



*A Single  
Spark*

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This is a work of historical fiction; 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.

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*For Lori Baney Mattingly,  
who is always quick to encourage with  
her loving heart and joyful spirit.*

WAR, AT THE BEST, IS TERRIBLE,  
AND THIS WAR OF OURS,  
IN ITS MAGNITUDE AND IN ITS DURATION,  
IS ONE OF THE MOST TERRIBLE.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

# ONE

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*Washington Arsenal, Washington, D.C.*  
*August 1862*

Clara McBride carefully counted ten cartridges before dividing them into a double stack of five. Her lips moved as she silently alternated the position of each bullet. *Up, down, up, down, up, down.* Bright sunshine poured through the high, narrow windows and zigzagged across the room, the warmth enveloping her like a thick, cozy quilt. *Up, down, up, down.* Both her lips and fingers slowed, the heat and repetition finally lulling her eyes to half-mast.

“Miss McBride!”

Clara jerked to attention. A cartridge slipped to the floor, and gunpowder spilled at her feet. Looking up, she met the harsh gaze of Mr. Grant, the packing room supervisor. A deep frown creased his jowly face as he signaled to one of the young boys near the door. “You’ve lost your ability to concentrate since leaving the packing room, Miss McBride.”

Clara’s cheeks burned as she picked up the cartridge. She didn’t look up, but she could feel the other girls gawping. Those who had been subjected to the same embarrassment would feel pity. Others would revel in the rebuke. The

combination of reactions was the same in every section of the Washington Arsenal, where one worker's misstep could provide a higher-paying position for another. Her own ascension from the packing room had been due to such circumstances.

She mumbled an apology and continued stacking, counting, and packing while wishing she could return to the cylinder room. This was the second time in the past month she'd been required to assist in the packing room, for once trained, the girls would apply for positions in other sections of the laboratory. Rooms where the work wasn't quite as monotonous, and the supervisor didn't enjoy berating employees.

"Mr. Grant, a word with you, please."

The workers glanced over their shoulders toward Lieutenant Brady, who stood in the doorway. When the lieutenant stepped into the packing room, Clara spied Dottie Wilson leaning against the doorjamb. Except for her darting eyes, the young woman remained as still as a statue—until she spotted Clara. In that moment Dottie's shoulders straightened, and her eyes narrowed in a dark glare.

Clara flinched, her thoughts racing as she attempted to think of any way she might have wronged Dottie. Anything that would have been serious enough to bring the lieutenant into the packing room during the middle of the day. Clara chanced a quick look at Mr. Grant and the lieutenant. Mr. Grant's face was the pinkish-purple shade Clara had observed during a few of the supervisor's angry moments in the past. Whatever had happened, there was little doubt it concerned Mr. Grant, Dottie—and Clara.

"Miss McBride, please vacate your position."

Clara stood and waited until the workers to her right stood and sidestepped their way to the end of the bench. She squeezed around them and moved to Lieutenant Brady's side.

Mr. Grant gestured to Dottie. “Take her seat, Miss Wilson. I do hope you’re more wide awake than Miss McBride. She created quite a mess for us this morning.”

Dottie smirked at the supervisor’s remark, but the lieutenant turned on his heel at the comment. “If that is truly what happened, Mr. Grant, you should be thanking me for taking her out of the packing room. Why did you argue to keep her here?” Without waiting for a response, the lieutenant escorted Clara from the room.

Clara quickened her step to keep pace with the lieutenant’s long stride. Before they arrived at the door of the cylinder room, he stopped and turned to her. “We have a new employee, a Miss Hodson.” He hesitated. “I don’t recall her full name, but you can inquire after I make introductions. I want you to train her. While she has no experience, since her recent move to Washington, she’s been eager to secure work here at the Arsenal.”

“I enjoy training the new girls, so I’ll do my best.” Clara’s lips curved in a fleeting smile. “May I ask why Dottie—Miss Wilson—was angry with me?”

“She didn’t want to replace you in the packing room and said she could train Miss Hodson.” The lieutenant hiked a shoulder. “That didn’t prove to be true. Her anger is misdirected. I’ll speak to her.”

Clara shook her head. “No, please don’t. I’m sure she’ll be fine once she returns to the cylinder room. There are few who enjoy the packing room.”

“Or Mr. Grant?” He arched a brow.

A soft chuckle escaped Clara’s lips. “That too.”

Clara captured a loose strand of chestnut-brown hair and tucked it behind her ear as she followed the lieutenant to the other side of the room. Miss Hodson sat in the lieutenant’s

chair and jumped to her feet as they approached. When the young woman fluttered her eyelashes at the lieutenant, Clara suppressed a gasp and gave him a sideways glance. Did he think the new employee's behavior charming or unseemly? Or had he even noticed? He'd been at the Arsenal for only a month now and appeared to be more interested in production than charm, although his good looks were often a topic of discussion among the girls who worked in the laboratory. In truth, the young lieutenant frequented Clara's dreams quite often—a fact that both disturbed and delighted her.

