

BY THE LIGHT OF FIREFLIES



A Novel of War Hero
Sybil Ludington

JENNI L. WALSH

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The author will be virtually visiting schools in the fall

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*For Sybil—the little-known young heroine
of the Revolutionary War.*



CHAPTER 1

They were coming for us.

The Loyalists.

Loyal to the King of England.

In the woods outside our home, their voices cackled, hooted, and hollered. They screamed, “Traitor!”

I trembled. They were talking about Papa. He was *not* loyal to King George III. Once upon a time, Papa had been. He had served in the King’s army. But Papa didn’t side with the British anymore. Not with how England was treating the new American colonies. Taxing us, not giving us a say on anything, forcing us to let their armed soldiers live and quarter in our homes.

“Traitor!” I heard again, from where I stood at the window at the bend of our staircase, weak at the knees, my hands clutching the windowsill for support.

Mama had feared they’d come. Papa had been offered a captain position from the British governor of New York. Papa had said no.

Outside, I couldn’t see the men. Too many trees obscured them, hid them. But they were out there in the wintry night, their voices carrying through the oaks and pines. I pictured torches illuminating their angry faces. Had they come to hoot and holler to simply scare and taunt Papa? Or were they here to

punish him? Would they break the tree line, enter our clearing, and approach our home

I shuddered away the remainder of my thought.

I shuddered away what their fire could do to our house.

Papa's voice rung out. "Into the cellar. All of you!"

The voices of Mama and my five siblings shrieked through the house.

A chill ran down my spine and I rubbed my arms. But my eyes stayed glued on the dark night. The reason was simple: I ached to see the lights of the fireflies.

Papa insisted they were magical. Enchanted.

Just last week, he'd said, "I was around your same age—maybe eleven or twelve—when *my* papa first told me about the magic of the fireflies."

"The *what?*" I'd asked.

Papa was a big, burly man. A trained soldier. And there he was talking about magic? At my squinted, questioning eyes, a mischievous smile had spread on Papa's face. "Didn't you know? Fireflies are magic, Sybil."

He had said it so matter-of-factly, but then a whimsical yet frightening story poured from his mouth: "I was only fifteen, in the middle of a battle ... one where I thought all was lost. Picture me: on my belly. It was dark, the only light coming from the moon and sparks of gunfire."

I had shivered at the danger he'd been in.

"I didn't know which way I was crawling, but my superiors were calling for us to retreat. I thought I'd never get off the battlefield without a miracle. That's when I thought of the story

my own Papa told me about the fireflies and how they come at different times, for different reasons. Sometimes, they simply talk to one another. Nothing special. But if you see them in ways you're not supposed to"—Papa had whistled—"that's *special*. That means they've come to talk to *you*. They flash to tell us something important, Sybil."

"And you saw them?"

"Oh I saw them all right. It was the dead of winter and I saw them. They're supposed to be underground at that time of the year, not yet fireflies, but still tiny glow worms. Yet there they were, blinking, silently talking to *me*, telling me I was going to be all right, while gunfire exploded all around me. Still I was frozen in place. That's when they showed me even more of their magic: they flickered in unison. It was unbelievable to see them doing that." He'd shaken his head. "It was like they were telling me to follow them. I listened and I found a hollow. There, I waited out the battle. And, I survived."

My mouth had hung open.

Now, I bit my lip, staring out the window. I'd seen fireflies flickering and chattering to each other before. But only in the summertime, when they were *supposed* to be there.

Tonight, though

Tonight—in a winter month, just like it'd been in Papa's story—I wanted to believe in the magic of the fireflies. I wished more than anything for the fireflies to appear. It'd mean something. It'd mean something *big*. It'd mean those Loyalists would come no closer to our house.

“Move!” my sister demanded.

But I couldn’t move.

I was too scared to peel my eyes away from the window. Papa’s story—still so fresh from hearing it only days ago—danced again through my mind.

