

a novel

THE
Blackout
BOOK CLUB

AMY LYNN GREEN

"A SALUTE TO THE POWER OF BOOKS AND OF FRIENDSHIP!"

—SARAH SUNDIN, bestselling and award-winning author of *Until Leaves Fall in Paris*

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To all the teachers and librarians
who encourage a love of reading . . .
but especially the ones who had
an impact on my young life.

ONE

AVIS MONTGOMERY

JANUARY 31, 1942

DERBY, MAINE

Avis gripped the ladder as her husband climbed, a thick swath of black bunting draped over his shoulder. “Be careful, please, Russ.”

He looked down at her from under that dashing swoop of dark hair and grinned. “Careful as I always am.” Which did very little to reassure her.

Across from them, her brother Anthony climbed another rung, staring critically at the windows of the library’s east wall. “Are you sure the curtain’s going to be wide enough?”

Avis nodded to her notebook splayed on the floor, the numbers arranged in neat columns like soldiers at attention. “Of course. I measured it.”

“Three times, I bet,” Russell chimed in, giving her a teasing wink.

“Four,” she admitted.

“See? I told you.” Russell bunched a corner of the blackout cloth in his fist. “All right, old man, catch!”

“Don’t even think—” Avis began, but it was too late. Russell wound up like a pitcher on the mound and tossed the edge of the fabric, causing Anthony to wobble dangerously as he reached to snatch the hem.

If she dared to take one of her hands off the ladder, she'd be rubbing away a headache. "You're going to fall and break your neck."

Anthony slid the eyelet holes along the curtain rod he'd rigged up, and Russell did the same on his end. "If you'd held my ladder instead of your husband's, you wouldn't have to worry about me."

"I'm fairly certain ladders were covered under my vow to have and to hold." She smiled in satisfaction when both of them laughed, Russell's deep and rumbling, Anthony's breaking off in a snort at the end. Two of her favorite sounds in the world, as different as the men they belonged to. Her husband, stocky and confident, more comfortable on a fishing dock than he was at his job at the bank; her brother, gangly and warmhearted, with a quip on hand for any occasion.

At least there was no one else about to hear their nonsense. This close to closing, the library's patrons had gone home to eat dinner and tune in to radio broadcasts about MacArthur and his boys trying to take back the Pacific.

Her hand trembled slightly as Russell climbed down. *Focus on what you can control*. For now, that meant measurements, regulations, and crisp right angles that matched the edges of the window frame, just as she'd planned. "A perfect fit."

"Well done." Russell kissed her forehead. "Miss Cavendish and the air raid warden won't be able to find even a sliver of light."

The periodical reading tables behind them, arrayed in two rows of three, now looked stiff and subdued in the sudden shadow.

When Anthony returned from stowing the ladders in the storage closet, a frown clouded his usually cheery face. "Grim as a funeral in here."

"It's wartime chic, pal," Russell said, slapping him on the back. "Better get used to it."

“Home décor magazines across the country will soon be touting these colors,” Avis chimed in. Already, *LIFE* magazine had featured Joan Fontaine in a smart cap from a movie where she played a recruit for the British Women’s Auxiliary Air Force.

That prompted a snort from her brother. “You and your silly magazines. When will you read a real book?”

“When ‘real books’ give me tips for altering last season’s styles and a recipe for blueberry cobbler,” she fired back, a variation of her usual reply. Just because her librarian brother was a snob about books didn’t mean she had to be.

“She has a point,” Russell interjected. “Last night’s cobbler was excellent.”

Anthony shot his childhood friend a look of profound betrayal. “There’s more to reading than information, you know.”

“I’ve yet to see any proof of that.” Why, she probably learned more in a week’s worth of her reading than Anthony did in a year of paging through novels. Still, it was no good trying to persuade him. Only twenty-nine years old, but thoroughly set in his ways.

Instead of rising to her taunt, Anthony breathed in deeply. “I’m going to miss this place.”

It crept into the quiet after his words: that familiar fear that tingled through her body. For weeks, she’d pushed off the thought of Anthony’s leaving, but now, with the trip to Fort Devens only a few days away, there was nothing to be done.

Russell leaned against the shelves, strong arms folded over his chest. “What’ll Miss Cavendish do without you around here?”

“Not sure. Though I did give her a suggestion for a replacement.”

Something about the way Anthony said it, heavy with implication, made Avis look up. Even in the shadows created by the newly darkened windows, she could see a smirk spreading on her brother’s face, and all thoughts of enlistment faded. “Anthony, you don’t mean *me*?”

