Ann McMan. To my crack editor, Ann Roberts, whose attention to detail gives my work a fine polish. To my final proofreaders, Laura Nastro and Anne Geary, whose keen eyes give me that last boost of confidence.

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And finally, to you the readers, who continue to support my work. Thank you all for taking the journey with me.

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CHAPTER ONE

She could hear them out there stamping their feet, clapping their hands, chanting her name, “Emma! Emma! Emma!” And her campaign slogan, “*United We Stand!*” She twisted the wedding band on her left ring finger. She didn’t wear it for optics, but rather to honor her dead wife and their thirty-one years together. Heather had sacrificed everything, including her life, to support Emma’s career.

“I wish you were here to see this.”

“What was that, ma’am?”

Emma could see the makeup artist’s eyebrows rise in question in her reflection in the mirror as she retouched the back of Emma’s hair.

“Nothing.”

Nichelle Johnson swept into the makeshift Green Room. She carried a folder in hand and wore a smile that was as wide as the Mississippi River valley from which she hailed. She had joined Emma’s staff back in the days when Emma was a wet-behind-the-ears state senator from New York. “Well, Madam President-elect, are you ready to face your adoring public?”

“Don’t you ‘Madam President-elect,’ me, Nichelle. It’s bad enough everyone else is saying it.”

“From where I’m standing, you’ve worked long and hard to earn that title. If I were you, I’d wear it with pride.”

“Was that a pun from my always-serious campaign manager and soon-to-be chief of staff?”

“Was what a pun?” Nichelle’s features scrunched up in confusion.

“Wear it with pride? Said to the first lesbian president-elect?”
Nichelle blinked.

“Yeah. I didn’t think so.” Emma stood and addressed the makeup artist. “Thanks so much. I don’t think I’ve ever looked this good before.”

“Are you kidding me? I got to do makeup for the hottest president in history on one of the most important nights in our country’s existence.” The makeup artist swallowed hard as tears pricked her eyes and all pretense of lightheartedness melted away. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I don’t mean to be impertinent, but I should be thanking you. As someone who puts the ‘T’ in LGBTQ, you make me proud to be an American again. You give me hope.” Her voice faltered, and she wiped away a tear. “You *are* going to sage that place before you move in, right?”

Emma choked on a guffaw and cleared her throat. “I hope you’ll always be proud to be an American. And if I do something that makes you feel less than that while I’m in office, I hope you’ll call me out on it.”

“Oh, you can count on that, ma’am.”

“Madam President-elect. We really do need to get going. Secret Service estimates there are upwards of 300,000 people out there.”

“I hope they’re not ruining the grass.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?”

“It’s the Great Lawn in Central Park. It’s iconic and it has survived concerts by some of the biggest names in rock ’n roll. I don’t want to be known as the one who destroyed a New York landmark.” Emma winked, turned on her heel, smoothed the lines of her suit, and followed Nichelle into the wings at the side of the stage. “Did David incorporate the changes I asked for in the speech?”

“He did.”

“And the updated version is what’s loaded into the teleprompter?”

“It is.”

“Okay.” Emma rolled her shoulders to release the tension.

“You’re going to be great. They love you. Seventy million of them voted for you—the largest number of popular votes ever amassed by a candidate of any party.”

“It’s not the ones who supported me I need to address tonight. It’s the rest of the country. I’m their president too.” The night air was crisp, but the stars shone brightly and the temperature was warm enough that she’d eschewed a winter coat. Emma briefly closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

Snippets from the campaign trail scrolled like a highlight reel through her mind: the endless speeches, interviews, debates, and fundraisers; the late-night strategy sessions, the sleepless road trips, the concerns for her safety as death threats rolled in...

But, first and foremost, she saw the faces of the people she’d met along the way. They were white, black, and brown; they were gay, lesbian, straight, queer, bi, pan, and transgender; each of them had a story they wanted to share with her, a need they hoped she would address.

She would carry them all with her. She would lift them up and show them they mattered. This was her duty, her solemn oath. This was why she had wanted to be president. This was her life’s purpose—to make a difference.

“It’s time.” Nichelle touched her gently on the arm as she handed her the folder.

“Where’s the vice president-elect?”

“He’ll join you on stage as soon as your remarks conclude.”

“Okay. I’m ready.”

“Yes, you are.” Nichelle signaled the speaker at the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the next president of the United States, Emma McMasters!”



Palmer Estes, top advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and currently the nation’s only female four-star general, shrugged out of her Army greens and threw on a pair of Army-issue sweats. The meeting with her boss had run late, but there was a lot of ground to cover with the upcoming transition of power to a new president.

She checked her watch, grabbed the leftover salad and dressing out of the refrigerator, and settled down on the couch in front of the television. Tonight was historic, and Palmer didn’t want to miss seeing the winning candidate’s acceptance speech. The idea that the

United States had elected the nation's first female president, who also happened to be a lesbian, seemed incomprehensible.

Palmer leaned forward on the couch, television remote in hand, and turned up the volume. She wanted to weep with joy as fifty-two-year-old President-elect Emma McMasters strode to the podium in Central Park. Here was her soon-to-be commander in chief, a woman four years her junior, who represented everything she admired.