“Don’t just stand there. You’re blocking the stairs,” Rebecca growled. My sister let out a huff and pushed past me, one of my little brothers tucked into her side. “Mama won’t be happy.”

Mama wouldn’t. I was the oldest. I was supposed to be helping her get my sleepy siblings downstairs to safety, especially with Mama as pregnant as she was.

The sounds outside grew.

High-pitched whistles.

Deep-sounding shouts.

I swallowed roughly.

Where were the fireflies? Would they come to save us?

I gripped the windowsill harder. Another brother rustled past me, tugging on my nightgown as he went.

But I stayed. I stared so hard into the trees, searching for the fireflies, that everything began to blur.

I covered my ears against the mob looming closer outside.

Then, I couldn’t believe my eyes. I saw them. Flashing. Intermittently.

Between the trees, there were the fireflies.

Even while I had wished for them, I began to doubt Papa’s story. It was only words, passed down in our family from Papa and from his Papa and from his Papa. But I so badly wanted to

believe they'd show themselves when I needed their magic the most.

Now there they were.

"We're here!" they seemed to blink, when they were supposed to still be underground as glow worms.

My heart raced at the next flicker. Then another. They were undeniable, as more and more appeared.

I dropped my hands from my ears and yelled, "I see them!" I took three baby steps away from the window to lean over the stair's bannister and screamed, "Papa!"

His footsteps pounded, even louder than the voices outside, until he came into view on the ground floor. Perspiration had gathered on his forehead and stained his shirt. "What? What is it, Sybil?"

I told him to get up here, to hurry, to come see.

He barreled up the stairs, a musket clenched in his hand.

But by the time Papa reached me and I had turned back to the window, the fireflies had vanished. Poof. Gone.

"Fireflies!" I cried quickly. "They were here. Only a moment ago. They were here!"

With ragged breaths, Papa stood beside me, studying the dark night. He held up a finger, telling me to remain silent. Together, we looked, we listened.

Papa finally said, "Looks like the mob is gone, too."

A slow smile spread across his face, with wrinkles around his eyes.

"The fireflies?" I asked Papa.

He nodded. “The fireflies.”

Tonight, I wanted them to show themselves to tell me we’d be safe from the Loyalists. And they did. Papa had experienced a magical moment with the fireflies when he was a boy. And now, I’d had one, too. Only, the fireflies hadn’t yet showed me all they could. There was more magic yet to come.



CHAPTER 2

Now that I'd seen the majestic fireflies for myself, I had questions for Papa. He was resting an elbow on his shovel, wiping his brow despite the morning's almost freezing temperature. Mucking the chicken pen was hard work.

"Papa," I said, and he startled at my voice, before yawning. "Out of the two million people on this continent, how come the fireflies chose to appear early and help us?"

"Two million, huh?"

"That's my guess anyway."

Papa laughed. "Well, it's not that the fireflies chose to help us, per se. It's more that we choose them. *You* chose to believe they'd flash to tell you something important, right?"

"Right. Is that why I never saw them like that before? Because I didn't know about their magic until your story?"

"Like my Papa told me and I'm now telling you, those who believe are the people most likely to experience the enchantment of fireflies. It's only natural we look for them when we're in a moment of need. But I will say, what happened last night was pretty scary. I don't want it to happen again."

Me either.

Papa went on, "In fact, your mama is insisting I accept that captain position." He sunk his shovel into the hay. I rubbed my

lips side to side, remembering the angry voices from last night and how they yelled *traitor*. “I’ve decided to accept the job.”

“What?” I said before I could stop myself. I never questioned Papa. “But you’re a Patriot now.”

“Family comes first. And if me being a captain stops a repeat of last night, then so be it.”

There was a glimmer in Papa’s eye.

I narrowed mine.

He chuckled. “Okay, maybe my heart or head won’t be in the job. But I’ll do it for show.”