“Come on, sis.” He directed his most charming grin at her. “You do half of our cataloguing when I get behind anyway.”

“An exaggeration.”

“And you have most of the Dewey decimal system memorized.”

Not an exaggeration, which unfortunately meant his idea had some legitimacy. “I couldn’t possibly. Not as a married woman.” She twisted her wedding band, a lovely solitaire, around her finger. Jobs, her mother had impressed on her, were for women who didn’t have a husband’s suit to iron and dinner to put on the table each night.

“Thousands of women are taking up war work,” Russell reasoned, shrugging.

He always took Anthony’s side. She gritted her teeth against a prickle of resentment. It was the price she paid for marrying her brother’s best friend, she supposed.

She was about to reply that that was quite a different matter when Anthony’s grin softened. “Anyway, I thought you’d be glad for something to do when Russ and I ship out.”

Despite herself, Avis’s jaw tightened, and behind her, Russell coughed. Anthony looked from one to the other, confusion on his face.

At the same time Russell began with “We haven’t actually—” she tripped over him with “Russell isn’t—”

Russell filled the awkward pause with a vague “We’re still discussing it, that’s all. Enlistment, I mean.”

Even that was only halfway true. It had been weeks since Russell had brought it up after their last argument.

Unlike the enthusiastic flag-waving masses who’d turned out when the United States declared war, Avis looked ahead to the long separations, half-empty beds, and casualty notices printed in the newspapers.

And, try as she might to ignore it, her mother’s warning, the night before the wedding and after too much champagne,

whispered back into her mind, *“Keep your man nearby as long as you can, or he might be tempted to wander in other ways.”*

Anthony blinked behind his narrow eyeglasses, face reddening. “Sorry. I thought . . . anyway, I didn’t realize.” He cleared his throat, moving the discussion into safer territory. “Still, it would be good for you to get out of the house, Avis.”

“But I don’t have a college degree,” she said, “and, in case you’ve forgotten in the five minutes since it was brought up, I don’t even read books.”

“You could learn.” Anthony scooped up the library keys from the empty sugar bowl where she’d insisted he keep them after misplacing them one too many times. “Seriously, Avis, we need someone to keep the doors open.”

“It’s not as if Miss Cavendish will shut the place down.”

At that, Anthony hesitated, looking back toward the oil painting of the somber man overlooking the shelves, the only piece of artwork allowed on the walls. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that. It was her father’s pet project, not hers. Something about this place . . . well, she pays the bills, but she doesn’t seem to like it.”

“Why’s that?” Russell asked.

“Beats me. With Miss C, you learn not to pry.” He tossed the keys in the air and headed to the entryway with his usual jaunty step. “I love this place, sis.”

As if he needed to tell her. He’d spent at least half his childhood either here or buried in one of the adventure novels he’d checked out from the shelves.

When he’d left for college, everyone, Mother included, expected he would “make something of himself” and never return. But he’d come back to Derby four years ago, degree in hand, content to spend the rest of his life in the small coastal town working at the association library that had once been his refuge.

“Come on, Avis. Promise me you’ll keep it up for me while

I'm gone. Please?" He looked down at her with those big, earnest brown eyes that had worn her down since childhood.

"I promise," she found herself saying.

The whoop he let out while tackling her with a hug was probably the loudest noise the staid old building had heard in ages, and Avis couldn't help smiling.

Really, this place might benefit from a woman's touch. Besides, Anthony wouldn't be gone long, and if she could get through the war cataloging books without actually having to read them, why, no one would be the wiser.

GINNY ATKINS

JANUARY 31, 1942

LONG ISLAND, MAINE

The way Mack Conway swaggered toward the harbor, Ginny Atkins would have guessed he'd hit the bottle a mite too hard, except it was only afternoon. Besides that, a Sunday suit poked out of his coat, his tousled head topped with a spiffy-looking fedora.

She waved at him with her scrub brush. Now that the busy season for lobstering had passed, it was time for three months of repairing traps and painting buoys for next year. Today, Pa had stayed home—"business to take care of," he had said, and she'd been told to take advantage of the sunny day to work away at the grime and bait that scummed up the *Lady Luck's* deck.

Instead of sauntering past to the bustle of lobstermen and boys tending their equipment, Mack stopped right in front of her. "Fine day, Ginny," he boomed, his voice deeper than normal, aging him past his nineteen years.