“Miss Hodson, I'd like you to meet Miss Clara McBride. She's one of the very best employees in the cylinder room. She is well qualified to train new employees in the packing room, filling room, cap cylinder room, and the cylinder room. If you heed her advice, you'll learn quickly.”

“I'll do my very best to please you, Lieutenant.” She leaned in as she lifted her head and batted her lashes.

The lieutenant took a backward step. “It's Miss McBride you need to please. If she finds your work suitable, it will satisfy me.” He looked at Clara. “You can begin your training, but I'd like to speak to you before you depart this evening.”

Clara nodded. No doubt he wanted an explanation about the happenings in the packing room. After his generous comments about her abilities, it would be difficult to tell him she'd nearly fallen asleep at her worktable.

She pushed the thought from her mind and turned to Miss Hodson. “Even though you've received some training from Miss Wilson, let's start at the very beginning.” She glanced toward one of the long tables. “Do you prefer I address you as Miss Hodson?”

The young woman shook her head. “No, please call me Beatrice. And you?”

“Clara. Last names seem far too formal when we’re sitting next to each other all day making bullets to help win the war.” Clara gestured toward the hard wooden benches on one side of the table. She leaned close to Beatrice’s ear. “Our hooped skirts and crinolines make it difficult, but we need as many women as possible working on each side of the bench, so push in as far as possible.”

Beatrice wrinkled her nose. “It’s uncomfortable sitting so close, and there’s no way off the bench without making the others get up. When I had to move, I discovered it irritated some of the ladies. You’d think they would be understanding when someone needs the necessary.”

“You’ll soon discover most of them to be very kind and helpful.” Clara smiled and walked to one end of the table.

“This is the beginning of the process. The women at this side of the room roll paper cylinders that will become cartridges once they’re filled with gunpowder. There are exacting instructions that must be followed when making the cylinders.” Clara pointed to a young lady holding a wooden dowel with a point at one end. “That piece of wood is called a former, and it’s the same width as a finished cartridge.”

Beatrice frowned. “Is this what I’m going to be doing? Dottie had me trying to fill those things with gunpowder in the filling room, but she said I would likely work in the cap cylinder room.”

Clara frowned. “The lieutenant wouldn’t assign you to the cap cylinder room.”

Beatrice tipped her head to the side. “And why is that?”

“The cap cylinder room requires workers with very small hands.”

Beatrice spread her fingers. “Did he tell you my hands are large?” Her brow creased as she extended her arms. “Place

your hands beneath mine.” When Clara didn’t immediately move, Beatrice reached forward and grasped her arm. “Come on—let’s see who has the larger hands.” Rather than have Beatrice disturb the other women, Clara complied. Beatrice inhaled a long breath. “There, you see. My hands are no larger than yours.”

Clara sighed and nodded. Had she known Beatrice was going to be so prickly about hand size, she never would have mentioned the matter. “Perhaps Dottie knew there were several openings in the cap cylinder room and she assumed you’d be assigned there.”

“So, the lieutenant didn’t say I have big hands?”

Clara took a moment before she responded. How had this conversation taken such a silly turn? “The lieutenant didn’t mention your hands at all. I was merely attempting to explain why you wouldn’t be assigned to the cap cylinder room. The girls who work there are usually younger than us and have tiny hands. I can take you through and show you what they do later in the day. If I offended you in any way, please know it wasn’t my intention.”

Beatrice beamed. “Thank you for your honesty—and your apology.”

Clara offered a weak smile, thankful the matter had been set aright. “I believe you’ll soon discover that I’m honest with others and I hope they’ll be the same. When I’m wrong, which is more often than I care to admit, I’m quick to apologize.” Clara nodded toward stacks of precut paper on the table. “If you come closer, you can see how the women place one piece of paper against the former and roll it into a cylinder.” They watched for a moment before she nudged Beatrice and pointed across the table. “Watch her. Once the paper is wrapped around the former, the pointed end is tied with a

string. That's called choking. Now she places a minié ball at the tied end and wraps a second piece of paper around and chokes it with string."

They stood for a moment and watched the woman fly through the process. As soon as she'd tied off the second choking string, she removed the former and placed the cylinder in a box.

"This looks more difficult than filling the cylinders with gunpowder," Beatrice said.

"Once you've worked here a few days, you'll be as quick as these ladies."

"Would you ask the lieutenant if I can work in the filling room with you—at least for now? Since Dottie's gone and he was having her train me to work beside her, there must be a position. We've just moved here, and I don't know a soul. It would mean so much to me if I could work near you."

Clara wasn't one to make special requests, yet she found it impossible to resist Beatrice's pleading look and woeful tone. Some of the women didn't hesitate to ask for special favors—a request to leave early or take an extended noonday break for one reason or another. Such requests were usually denied, though occasionally a supervisor would be generous. Perhaps the lieutenant would agree, since this request wouldn't require any time away from the laboratory.

"Please? Will you at least try?" Beatrice grasped Clara's hand and squeezed.

"I suppose it won't hurt to ask. You stay here."

