

# One

**February 22, 1943**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Maggie McCleod had exactly twenty-four measures to get her heels back on. The trouble was, she had to keep wailing on her trumpet at the same time, which made the whole operation much more complicated.

As she riffed on the crescendo of “Rhapsody in Blue,” she tried to work her bare left foot deeper into the high heel. The motion was hidden from the audience by the hem of her gown, but her grimace as her toes jammed partway in could be spotted by anyone with a keen eye. Swollen again. No surprise after the band members had been forced to run to catch the train to Minneapolis.

*Come on, come on.* A measure skipped by without her as she fumbled with the strap, trying to force it over her heel.

It was easy enough to wriggle the shoes off at the start of each concert, right after Maggie took her spot on the stage. Just a discreet motion shielded by her gown’s long hem while the audience listened to Catherine Duquette, first-chair violinist, give her polished introduction to the Swinging Sweethearts. Replacing the heels before the final bows was trickier, but Maggie had never had this much trouble.

In front of her, conductor Martin Simmons tilted his head back theatrically with the final swell of the upbeat tune, his baton twitching wildly, as if trying to juice the last bit of energy out of “his girls.” Beyond him, the audience filling the plush seats of Northrop Auditorium clapped enthusiastically.

*“A good show,”* they’d say during intermission. *“Didn’t those girls play like men?”*

At least, that’s what they’d say if she didn’t give them something more interesting to talk about by tripping to the microphone. It was tradition for the soloist of the previous piece to dismiss the audience for intermission, reciting the standard lines their promoter churned out. Tonight that was Maggie, shoes on or off.

On Simmons’s cue, Maggie curtsied with the others, deeper than usual, letting her hook the heel’s strap with her finger and give it a frantic tug.

No one else could hear the tiny snap, but Maggie froze. *Perfect. Just super.*

She silently cursed Simmons for choosing the ridiculous uniform, their promoter for picturing it on publicity kits, and even women like Catherine who made walking in heels seem effortless.

Simmons, arms spread apart in his circus ringmaster stance, was staring at Maggie, punctuating her cue with his thick eyebrows. One of her fellow brass players elbowed her in case she’d forgotten.

There was nothing for it but to scoop up the broken heel, letting it dangle from her free hand, and limp to the microphone.

The gathered audience stared, and she gave them a smile. Might as well defuse the tension. “Never fear, everyone, I wasn’t injured. Just a wardrobe issue.” She held up the shoe, and the concern turned to chuckling. “Not the most practical of uniforms, but you all came for the glamour, and the Swinging Sweethearts deliver at any cost.”

It wasn't how she was supposed to start the speech—the script called for her to mention the venue and thank everyone for being there—but it felt good to say it out loud, despite the slight discomfort on the faces of the first few rows past the stage lights. She'd always hated the posters with condescending slogans like “While our boys are off at war, the women have joined the band . . . and these sweeties sure can swing!”

She warmed to the speech, drawing closer to the microphone to make sure even the back row would hear. “I hope you’ve enjoyed our all-girls extravaganza, even if it was just our name that drew you in. Come to think of it, you don’t see Tommy Dorsey or Glenn Miller changing their band names to ‘The Bachelors of Rhythm’ or ‘The Dashing Dreamboats.’ Maybe it would sell more tickets—or maybe that’s just for us women.”

More laughter, and this time she glanced across the stage at Simmons, who was frozen in place. Good thing he couldn’t actually murder her with his baton in front of this many witnesses.

Anyway, this was his fault. He was the one who dressed them up like dolls, scolded anyone who seemed to be gaining weight, and told their promoter to feature posters with photographs that made them look more like pinup girls than serious musicians. “The crowds come to get an earful *and* an eyeful,” she’d heard him say.

Well, he was getting an earful now, and it served him right.

Mr. Simmons was already gesturing frantically to the band to leave the stage, but the women’s eyes were mostly on her, including a horrified Catherine Duquette, cupid-bow mouth in a perfect O.

Better finish this quickly.

“The program will continue after intermission. So listen to us—close your eyes if you need to—and see if you don’t get the best music you’ve ever heard from this all-girl band.” She gave a small bow. “Thank you.”

The applause that followed was probably the same volume as usual, but it felt different. Special. It was for her specifically. Not just her as one instrument in dozens, another gown in a sea of sweethearts.