Ginny wiped her cold, wet hands on her trousers, suddenly feeling grimy in her scuffed rubber boots and brother's overcoat. Who'd have thought ol' Mack would outdress her? "Where you been, Mack?"

His grin spread even wider, like he'd been waiting on her to ask. "Took a ferry to the recruiting center."

"Already?" And she tried, really she did, to keep the dismay out of her voice.

It had all happened so fast. One day, Roosevelt was saying they were likely to stay out of the whole mess in Europe; next thing you knew, Japan had sunk those ships in Hawaii and all the young fellows on the island were lining up to stuff themselves in uniforms.

"Can't wait to lick those Japs." Mack rapped his knuckles just under his shoulder. "Once we show 'em who's boss, I'll come back with so many medals pinned to my chest there'll barely be room for buttons."

Ginny watched him for a moment, her breath coming out in white puffs as seagulls filled the silence with unearthly screeches. There was a spark she'd never seen before on Mack's face, a pride in the way he squared his shoulders in the hand-me-down coat.

With the lobster boat, traps, and know-how Pa had gotten from his father, Ginny's family was one of the wealthiest on the island, on account of having steady work. The Depression had knocked other folks, like the Conways, down often enough that they stopped trying to get up. Mr. Conway was snow-in-the-woodbox poor, and she'd heard Mack mumble a dozen shamefaced excuses when her brother invited him to go to the movies or grab a soda.

"I bet you will," Ginny said, rewarding Mack with a smile. If he hadn't been weighed down with spit-shined shoes, he might have floated up to join the planes that were always zooming past from the Godfrey Army Airfield.

Then his smile faltered. "Say, Ginny?"

"Say what?" She jammed her hands deeper into her coat pockets as a sudden breeze rammed against her.

"Want to be my girl?"

She nearly toppled into the ice-cold ocean from sheer surprise, but Mack hadn't noticed, studying the ground like he was. "Aw, Mack, you're like one of my brothers."

"No, I ain't," he insisted, jutting his chin up. "Anyway, nobody but you loves this island like I do."

He had a point there. All that most young fellows on Long Island talked about was how determined they were to get away someday. Ginny hated that, hated it when folks took in the rocky coast with its snow-dusted firs and the scent of the sharp sea air and tossed it all aside like a ball of trash.

Mack was different, always had been. Maybe it was on account of his gran's old tales, somewhere between history and lore, wrapping around his legs like seaweed and making him want to stay. Ginny had to admire that, and he wasn't *exactly* like one of her younger brothers. Hadn't she been thinking about how spiffed-up he looked, golden hair glinting in the sun?

"Fred said before I leave I'd better have a girl to wait for me," Mack went on. "Plus, there's gonna be a dance in town, and I need someone to take."

Ginny's shoulders relaxed. If that's all this was, it was nothing serious. "You know I'd dance with you, Mack. And I'll write you too."

His eyes—she'd never noticed, but they were a nice bold blue, like the sky on a cloudless day—crinkled up with a smile. "This Friday, then?"

"Sure." She was probably one of the only girls on the island with a store-bought dress. Pa had gotten it from a shop in Portland for her twentieth birthday the month before. Nice to have someplace to use it.

"All right, then." Instead of saying something sweet or asking her what time he could pick her up, Mack mumbled a goodbye and charged away like he was getting a leg up on his basic training a few weeks early.

Well. Was she really Mack Conway's girl now? Just like that?

She'd probably have to call him by his real name, Marvin, instead of the childhood nickname after the Atlantic mackerel his family fished.

Nah. No matter what, Mack would always be Mack to her.

Couldn't be any harm in it, from what she could see. Mack was a decent sort, and it would do him good to have someone writing to him. His ma couldn't read much, and his pa—well, it wasn't right to speak ill of a neighbor, but he might not notice his son was gone.

Wasn't very romantic, though. On the walk home, after the *Lady Luck* was scrubbed up proper, she compared Mack's asking to all the declarations of love she'd seen in movies. He hadn't even tried to steal a kiss.

'Course, she would have slapped him if he had.

Maybe that's how it had been with her ma and pa. Just two people who found themselves in the same place wanting to stay there, getting hitched and scrapping out a life. They'd gone through their share of trouble—most of it caused by Ma—but they stuck together.

By now, Ginny had reached the gate of the house. Everything was so . . . quiet. Funny. Right before supper, her younger brothers usually tussled in the yard like gulls after the same fish.