Emma exhibited grace under fire from misogynists and bigots who attacked her ability to lead because she was a woman—and not simply a woman, but a lesbian. She handled every insult hurled at her with aplomb, conducted herself with dignity, and acted with integrity.

“And since you're not yet my commander in chief, I can admit to myself that you're stunning.” Had that been her outside voice? Well, it was true. Emma's youthful features, penetrating green eyes, high cheekbones, and thick black hair with a hint of gray created a flawless face. Her form-fitting suit showed off her obviously workout-toned body to perfection. Yes, Emma McMasters was gorgeous.

“Oh, my God. You're as bad as the guys!” Palmer tossed the remote onto the couch in self-disgust. “This capable, intelligent person, with a vision for this country that you believe in, is about to be your boss. Shape up, soldier!”

“Hello!” Emma waved to the crowd. Her brilliant, white-toothed smile lit up the night. The massive audience went berserk, chanting her name. She allowed the adulation to continue for a moment, then tried, to no avail, to quiet the crowd. She stepped to the side of the podium, seemingly embarrassed by the attention, and paused before she endeavored once more to speak.

“Oh, my goodness. Thank you! Thank you all so much. Thank you for being here tonight to celebrate with me. United we stand!”

The crowd erupted again.

“Tonight we gather on hallowed ground. Not just because this Great Lawn has been the site of some of the most amazing concerts ever...” Emma nodded as the audience laughed. “You know I'm right. Barbara Streisand, Diana Ross, Bon Jovi, Elton John... I mean, come on!”

She's got them eating out of the palm of her hand. Palmer sat transfixed. *Me too.*

"But that's not the reason I chose this location to accept this most solemn, most monumental honor. No. Did you know that in 1931, during the height of the Great Depression, this very spot served as the home of displaced residents—folks who were down on their luck, cast out of their homes, many of them without a place to go, and most of them stripped of dignity and hope?

"For too long, too many of us have felt the same way. We've felt like outsiders in our own country, cast aside, hopeless, desperate for better days when we would once again feel safe, valued, whole, and a part of something larger than ourselves.

"Well, my friends and fellow Americans, that day is today; now is your time. Together, we will heal this *one* nation, under God, indivisible."

The audience went wild and Emma had to scream to be heard. "Mine is a big tent, where all are welcomed, treasured, and vital, regardless of race, immigration status, religion, ethnicity, sexual identity, sexual orientation, income level, or political affiliation. *You* are the fabric of this nation, and, as your president, I serve *all* of you."

The chants began again. "Emma! Emma! Emma!"

"E pluribus Unum," Emma shouted. "Out of many, one."

Someone in the crowd shouted, "E Pluribus, Emma!" The president-elect's eyes grew wide and she laughed. Palmer thought she'd never seen a more beautiful sight.

For the next half hour, she watched and listened as Emma expertly weaved a narrative that was equal parts history lesson, vision for the future, and rallying cry. The president-elect finished with a flourish and was joined onstage by the vice president-elect, along with his wife and children, all of them standing together, hands linked and raised to the sky in victory.

"I wish you had someone there for you, Madam President-elect," Palmer muttered aloud. On what undoubtedly was the most triumphant night of her career, Emma McMasters cut a solitary figure. Palmer felt sorry for her. Surely, this night was meant to be shared with loved ones.

Palmer mostly ignored stories about the personal lives of the candidates in the run-up to the election. She had no stomach for

attack ads, smears, innuendo, or overly intrusive media profiles. Everyone was entitled to privacy, even the most public figures. She'd studied the candidates' positions on the issues, watched the debates to get a sense of each potential nominee, and chosen her candidate accordingly.

As a result, Palmer knew nothing about Emma, beyond the fact that she was a lesbian, she had lost both her parents to cancer, and that she was widowed. Now, sitting here watching her in this historic moment, Palmer wanted to know so much more.

She grabbed her iPad and tapped the Google app. She typed, "Emma McMasters," in the search parameters. Instantly, thousands of entries filled the screen. At the top was a sponsored ad with a link to Emma's official website. Directly below that were newspaper stories from *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* followed by a link to Emma's Wikipedia page. Palmer clicked to open the Wikipedia entry.

Emma Jean McMasters (born April 23, 1968) is an American politician and lawyer, serving as governor of New York since 2015. She was formerly the Senate minority leader in New York State, a state senator from New York's 27th Senate District, and before that, district attorney in Manhattan. She is a member of the Democratic Party.

Palmer scanned farther down the page.

McMasters is a graduate of the University of Connecticut and the University of Michigan Law School, where she was president of the prestigious Michigan Law Review. Although she was heavily recruited by many of New York City's most notable law firms, McMasters chose a life in public service, joining the Manhattan District Attorney's office as an assistant district attorney, where she successfully prosecuted cases involving high-profile white-collar crimes, political corruption, murder, and organized crime.

