

*The*  
FOXHOLE  
VICTORY  
TOUR

*A Novel*

AMY LYNN GREEN

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BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
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: Green, Amy Lynn, author.

Title: The Foxhole Victory Tour / Amy Lynn Green.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023031465 | ISBN 9780764239571 (paper) | ISBN 9780764242779 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493445189 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3607.R4299 F69 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230711

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023031465>

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24 25 26 27 28 29 30      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my amazing in-laws, with much gratitude  
for welcoming me into the family.

“A small USO unit is aboard this troopship, girls and men who are going out to entertain troops wherever they may be sent. These are not the big names who go out with blasts of publicity and maintain their radio contracts. These are girls who can sing and dance and look pretty and men who can do magic and pantomimists and tellers of jokes. They have few properties and none of the tricks of light and color which dress up the theater. But there is something very gallant about them.”

—John Steinbeck, *New York Herald Tribune*, June 1943

**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 hemline 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 showcasing 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 eye-ful,” 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.

She refused to look over her shoulder at Simmons as she filed backstage with her fellow band members. As she did, Catherine turned, clutching her violin case. “Was that . . . planned?”

Catherine looked the very image of demure womanhood, her auburn hair pinned with a pearl hair comb, with only one curl falling out by her ear. Even that was probably intentional. She’d never gone onstage with a wrinkle in her gown, much less lost a shoe and embarrassed their conductor in front of an audience.

“Of course not. Help a girl out, would you?” Without waiting for an answer, Maggie grabbed the shorter woman’s shoulder, steadying herself as she pulled off her other shoe without tearing her gown’s hem. That done, she flared her toes against the scuffed boards of backstage, enjoying the freedom of being gloriously barefoot. “Thanks.”

“Why did you . . . ?” Catherine began, then bit her lip and tried again. “That wasn’t the speech we’re meant to give.”

*Noticed that, did you?* Maggie fought rolling her eyes and just shrugged. “It came to me, that’s all. Didn’t you like my improvisation?”

“I don’t . . . it’s just . . .” She seemed to give up on explaining the faux pas and settled for “Mr. Simmons will be upset.”

“That’s why I don’t plan to let him find me.” Maggie hiked her skirt up enough that she wouldn’t trip over it and gave a

little wave. “See ya onstage.” With that, she made a beeline for an abandoned stack of scenery, an ideal place to hide until the end of intermission.

Maggie leaned against the wall, breathing out deeply. She’d actually gone and done it, said what she’d been thinking for ten long months now.

For once, she wished her father had been in the audience. He hadn’t fully approved of her joining the Sweethearts, but he’d always raised her to speak her mind. But he was still back in Chicago and hadn’t even been able to break free from his mission work to attend one of the shows they’d put on near her home in the Windy City.

As confident as Maggie had tried to sound to Catherine, she couldn’t help worrying. This was her third job since she’d moved out on her own a year and a half ago. She hadn’t cared when she was fired from the soda fountain for slapping a handsy customer or when she walked out from the munitions factory when she found out the male employees were paid more. Those had been ways to pay the bills, nothing more. But the Sweethearts, despite their ridiculous name, had been her dream, a chance to play music professionally. If she’d ruined it by running her mouth again . . .

“It’ll blow over,” she muttered, willing it to be true. She could talk her way out of nearly anything, after all.

At least, that’s what she hoped.



# 2

**FEBRUARY 22, 1943**  
**MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

Catherine Duquette pretended to admire the Northrop Auditorium chandeliers as the audience streamed past her, hoping against hope that no one would talk to her.

It wasn't strictly required, but Mr. Simmons always liked his girls to mingle with the crowds during intermission to make connections for future bookings. That wouldn't be so bad, except it required her to speak coherently to strangers.

Still, there was no way around it. Better to make an appearance and be seen by Mr. Simmons, murmur a few thank-yous to compliments on the show, then hurry backstage with some excuse or another.

To pass the time, Catherine took covert glances at the gowns worn by the women of the audience, some draped in furs to keep the chill of the winter night away. The frigid season and the seriousness of wartime ensured that most of the colors and prints were subdued shades of blues and grays. But she caught a glimpse of a stunning cream dotted-swiss

gown with a tiered skirt, and a gold number with a sweetheart neckline designed to show off a sapphire necklace.

The men she mostly ignored, except that, as usual, her heart raced slightly when she saw a glimpse of Brillantined black hair. A moment later, the turn of a head and the appearance of a rotund belly proved it wasn't Leo.

