

Author of the 2020 Christy Award Book of the Year

AMANDA DYKES

*yours is
the night*

a novel



yours is
the night



AMANDA
DYKES



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dykes, Amanda, author.

Title: Yours is the night / Amanda Joy Dykes.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021004780 | ISBN 9780764232688 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764239274 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493431465 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: World War, 1914–1918—France—Fiction. | GSAFD: Historical fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3604.Y495 Y68 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021004780>

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Kathleen Lynch/Black Kat Design

Cover image of poppies by Trevor Payne/Trevillion Images

Map illustration by Najla Kay

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Ben,
my beloved.
The “boy born in a barn.”
What a gift to travel this road with you.

And to the four million men who served in the
American Expeditionary Forces of the Great War.
Your journey was harder than we can know,
your lives more meaningful than we can say.



“The day is Yours,
the night also is Yours . . .”

Psalm 74:16

prologue

October 24, 1921

Chalons-sur-Marne, France

Ceremony for the Choosing of the Unknown Soldier

There are days you live over and over again, for as long as you live. October twenty-fourth of 1918, just days before the unending war ended, was one of mine. I went into a forest of darkness that day, never imagining how that place would claim me. Four years ago, to the day.

And four caskets before me now.

There were four of us, then, who took a journey. Armed with bayonets and canteens and a mission we had no idea how to accomplish, bumbling fools that we were. A mission of greater import than we realized at the time. One that would change us all.

I watched now from the outskirts of the solemn ceremony as a man in uniform gripped not a bayonet, but a bouquet. A grip of roses—white. Pure. Absent of the scarlet we'd all seen too much of. Slowly, he walked down the line of boxes that held the remnants of so much life. Nobody knew whom the boxes held. And yet everybody knew a thousand soldiers, brothers, friends whom they might hold.

We were no different. I stood shoulder to shoulder with two of my brothers from that time. We'd seen it all, then. We'd seen each other at our best and our worst. We'd scorned one another and needed one another and had left that battle-gouged land with battle-gouged hearts. We'd left one of us behind, in that forest, and though we would never know who lay in these caskets, every one of us wondered: *Is it him?*

The man before us now would walk this line. He would place that spray of roses on a single casket. The casket would be taken back across the sea, to our nation's capital, to the soldier's homeland, to be entombed there. Guarded, always. Kept safe from war, from loss, from all the atrocities he had faced. And in this . . . he would bring something to a nation. Something we brought out of the forest that day, a lifetime ago.

Hope.

This is our tale.

May we never forget.

Matthew Petticrew

1900

Greenfield, New York

Rules:

1) *Keep off the racetrack, you dolt! That's what Mr. MacManus says. He says if Maplehurst Stables is the crowned jewel of thoroughbred racing, then "that dirt you think you can just run on any old time is good as gold."*

2) *Feed the hens and horses between the hours of four and five, and if you finish early, stay out and play. Do not come back to the caretaker's quarters before that. And don't run on that gold dirt.*

I looked at my old notebook, with these two rules scratched inside. I was five—almost six—and I had written them down with the help of Mr. Haggerty, the gardener, so I wouldn't forget. When I forgot, bad things happened. He'd looked at me a little funny when I told him what they were, but he wrote down the hard words for me before getting back to pruning his roses.

The rules weren't so bad. The rest of the green rolling hills of Greenfield Springs, New York, were mine for the taking, and most of the racetrack, too. But tonight—tonight there was one more rule.

"Stay with Mrs. Bluet, tonight," Mother had said. "You know the way?" She'd smiled and winced at the same time, cradling her swollen belly before reaching out to ruffle my hair. I was not the

smartest boy around, but I could tell something was different. Her breath came quick or sometimes not at all, like she'd been the one caught running around the racetrack and not me.

Her hand was stiffer than usual, and her smile so tight. It wasn't right. Her smile always went deep and wide, probably the deepest, widest thing I knew.