Inside, Pa sat at the kitchen table, head clutched in work-worn hands, and her heart nearly stopped beating. "Pa? What's going on?"

Was something wrong with Ma? Had she been taken to jail again? She'd been better these past few years, once Pa cut her off from the family's money to guard her from herself.

Barely lifting his head, Pa thrust a notice at her. Printed in tall, neat letters that she struggled to read were phrases including *coastal fortifications* and *vacate immediately*.

She scowled at the paper. "What does *eminent domain* mean?"

“It means they can do whatever they want, and folks like us haven’t got a chance.” Pa’s voice was cold as the wind battering the door as he took the paper back, crumpling it. “The government’s buying our home, Ginny. Making the whole place into a navy base.”

No. They couldn’t. Her family could fight this.

But her pa went on, voice as helpless and hopeless as she’d ever heard it. “We’ve got to leave the island.”

MARTINA BIANCHINI

JANUARY 31, 1942

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Martina ran her thumb over the worn spines of her books, swiping at the tears that threatened to pock the covers with wet blotches.

“*Affogare in un bicchier d’acqua.*” She scolded herself using one of Mamma’s tried-and-true phrases from the old country. “Do not drown in a glass of water.” After all she’d gone through, was she going to cry over a few dusty books?

She took a deep breath. Rosa’s collection of fairy tales, tattered and threadbare like Cinderella’s rags, would need to come. *Swiss Family Robinson* for Gio, with a hope that he wouldn’t outgrow that too, as he had with two pairs of shoes this year. *Emma*, of course, her most reread of Jane Austen.

A glance over her shoulder revealed that the faux-snakeskin suitcase she’d allotted herself for personal items was mostly full already.

So *Jane Eyre* would stay behind. It was easier to abandon the biographies and history books she’d used to study for her citizenship test, but *Oliver Twist* was a loss.

Still, it had to be done. The hiring manager at the foundry had given her the dimensions of the one-bedroom trailer home. She’d marked it out with chalk and her sewing tape. So

small. With two growing children and all of their possessions, she would have a single shelf at best for her own nonessentials.

"I *will* come back for you," she whispered to the forlorn books. Better not to wonder when.

"No!" Past the thin door, the floorboards of the apartment creaked with hurried footsteps and her son's voice. "I won't give it to you! I *won't*."

She closed her eyes, longing to kneel by the books a little longer and let the latest trouble run its course. But only for a moment, because deeper than the weariness was the knowledge that she was a mother, so all trouble in the family was her trouble.

When Martina stepped into the hallway, Gio rammed into her, wiry arms wrapped around his prized possession: a portable Motorola radio.

At the end of the hallway, Martina's mother stood with arms folded and dark brows set in a look of *Well? He's your son. Do something*.

What could Mamma want with Gio's radio? She hated the noisy thing.

"Gio! Show respect to your *nonna*." At times like this, Martina couldn't bear to call him George, the name she insisted he use for school.

"It's not *her* I'm disrespecting," Gio shot back, "it's the officer."

Officer? A glance at her mother—who, for all the wrinkles gently scoring her face, looked like a girl caught sneaking cookies before dinner—told Martina there was some truth to Gio's words.

"To your room, Gio." Martina used the tone she heard from matriarchs on every stoop and street corner in Boston's North End, whether the words were in English or Italian. "Finish packing. *Without* the radio."

He reluctantly surrendered it with one last pleading look

before she shooed him away and turned her attention to her mother. “What haven’t you told me, Mamma?”

“*Calmati.*” Mamma bustled down the hall, and Martina followed her into the kitchen, where miracles were produced under Angela Bianchini’s wooden spoon. “A nice young man came by yesterday to tell me where to get a registration card. He also said I should not travel far from home, and I must turn in any cameras and radios. That is all.”

With each addition, Martina clenched the radio more tightly. “You see? Didn’t I tell you? This is what I was afraid of.”

“You are afraid of all things, *figlia mia.*” Mamma paused to pat Martina’s shoulder, as if to soften the criticism. “It is only right they would make sure I am not a spy. I am not an American citizen like you.”

“And what’s next? Once you’ve registered, they might put you in prison.”

“You—what is the word?” She snapped her fingers, smiling proudly. “*Exaggerate.* This is not the Red Summer.”

Martina’s shudder was quick enough to cut off the memories from her girlhood that threatened to fill her mind. “Don’t tell me it can’t happen, Mamma. The newspapers are all shouting for the government to take the Japanese away—even some who are citizens. They might come for us next.”