"So, you've got some mettle and you're not afraid of a fight. That's good." Palmer noted the crawl on the bottom of the television screen indicating that the Republicans had retained control of the U.S. Senate by a one-vote margin. "I have a feeling you're going to need those qualities, Madam Soon-to-Be-President."

The coverage shifted to the network studio, where the anchor intoned, "Who is Emma McMasters, really? Our own Judith

Abernathy sat down with Governor McMasters during the campaign for an in-depth interview.”

Palmer shoved the iPad aside and gave the television her full attention.

“Governor McMasters, your opponent and his proxies have painted you as a security risk who can’t be trusted with the keys to the front door of the White House. What do you have to say to that?”

If the reporter’s question rattled or irked Emma, Palmer couldn’t tell from her demeanor. Emma, seemingly relaxed and at ease, sat across from the interviewer wearing a sharply tailored dark business suit and a white shell underneath. She was the picture of calm dignity.

“I would say that the American people are smart enough to recognize a desperate smear campaign when they see it, which is exactly what this is. My opponent can’t win on the issues, so he and his associates resort to personal attacks. The American people know that this is a weak attempt to deflect attention from the important work that needs to be done.

“Now is the moment to unite our country, to heal the deep wounds of partisanship that have dominated our government and our people for too long. The White House is the peoples’ house, and all that represents. As president, I will be the custodian of a democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people. I will undertake this solemn responsibility with humility and integrity.”

“I understand that, Madam Governor. But they’ve intimated that your sexuality and the fact that you’re single—”

For the first time since the interview started, Emma’s eyes flashed fire. She sat forward and planted both high-heeled shoes on the floor. The camera zoomed in for a close-up. “I’m a widow who lost her wife and partner of thirty-one years to a tragic car accident three years ago. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t bear that burden and that sorrow. Anyone who would suggest differently has never lost someone they loved.”

“I want to show you something.” The reporter pointed to a television monitor and hit the play button.

A gravelly, disembodied voice intoned, “This is the type of thing you can expect to see entering the presidential residence at the White House if Emma McMasters gets her hands on the presidency.” The picture on screen showed a revolving door

underneath the White House portico and several obviously masculine-looking women entering and exiting.

When the ad finished, the reporter turned to Emma. “What’s your reaction to that?”

Sitting in her living room, Palmer fumed. “Would you ask a straight male candidate the same question?”

Emma was forceful in her response. “It seems to me that my opponent is intimating that LGBTQ and/or gender fluid individuals should not be welcome in their own house. United we stand. Mine is a big tent. I intend to include in my administration people of all faiths, all sexual identities and orientations, all ethnicities, and all political parties.”

“Understood, Governor. But I believe the purpose of the ad was to suggest something more on a personal level...”

“From the beginning of my public life, I have been on the record and transparent about my personal relationships. At eighteen, I met and fell in love with my college roommate, who happened to be a woman. We were together for more than three decades until death parted us. Period. I have had one constant, faithful, loving relationship in my life.” Emma stared unflinchingly into the camera. “How many other candidates for president can say that?”

“Impressive, Madam President-elect,” Palmer said. Anyone with a pulse knew the answer to that question, and Emma had made her point without resorting to mudslinging.

Palmer’s phone buzzed and she checked the screen. Immediately she muted the television and took the call. “Estes.”

“Sorry to bother you, General. I know you just got home, but we’ve got a situation.”

“I’ll be there in ten.” Palmer clicked off the call and the television and strode into her bedroom. Her various uniforms hung in neat rows in the walk-in closet. She shucked off her sweats and chose a fresh set of Army greens. Whatever was afoot, a summons at this hour portended high-level, classified briefings and a potential trip to the White House.

She didn’t want to waste precious time standing on ceremony and calling her driver. Tonight she would take her private car.

At this hour, the drive from her home on the Fort Myer base to her office in the Pentagon took less than eight minutes.

At the entrance to the Pentagon grounds, she scanned her badge, parked in her assigned spot, and hustled inside. Her aide, Brigadier General Maxwell Jeffers, came crisply to attention as she entered the building. Palmer noticed, not for the first time lately, that his closely cropped afro was considerably grayer than it had been when they'd first served together all those years ago in Desert Storm.

"General, they're waiting downstairs." Downstairs meant below ground, in the most secure area of the building.

When they were alone in the elevator leading down to the basement, Palmer asked, "Who have we got?"

"CIA, NSA, OSD – J2."

Palmer sighed. If the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the general in charge of the Office of the Secretary of Defense/Joint Forces were involved, this was serious, indeed. Fleetinglly, she thought about Emma McMasters. Whatever Palmer was about to discover, she was grateful it no doubt would be a distant memory by the time the president-elect took office in January.

About the Author

Lynn Ames is the best-selling author of sixteen books. 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 six Goldie awards, the coveted Ann Bannon Popular Fiction Award (for *All That Lies Within*), the Alice B. Medal for Lifetime Achievement, 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, a Writer’s Digest Self-Published Book Awards Honorable Mention winner, and winner of several Rainbow Reader Awards. *All That Lies Within* was additionally honored as one of the top ten lesbian books overall 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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