Beatrice gave Clara's hand another squeeze and nodded toward the lieutenant. "He's quite good-looking, don't you think?"

Clara tugged her hand loose. She didn't want to admit that she thought he was the most handsome man she'd ever

seen. If she did, she'd never gain the courage to approach him. Instead, she whispered, "It doesn't matter what he looks like. What matters is your assignment."

The grin vanished from Beatrice's lips. "Yes, of course."

The walk to the filling section had never seemed so far. Lieutenant Brady remained at a desk not far from the tables in the filling section. Clara stepped to the side of his desk and waited.

When he looked up, his lips curved in a smile. "Done training Miss Hodson so soon?"

Clara cleared her throat. "I've described the work in the cylinder section, although she hasn't yet attempted to make a cylinder. I thought perhaps she could work beside me in the filling room rather than in the cylinder section. If you approve, that is. I think she's quite capable of—"

He held up his hand. "I trust your judgment, Miss McBride. We have openings in all sections of the laboratory, so wherever you think she would prove most useful. She appeared to be having difficulty earlier, but if you think she's capable, I'll leave it to you."

"I believe she's overcome some of her earlier nervousness and will do fine."

"You work alongside her, and if she has difficulty, we'll move her elsewhere." That said, he gave a slight nod and returned to his paper work.

As they were approaching the bench, Clara unbuttoned the cuffs of her dress and rolled up her sleeves to just below the elbow. She touched a finger to Beatrice's cuff. "You'll want to keep your dress as clean as possible—unless you own many more dresses than most of us. Gunpowder is fine as flour and black as coal. It will leave ugly stains. And loose gunpowder is dangerous. You don't want to collect any of

it in your sleeves. We receive lots of reminders from the supervisors about the need to be careful.”

Beatrice inhaled a deep breath and swiped at one sleeve of her dress and then the other. “I noticed the other ladies, but Dottie didn’t tell me I should roll my sleeves. Do you think I’m safe?” Beatrice slapped at her sleeves and shook her arms.

“I think you’ll be just fine. All of the necessary materials for this next step will be on the tables. You saw the ladies in the cylinder room place a minié ball in the outer cylinder. We’ll now add the gunpowder. You must be careful handling the gunpowder and remain alert.” As Clara issued the warning, a remembrance of her earlier boredom in the packing room flashed through her mind. A reminder she needed to heed her own advice.

Beatrice gestured to the empty space on one of the benches. “Do we sit here?”

Clara nodded, and the two of them pushed down their hoops and squeezed onto the narrow bench. “The gunpowder is premeasured, so you’ll need one of these funnels.” Clara picked up a cylinder, inserted the tip of the metal funnel, and poured gunpowder inside. “Once it’s filled, you gently tap the cylinder so the gunpowder settles. Next, you flatten the empty end of the paper and the cylinder is closed in a three-fold process. Watch.” Clara flattened the end of the cylinder and nimbly made the proper fold. “Make certain each step is done exactly as I’ve shown you.” Clara picked up a funnel and handed it to Beatrice. “Go ahead. I’ll watch to make certain you understood my directions.”

“Dottie didn’t let me use one of the funnels when I was here earlier. She said she didn’t have another one, so I should just cup my hand around the end of the cylinder. That’s why I had trouble.” Beatrice leaned close. “I don’t think Dottie

wanted me to succeed. She saw the lieutenant looking at me, and I think she was jealous.”

“I don’t believe Dottie wants anyone to fail. We need every worker we can get. Winning the war is important to everyone who works here, and our soldiers need these cartridges. As for the lieutenant, I doubt there was any jealousy involved. Dottie already has a beau.”

Clara watched as Beatrice filled the paper tube with gunpowder, then folded the end and placed it in a wooden box.

“How did I do?” Beatrice straightened her shoulders and smiled like a child who’d presented a perfect paper to her teacher.

“That was flawless. You’ll need another ninety-nine to fill that box. When it’s full, push it toward the end of the table. Once the lady at the end completes her box, she’ll take the other boxes to the cap cylinder room, where the tubes of percussion caps will be placed in each box before they go to the packing room. When she returns, she’ll go to the other end of the bench and we’ll all move down. That way we all receive a few minutes to straighten our backs and stretch a bit.”

A frown creased Beatrice’s face. “My back already hurts from sitting on this bench. We should have chairs, don’t you think?”

Before Clara could respond, one of the circulating inspectors stopped behind them. He gestured to the cartridge box. “Less talking and more work, ladies.”

Clara waited until he’d moved to the next table. “We’re not supposed to talk while we work.”

Beatrice glared at the inspector. “I don’t think I’m going to take any pleasure in being around him. The lieutenant is more to my liking.”

Clara glanced toward the lieutenant, whose desk was situ-

ated near the center of the room. She'd thought the very same thing the first time she laid eyes on him. Unfortunately, other than praising her work, he'd come calling only in her dreams. Maybe Beatrice was more to his liking. Silly as it was, the thought bothered her. Never had she cared if a man wanted to court her.

Yet Beatrice's interest in the lieutenant gnawed at Clara for the remainder of the day.