So, I packed a clean shirt like she told me to right after she'd kissed me on the top of my head. But I tucked myself under her window outside instead of heading to the cook's quarters at Mr. MacMannus's house. It sat just on top of the hill, looking down on our little house, the way hawks look down at field mice. I didn't like it there. It was called *Maplehurst* too, just like the stables. It sounded sweet like the syrup, but for all its fancy rooms and people coming and going in suits and dresses, it felt awful cold and unsweet to me. I accidentally called it *Maplehurts* once when I was there eating a molasses cookie in the kitchen. Mrs. Bluet looked at me with flour on her face and her eyebrows raised and said, "Well, young Matthew, if that isn't about the rightest thing I ever heard."

I did not wish to go there that night. I didn't want to be near Mr. MacMannus and his rules and the big, cold house. I didn't want to be away from my mother. She needed me. I could tell.

Only once did I peek inside the window, where an oil lamp glowed so dim I could barely see her there on the bed. Her face was so pinched up that it hurt me to look at her, and her cheeks were wet with tears.

That was the night I first felt the Flame. I called it "the Flame," for it burned in my chest, right where Mrs. Bluet said my heart was. I once saw them set off dynamite at the quarry over the hills. The way the spark chased a cord to the place it would explode—that's how I felt. A spark hot within me, a cord running between me and Mother, but I was not allowed in, not allowed to let that spark rush in and explode inside the little house and chase her pain away.

Two ladies came and spoke together so quietly I couldn't hear. Mother always said that hearing was my gift because I could hear things others couldn't. Even so, strain as I might, I couldn't make

out what their concerned tones were saying. One woman kept coming and going, bringing cloths and boiling water, while the other one stayed with Mother and said things to her and held her hand while her cries turned into the sort of moan that could dig into your insides and hollow you out. What was wrong?

The groans grew louder and longer until the spark inside of me was gone, smothered by a blanket of fear so heavy I didn't know whether to run or stay.

So, I prayed. We always prayed on Sundays. Mother would tuck her white blanket around my shoulders and read scriptures to me at our table beneath the very window I now crouched under. She baked something very special on those days, like an apple cake just my size, which she gave completely to me, or vinegar pie, which we shared. I felt like a king on Sundays, wrapped up in that blanket like those red capes that kings wear, only mine was so old and had been washed so many times, it was much softer than any king's.

But for the rest of the week, she was quiet and troubled most evenings, her only prayers silent, and mine, too.

That night was a Tuesday. I prayed aloud on a Tuesday for the first and only time I could remember, that night. The shortest prayer—it did not rhyme or sound very right, but it was the truest prayer I had ever prayed.

“God in heaven, help her.” I pressed my eyes shut so tight it must have sent my prayer higher, louder. It had to. I rocked myself back and forth to the words and said it again. And again, and again, and again, my words mingling with her cries until her cries grew quiet and were replaced by another, smaller cry. That of a baby.

Something strange happened, then. I have never felt it since that moment and maybe never will again. But as I rose to my knees and clutched the windowsill, my fingernails caked with dirt, and peeked inside that golden-glow room, I saw something perfect.

Mother, happy. A baby in her arms, all wrapped up in the old king's cape blanket and her smile once again so deep and wide.

That was the last time I saw her. I did go up to Maplehurst after that, and when the morning came, I awoke to Mrs. Bluet

sitting beside me and holding my hand. She looked like the whole world had cracked open overnight. And when she spoke, I found that it had.

Mother was gone. She had died in the night, gone to the angels and God above. Leaving behind one tiny angel in her place, and both of us without a mother or a home.

1914

The world was going to pieces at war, way across the sea. But at Maplehurst, the earth erupted every day at twelve o'clock sharp. It started as a rumble. A tumbling, trembling sound that burrowed through the soil like it burrowed through my veins. And then it grew louder, the current separating into rhythm, the rhythm pulsing into force, eclipsing the tick of the clock on the stable wall.