Of course it wasn't. He couldn't be here, lounging in a Minneapolis performance hall. He was somewhere across the ocean. At least, she prayed he was, and not in a field hospital or buried in foreign soil.

*Don't think about that.* Whenever her mind drifted to Leo during shows, her performance suffered.

A flash of color caught her eye, and Catherine squinted at the woman emerging from the auditorium's side door just to be sure. Yes, she knew that fur coat, a dark tuxedo-front mink with turned-back cuffs over a burgundy gown. That her mother was wearing an old coat proved she was at least attempting to cut back on new fashion for the war effort.

Catherine bit her lip. She'd worried about coming back to the Twin Cities, although she hadn't said a word about the Sweethearts' schedule to either parent.

The second Mother's eyes caught hers, they sparkled, bottle green like a traffic light and outlined with winged liner to make them seem larger. "Catherine!" she squealed, nearly trampling several audience members to clear a path to her, arms spread wide for a hug. Catherine breathed in the familiar scent of Evening in Paris, the one constant in her mother's life. "You were magnificent, as always."

"I didn't know you'd come," she said, forcing a smile.

Her mother had already changed her expression to an exaggerated pout. "Come now, be honest, *ma chérie*. Were you ever going to tell me about your show? Ah," she said, waving a manicured finger in the air before Catherine could speak. "I've guessed it. You were embarrassed of your *maman*."

“No, of course not. I—I thought you were living in New York until . . .” Catherine choked on the ending she couldn’t bring herself to voice: until the divorce proceedings went to court.

“Ah, I see,” Mother said, leaning in conspiratorially. “I am, of course, but those dratted lawyers are always making me pop back into town. Imagine how delighted I was to have this to look forward to.” She took Catherine’s arm to lead her out of the flow of traffic, pausing to greet an acquaintance Catherine pretended to remember and waving at a couple across the room before turning back to her daughter. “Honestly, it was divine, seeing all you ladies up there. I couldn’t have been prouder.”

“Thank you,” Catherine murmured, all that was usually required of her in conversations like this.

“Do you remember how your father grouched about starting lessons when you were so young. ‘Vivienne, imagine the *expense*.’” Her imitation of Gerald Duquette, complete with gruff, smoke-grated voice, was quite good. “I told him that it would be worth it one day, and wasn’t I right?”

“Yes, Mama.” That was always the right answer . . . as long as Catherine’s father wasn’t around.

Whether it was that stray thought or a familiar lurching gait that caught her attention, Catherine found her gaze drifting toward the crowd—and the one man striding determinedly in their direction.

*No. Not both of them.* The sick feeling in her stomach intensified as he took measured steps across the gleaming terrazzo floor toward them, but she discarded a momentary thought of fleeing.

“Catherine,” he said coolly, not even directing the slightest acknowledgment toward Mother.

“What are you doing here, Father?” It was terribly rude, but Catherine hadn’t been able to help blurting it out. Father

never read the entertainment notices in the newspaper. His order was strictly Business, News, and sometimes Editorials, but never something as trivial as music or theater.

"I certainly didn't invite him," Mother inserted, as if this were at all in question. Her face didn't wear the same stormy glower as her estranged husband, but she'd taken on a haughty, head-tilted posture that had the same effect.

"Arthur brought me a playbill with your photograph in it," Father said, disgust lacing his voice, as if she'd been plastered across town on a circus flyer clad in a lion-tamer's bikini instead of a perfectly respectable glamour shot with her violin.

Catherine felt a fleeting burst of anger at Father's favorite employee, but poor Arthur likely had no idea of the tension he'd caused. She turned up the brightness of her smile to a level that would break blackout regulations. "Yes, our promoter thinks people respond best to a local connection."

"I see." Catherine knew that tone well. It meant Father had weighed all the details and passed final judgment. "I just finished speaking to that director of yours—"

"Conductor," Mother corrected, forcing her way back into the conversation and angling her narrow shoulders to step between the two of them. "Honestly, Gerald, even an uncultured boor like you should know that. I suppose you think intermission is called the seventh inning stretch."

Father ignored her, a skill which, Catherine had recently realized, had allowed him to remain unhappily married to Mother for twenty-two years. "He told me he wasn't aware you were only touring for a year."

Catherine felt her ears burn and knew it would only be a matter of seconds before the flush crept up her neck and to her cheeks. "I—I meant to tell him. The timing just never seemed right."