“Sybil!” I heard, coming from the house. It was Rebecca. “You’ll be late.”

For school.

I glanced down our long drive. There was no sign of Johnny Whitaker yet. It was his routine to arrive every morning with his horse and cart to take Rebecca, Mary, and me to the church’s schoolhouse. It was *my* routine to twist my mouth at him every time.

It wasn’t that Johnny Whitaker was a pill. We’d grown up together, living close by, and he was actually quite funny. Just the other day he tipped his hat to us like he was taking us to a fancy ball and nearly fell off the cart.

What bothered me was the simple fact that he was taking us to school. *He* was bringing us there when *I* was one hundred percent capable of driving the three miles to the church’s schoolhouse all on my own. Johnny Whitaker and I were the same age. We were the same height. Plus, we owned a farm cart and two horses.

However, Papa insisted those horses already had jobs. Jasper, with his thick chest and short legs, was used to plow the fields. And Pepper, thinner and longer, was better suited for riding. The real problem with Pepper, however, was that he'd only let Papa ride him. The sight of anyone else holding a saddle sent his legs running and his lips flapping.

My solution was quick: let's get a third horse that I could use.

My parents' response was swift: *There's no need. We have Johnny Whitaker.*

Alas, it was a battle I never won. And I knew why. Johnny Whitaker was a boy and I was a girl. And Papa wanted a boy with his girls whenever we left our homestead.

"For your protection," he always said when I sulked.

There wasn't time for sulking this morning. I hurried inside to change for school. I kissed Mama good-bye, then the tops of my three brothers' heads. I wondered if Mama would have a boy or girl next. My two sisters and Johnny Whitaker were waiting for me when I rushed outside and onto Johnny's cart.

He had a whole mouthful of things he was saying. But I wasn't paying attention to him. We were clattering down the drive, each bump taking us farther from my house. We turned onto the ox-cart road and I was officially off our property. I knew there was a big world out there, proven by the seemingly endless number of trees I now saw. I took as much air into my lungs as possible, holding it there, doing my best to ignore the fact that any time I left the farm was when someone took me.

Still, I was always happy to cross that threshold, as if the moment I left our drive I transformed into Sybil the Unknown and Unexplored, instead of Sybil the Farmer's Daughter.

The drive to school was too quick, per usual.

At school, Johnny Whitaker extended a hand to my sister Mary to help her down from the cart. Rebecca would be next. When he was done unloading us, he'd leave. He used to stay for classes, but not anymore. Now he only dropped us off and picked us up. In the middle, he apprenticed with a blacksmith.

I envied him that, too. When I was a day over ten—the age when boys often began their apprenticeships—I asked Mama what I could be when I grew up. I didn't have many women in my life. My mama. The women at church. I knew what my mama did every day, but I didn't know what the church women did after the sermon was over. Maybe they led exciting lives that I never saw.

Mama had seemed surprised by my question. "Well, you'll get married."

"But then what? What job will I do?"

"My dear, you're a farmer's daughter and one day you'll be a farmer's wife. It's who we are. We stay on the farm. We have plenty of work of our own."

Funny, we lived on two hundred and twenty-nine acres of rolling land and even so, I felt suffocated. Confined. I still didn't understand why I couldn't be something different than I was born into.

At school, Johnny Whitaker extended his hand to help me

down from the cart, but I bunched my own skirts, quite capable of jumping down on my own. I was quite capable of a lot of things. Or I assumed I could be, if I were given a chance to try the things Johnny Whitaker would be allowed to do.

I could be a teacher. I sure loved facts.

Or maybe I could work as a cooper, making barrels and casks.

Maybe a cobbler. Everybody needed shoes.

Candles, too. So there was the option of a candle maker.

Or perhaps an apothecary, making medicine for people.

The idea of an innkeeper was interesting as well. It'd take me off the farm and put me in town or in a city, where I'd meet endless numbers of new people from faraway places. I bet they'd be dripping of stories to tell.