I looked down the corridor. I'd pitched hay, mucked stalls, and pounded horseshoes since before dawn. I'd known little else in my nineteen years, but it was a good life. My work was done—almost. And the pulsing called to me until I obeyed, leaving the home stable behind and letting my own pulse sink into it as I ran out the big white doors, up the pasture hill, over the ridge until I could see the cloud of dust rising, like it was reaching up to see me. My own feet pounding back into the earth in response: *I'm coming.*

I knew each one of those beasts like my own always-smudged face. From the time Mr. MacMannus discovered me and Celia squirreled away in the old loft rooms over the stable, where Mrs. Bluet and Mr. Haggerty took turns smuggling us food and staying with us while we were still small, he'd looked at us grim and silent and said a few words—powerful and unhappy words—to our unlikely caretakers. They'd said a few words back—quiet and strong ones—that seemed to silence his anger, or at least send it deeper inside of him, away from us. Ever since, I'd been the resident stable hand, and Celia a small seamstress at the ready, mending blankets and garments for horses and humans alike by the light

of our one window. She sewed, and I worked shoulder to shoulder with the best thoroughbreds in New England. “*The finest in the country,*” Mr. MacMannus liked to tout to his visitors.

It was not a bad life. We had a home. We had food. We had the gruff humor of Mr. Haggerty, who gave us a garden plot out behind the barn and liked to call me “the boy born in a barn!” *Stable*, I’d correct him with a laugh, even though we both knew neither was true. I only lived in a stable, and Celia was closer to being born in one than I had been.

Still, something in me rather filled up with a sort of pride when the gardener called me that. At times, it felt like it must be true, this tale of my being born in a barn. For this was what I was born *for*. Mr. Haggerty started saving the funnies from his Sunday edition of the *Herald*, slipping it my way so I could read “The Escapades of the Rough Riders.” It was a comic strip, but nothing was comic about it at all. I followed the daring deeds of Theodore Roosevelt, Jasper Truett, and the rest of the men, wondering why I hadn’t been born two or three decades before so that I could’ve been valiant alongside them.

Mrs. Bluet, whenever she sensed either of us was feeling sad, would bake a blueberry buckle before the sun was up and sneak it our way. It was a consolation, but also an omen of sorts. I always got a sinking feeling when I smelled the sweet dish in the air, for it meant something difficult was afoot.

We had good work to do. We had a surly overseer in Mr. MacMannus, who’d tanned my hide a time or two when he’d discovered footprints on the track. I couldn’t tell him who they really belonged to. But for the most part, he ignored us, so long as we did our work and didn’t raise a racket.

Celia had inherited Mother’s deep and wide smile, and she loved to hear me tell of it. She’d soaked in the stories of vinegar pies and Sunday scriptures like a person starved for air, especially during the long nights bedded down with a sick mare or struggling foal. She was drawn to them, then, a better sickbed attendant than I, and would stay up all night asking for stories and tending to the

horses, with a knack for soothing a worried animal. Stitching its wounds, healing both fear and hurt.

And Mr. MacMannus kept away. I only ever saw him across the track, when I arrived in time to see them running the horses in practice heats, those daily rumbles that summoned me. I watched for years from the shadows, but slowly, over time, I found a spot at the fence, obscured slightly by a nearby tree, where I could drape my arms over the rail and taste the dust as the horses drove with all their might toward the finish line.

So much purpose, they had. I watched the singular, fire-hewn focus in their animal eyes. I could almost hear them, in the steady pounding of hoofbeats, drill the one truth into me that Maplehurst had taught me: *Make a plan*. With every disaster, make a plan. For every uncertainty, make a plan. The hoofbeats and the words drilled: *Make a plan. Make a plan. Make a plan.*

I didn't have two pennies to rub together, or much educating in my brain, but I could at least be ready for anything.

"Matty!" Celia's voice sailed up the hill behind me now. "Matty, wait!"

My feet urged me on but something inside slowed, and suddenly I was stuck in the middle of a tug-o'-war. "Yeah?"

I turned to watch her, her gait carrying a lilt with the way her left foot limped. Some folks thought it made her a spectacle. But I knew it gave music to her movements and matched something inside of her, the way she was always coming at things from an angle, seeing more than everyone else.

She was fast, too. We'd made sure of that, she and I, in case she ever had a run-in with the man who'd left more than a few scars on my back with his horsewhip. There'd been too many close calls already, though Mr. MacMannus hadn't come anywhere near us since his first wife died a few years back and he'd brought a new wife home three months later.