That wasn't entirely true. Some part of Catherine had

hoped that she'd be able to negotiate with Father, or even that, with the divorce proceedings taking up so much of his time, he might forget.

A foolish hope, she now realized as she looked at her father's immovable face. He had more gray around his temples than she remembered.

"I see. Well, I took the liberty of breaking the news to him. He wasn't happy, of course—all the more reason you ought to have given him notice from the start—but he said he certainly wouldn't want to keep a young woman in his band without her parents' approval."

The words made Catherine flinch. Persuading her father to agree to one year of touring "to get this music business out of your system" had seemed like a dream come true. But here she was, eleven months in and barely started. When she took her place onstage, none of the difficulties of the tour came to mind. She could only think about the dear friends she'd made in her fellow musicians, the improvements in her skill, the sheer freedom of touring through glittering ballrooms and big cities across the country . . .

Mother brushed Father aside with the flat of her hand, a gesture that might look playful if you overlooked the spite in her tone. "Oh, stop being such a boor, Gerald. No amount of bluster can keep my Catherine away from music, can it, *ma chérie?*"

Catherine searched for a response, but Mother didn't seem to need one, her attention fixed on her estranged husband.

Father, on the other hand, hadn't taken his eyes off Catherine, his words clipped and businesslike. "It is, however, not up to you. Catherine and I had an agreement, and I'm sure she wouldn't be so foolish as to break her word, not with her future at stake."

The words were very proper. No promise of disinheritance, no reminder that most musicians at her level wouldn't

be able to survive on their salary, no threats. Those wouldn't come out until she dared to cross him.

Just now, Catherine was feeling remarkably low on daring. She wasn't like Maggie, who could speak her mind and grit her teeth against the reaction. Her parents' slowly rising voices were already attracting stares, and she licked her dry lips in an attempt to speak. "Can we discuss this after the performance, please? I really ought to—"

"There's nothing more to discuss," Father interrupted. "One month, Catherine. That's final."

Mother sniffed. "Delightful. Then I'll be sure to tell the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic to schedule Catherine's audition for mid-March."

"My audition?" Catherine asked, hating how helpless her question sounded. Surely her mother hadn't. . . . She wasn't ready, not for performances at that level. Her year with the Sweethearts was the first time she'd ever played with other musicians.

"I was just going to tell you before we were *interrupted*." She glared at Father, then turned back to Catherine. "It's a magnificent opportunity. I may have been forced to give up my career after getting married, but I still have my connections."

That was a slanted version of the real story. From what Catherine had heard, her mother, a Parisian-born opera singer, had been struggling financially and had married Father as a way out. But Catherine knew Mother had told her rendition of the story so often that she believed it was true.

"I must say, he was fascinated when he heard I had such a talented daughter. 'Where have you been hiding her away?' he asked." She gave her usual trill of a laugh. "Of course, the real question was, *Who* was hiding her away?"

Father's voice was little more than a growl at this point. "That's unfair, Vivienne. I've always wanted the best for

Catherine—which doesn't include the life you lived in Paris, half-starving in a tiny apartment with a ruined reputation.”

Catherine cast desperately about for a way of escape and saw two of the Sweethearts' woodwind players whispering to each other and discreetly pointing in their direction. Were they close enough to hear?

If not, they soon would be. Vivienne Lavigne-Duquette and Gerald Duquette were known in society gossip rags for their tempestuous public rows. Catherine usually managed to play the peacemaker and remained invisible whenever possible.

Not this time. She struggled to breathe as more and more people turned and whispered, gesturing to her parents, who now stood directly facing each other, their voices continuing to rise.

“You mustn't pretend, Gerald. You want *your* best and always have. The rest of us might as well not even exist.”

Father scoffed. “Really, Vivienne, you seem determined to make it impossible for *anyone* to forget about you, even if that means making a scene.”

“I really must be getting back,” Catherine finally said. Both pairs of eyes turned to her, sharp as daggers, cutting the courage out of her so she could only add, “Enjoy the rest of the program, Father, Mother.”

Now. Now. She had to leave now. Before they shouted after her, before she was in the middle once again. Catherine nearly tripped over her hem in her hurry to escape, blinking back tears.

What was she going to do? If Mr. Simmons had already agreed to dismiss her from the Sweethearts—and she didn't doubt her father could bribe or coerce him to do so—then she had very few choices before her. She could return to the Duquette mansion on Summit Avenue and marry a suitable husband like her father wanted. Or she could run off to