Mamma made a scoffing noise deep in her throat. “There are too many Italians in America. Hundreds of thousands.”

“But, Mamma . . .” Martina switched to her mother tongue in case the children were listening. Rosa and Gio could speak some Italian, but school made English drop first from their lips, saints be praised. “I can’t leave you now. We’ll stay another month or two, to make sure things are all right.”

Mamma’s hand stilled on the counter, where it had been tapping out an impatient pattern. Then she looked up, eyes steady and sure. “My door will always be open to you, daughter. But you need your own life, away from here. There, you’ll have a

job with good pay and a home of your own. Somewhere safe, where . . .”

She shrugged, refusing to finish the sentence, but Martina knew what the downward look meant.

Where he can't find you. That's why she'd looked for work in Maine instead of one of the many war industries springing up in Boston. A fresh start.

“This is what I want for you, daughter. There will not be trouble.”

She had to ask. “But if there is?”

Mamma hesitated only a moment. “If there is, I want you and the children to be far from it.”

Martina surrendered to her mamma's fierce embrace, letting it soothe the ache, the fear, the knowledge that, however many books she left behind to travel to Maine, the heroine she would miss most was her mother.

LOUISE CAVENDISH
FEBRUARY 1, 1942
DERBY, MAINE

Fierce barking woke Louise Cavendish in the thin hours of the morning, when the tide ebbed its lowest, leaving behind the smell of rot.

All sleep-induced haze flew from Louise as she sat to attention. Jeeves, her German shepherd, might warn off an errant squirrel during the day, but he hadn't made a fuss at night since his puppy days.

On went her quilted housecoat and slippers, and she hurried down the stairs. Jeeves was a shadow by the front door, his muscled form tense, growling a warning at whoever was beyond the door.

Louise's fingers hesitated before turning on the light switch at the base of the stairs, illuminating the candelabra in the

entryway. Father's old hunting rifle was still mounted over the fireplace in the dayroom, and Delphie always kept the kitchen knives razor sharp. Should she . . . ?

No, if there was an intruder, Jeeves had likely scared them off already. And if he hadn't, a woman in her fifties struggling to wield a meat cleaver certainly wouldn't.

He whined and pawed at the door, looking back at her with pleading eyes. "Steady, boy," she soothed, peering out the front window to the grounds of her family's summer home—a flat lawn looming with heavy shadows from shrubbery and the three outbuildings.

And then she heard it: a distant concussive boom, soon drowned out by a renewed burst of barking.

German bombs? Had Hitler's troops really dared attack America's shores so soon after declaring war?

But no, the sound came distinctly from the east, and the only thing east of the cliffs of Windward Hall was the ocean.

"It's only depth charges." She bent down, trying to calm her disconsolate dog. "They've found a German submarine, and planes are shooting it down."

Though there was always a chance they'd gotten there too late, and the U-boat had dived under the surface for another chance at destroying American tankers and freighters.

How Delphie, even with her hearing loss, could sleep through the ruckus of a German shepherd on full alert was beyond Louise, but the older woman didn't venture out to join her. Slowly, with no new explosions to set him off, Jeeves relaxed onto his haunches.

"Good boy," she whispered, running her hands over Jeeves's neck. As usual, he concurred with this assessment, basking in the attention. In the sudden calm, he clearly decided he had single-handedly dealt with and removed the threat.

Maybe the American planes had seen the telltale oil rising to the surface, prompting another boastful newspaper account

flashing across the front page with the subtlety of a bad dime novel: *UNCLE SAM SINKS ANOTHER!* and *U-BOAT DISASTER AVERTED*.

But Louise also knew that the U-boats were sinking American ships by the dozens, consigning valuable cargo—and the merchant mariners who crewed them—to the cold depths.

All the more reason average citizens needed to rise up and be useful. The Red Cross motto sprang to her mind: In War, Charity.

It had been years since she'd thought of that, ever since that fateful telegram from Father that kept her from joining the forces of nurses serving in the first world war. And now here she was, too old by a decade to be of use in this one either.

Don't mope, she scolded herself, as she always did at the first tug of self-pity. *If anything, this should be a reminder that there's work to be done here too.*

Louise had had nearly a quarter century to get used to the unease of being a spinster living alone in a large house—well, alone besides Delphie, her cook. Never before had Louise felt herself in danger at Windward Hall.

That was a consequence of war, she supposed. One couldn't feel safe in one's home, even if the major campaigns were an ocean away. And now war had come to even the shores of peaceful Derby.