The first Mrs. MacMannus had simply ignored us. The new Mrs. MacMannus liked to turn her nose up at us like we were vermin discovered in her mound of jewels, which by all appearances

was a heap bigger than the Adirondacks. Apparently, she didn't like to be reminded of her husband's . . . well. Let's just say I'd grown up pretty quickly after our mother died and learned fast what happened to a widowed caretaker's wife trying to earn her keep by darning socks and trying not to lose the only home she'd known. The owner came around during the hours of four and five o'clock most days, that's what happened.

I was born a year later, and then Celia. Everyone knew it to look at us; I had the blue of his eyes and Celia the gold of his hair. But he'd never acknowledge that, not in a million years. And word all over the manor was that the new lady of the house was already fashioning a nursery upstairs, in anticipation of the children she would give him. Heirs to Maplehurst.

And we continued up in the stable loft, happily living in our little wood-slatted, sun-shafted kingdom, and choosing not to hear the talk.

Celia drew up beside me now quick as a wink, her face pained.

"You okay?" I asked, forgetting the pounding river beneath us for a minute.

"No," she said, her features drawing deeper. I stopped entirely, then.

She gave me a pleading look, her green eyes big.

"C'mon, Celia . . . we're getting too old for that." I was closing in on twenty—she was fourteen. We'd carried the roles of adults for more years than we could count. Still, I knew what she wanted. She'd ridden around on my back since she was six and I was eleven, whenever her leg gave her trouble. "Let's just go home."

She tipped her head in a silent plea.

I stooped, crouching so she could climb up.

"Gotcha!" she cried, pulling right on past me. A smile spread across her face as her feet peeled across the ground. "Race you!" She was a mystery. Sometimes acting eight—like right now—and sometimes spouting words that made her sound wiser than an eighty-year-old.

"No, you don't," I said, and ran to beat the band.

We both stopped at the rock wall, catching our breath and watching as the clouds dissipated into the sky.

“How much you want to bet it’s Poseidon?”

“We shouldn’t bet, Celia.”

“How much you want to bet the food on Maplehurst’s table is paid for by betting?”

I gave her a look. She knew as well as I did what a lost bet could do to a man, to his family. We’d seen it as much as we’d seen the sunrise, growing up at the stables and just a stone’s throw from Saratoga Springs Racetracks, where MacMannus thoroughbreds were often crowned with wreaths of roses.

“Anyway,” I said, “it’s not Poseidon.”

“How can you tell?”

I could no sooner have explained it than I could explain my own pulse. “Listen.”

And we did. To the thrumming, pounding beat. “It’s Gulliver. That’s a horse that was born to run.”

And I was born for this, I thought once again. For the smell of the hay, the slick of the mud on a fresh-rained track, the click of the starting gates harnessing oceans of strength. For that single moment, when the gate flies open to the crack of the pistol—and life, life, life beats into the ground. Going somewhere.

And I knew—I could stay right here, watching all this “going somewhere,” for the rest of my life.

But knowing something doesn’t make it true.

We arrived at Maplehurst’s practice track out of breath. I’d been right—it was Gulliver rounding the bend, his jockey feeling the curves of the track, leaning into them. Gulliver’s hooves pounding while the sounds of birds singing, a saw working, and hammers hammering all struck up a background chorus. A crew of men were building a new grandstand for the MacMannuses’ upcoming private race. “*The social event of the season*,” Mrs. MacMannus had been saying for months now.

It was just five days away, and the track was in a flurry with preparations. Gardeners, groomers, builders, jockeys, guests who’d

arrived days early to stroll the estate with their parasols and canes. New uniforms for the entire staff, both house and stable, were another innovation of Mrs. MacMannus. Her idea of garbing the staff in a way that made them look like accessories to the track she was attempting to elevate to the status of the Waldorf.

Celia and I hadn't received ours yet, but she'd hear no complaints from me on the matter.

The evening before, she'd hosted a fancy dance for her guests at the big house. I'd seen from our windows, looking up into theirs. The glow of all those lights, Mrs. MacMannus fluttering a silk fan with the vengeance of a thousand flies, a string quartet playing.

A pang had struck my chest, then. Nothing to do with wanting inside. The farther away, the better, in my view. But as those couples danced around, my hands suddenly felt very . . . empty. The thought struck me, unbidden—*what would it be like to have someone lace their fingers into mine?*

Ridiculous thought. I shook it off immediately, filling my hands instead with Gulliver's reins for a midnight ride out in the pastures. It had been a good ride. Maybe I'd do it again tonight.

As we arrived back at the stable, I climbed the stairs in jovial spirits for the first time in days, Celia on my heels, chattering about making a loaf of bread for supper. Just as I was ready to turn the dented doorknob to let her step in ahead of me, I froze. I knew that smell.

Blueberry buckle.

Either this was consolation for the past days of Mrs. MacMannus's flurries . . . or something bad was about to happen.

I had my answer when I saw Mrs. Bluet sitting at our wobbly table, eyes rimmed in red.

"What is it?" I rushed in past my deadpan words, spoken in cold dread. "Are you alright?" She didn't seem to know what to say. I felt the Flame rising up in me, ready to defend her if someone had dared to hurt her. Mrs. Bluet had once cautioned me about the Flame when I'd chased down the pack of kids who had raided her garden for strawberries when I was twelve years old.

“That burning justice is a gift, Matthew Petticrew. But you be sure and save it for where it’s needed. Some battles aren’t battles after all.”

I stood ready to fight this battle for her, if needed.

“There’s no easy way to say this, young Matthew.” She had always called me that, and the name took on a gleam in her eye the year I turned twelve and overtook her height in spades. “You’re—you’re to leave here. The two of you.” Her voice caught.

My jaw twitched. Anger flared. I tamped it down. This was not Mrs. Bluet’s fault. “Who . . . who wants us to leave?”

“Well, that’s just it, my loves.” She put on a smile. “They say the new groom—Hector—will be needing these living quarters.”

“He has living quarters.”

“Yes, and Mrs. MacMannus is bringing in a new caretaker who’ll be needing those.”

Hector was to have our home. A caretaker—whose role I had been filling for years now, with no compensation or dedicated living quarters—was coming. Taking Mother’s old house.

And we were to leave.

“Where will we go?” Celia spoke for the first time, her eyes round. She had made this place a palace, fashioning curtains and couches from castoffs.

“Now, there’s a piece of good news. Mr. MacMannus has found you both good positions. At a hospital for you, Celia,” she said brightly. “In the city. With a boardinghouse for young women just next door. And as a groom at the stable of Harvard University for you, Matthew.”

Celia hung her head. “We won’t be together,” she said quietly. “We will,” I said. “We’ll find a way.”

A silent word hung heavy over us all, and it was Celia who had courage to speak it. “When?”

Mrs. Bluet hung her head and wiped her eyes. “Today.”

And it was done. Maplehurst, for all its imperfections, had been our whole world for our whole lives . . . and it was closed to us now.

We packed what little we had and were on trains headed in

separate directions that very afternoon. As we left Maplehurst for the last time, I cast one last look at it. There, in a window on the third-story landing of the great stair, and hawk-like as ever, was Mr. MacMannus.

I could have been mistaken, but at a distance, he appeared to hang his head . . . and then he vanished. Walked away from his gabled window, away from us. A cloak of remorse about him.

It would be the only gift I was ever to receive from my father. I used to wonder what it would be like to have a father who would fight for you. Not the sort that would attack or ignore you. I imagined the Rough Riders, whose courage and daring I read of in my youth. Theodore Roosevelt, and the kid who rode with him all those years ago—Jasper Truett, who embodied courage. What would it have been to have a father like that?

But that was not for me to know. What I did have, in this moment, was the realization that perhaps, all along, he had been watching us from a distance. He had seen that a hospital would make Celia thrive, her caring spirit meant for such a place. And whether he knew it or not, that arrangement he made for me at Harvard—it was to change my life forever.