I wouldn't want to be a milliner, though. They made clothes to sell. That was my sister Rebecca's skill. Not mine. Even so, Mama had me sitting at the handloom and spinning wheel nearly every day to fashion clothes for our family.

The real problem, however, was that Mama insisted none of these jobs would be appropriate for me. Still, I dreamed. And, I wouldn't give up. Mama would hear about it again.

On the way inside the schoolhouse, I scoured the tall grass along the building for any fireflies trying to hide and sleep until nighttime. But I reminded myself their magic was needed to see them this time of year and I didn't have a need for my little friends at the moment, beyond simply wanting to see them again.

Inside the church's schoolhouse, Mr. Carter sat at his desk. Only a few chairs were filled so far. I placed both hands on his desk. "Good morning, Mr. Carter. Do you know anything about fireflies?"

He met my eyes, amusement there. "My brothers and I always called them lightning bugs."

Was that so?

"But they aren't bugs," he said. "They actually aren't flies either, if you're calling them fireflies. Flies have four wings, not two like fireflies, lightning bugs ... whatever you want to call them. They're actually beetles."

Beetles, huh? I thanked Mr. Carter, and took my seat, still reveling in my newfound knowledge that those enchanted little creatures were actually beetles.

My day went on. Johnny Whitaker carted us home. I cooked and served supper, Mama still in bed. Then I entertained my brothers and sisters with hide-and-seek outside to keep the inside quiet for Mama, who was bound to have her baby any day now.

The next day went much the same. The days after, too, with the exception that hide-and-seek was replaced with things like jump rope, scotch-hopper, and rolling the hoop. And, on the days there wasn't school, I was assisting Papa and the farm help with getting the ground ready for plantings, then as the weeks passed, helping Papa with the plantings, while also trying to keep my brothers from rolling in the mud.

Not that I was successful—with the mud part. So I ended

up hauling the tub into the center of the kitchen, boiling water, putting one brother or sister in after the next. As always, I was the last to splash, when the bathwater was murky and straws of hay floated on the water's surface. Gross. And, now that Mama had her baby—a new baby brother—there'd be another sibling to go into the water before me.

Before I knew it, it was the dawn of summer, the time when the fireflies would begin to emerge from the ground. I couldn't sleep. I was too excited to see them again. That night, I crept outside. And, there they were blinking their hellos. It was like they knew I was coming to see them.

I went to bed with a smile.

I woke with a smile.

“Something's got you happy,” Mama said to me. We stood together in front of the strawberry bushes. They were overflowing with fruit.

I wouldn't dare tell Mama about my fascination with the fireflies. She'd only shake her head and tell me not to listen to Papa's stories.

Too late.

And right now, I was more concerned with the twinkle in Mama's eye. I knew that twinkle meant trouble for me. What that twinkle actually meant was that Mama had been cooped up in bed too long after having my newest brother and was antsy. A day full of canning strawberry jam would fix that, with me as her helper.

At least, when it was all done and night had fallen, my fire-

flies would be waiting for me. It'd be soothing, seeing them blinking and flashing in their disorderly, random way. Little did I know ... the fireflies had something special in store for me that night. Something all for me. Something that would change my life forever.



CHAPTER 3

I should've been in bed. But I snuck outside to the front porch, knowing my beetle friends would arrive soon.

I pulled my knees to my chest, propped my chin on my bony knee, feeling the trickle of summer-time heat trail down my back, and watched them chatter.

I imagined the silly little things they said:

Hello!

How do you do?

Nice evening, is it not?

Truthfully, heat still hung in the barely-there breeze and I breathed in the humid air, heavy with the day's earlier rain. At least it was cooler outside than in the house. The house got extra hot from the absurd amount of jam Mama and I had cooked today.

"Even with a family as big as ours, we'll never eat this much strawberry jam," I had told her.

Her response had been mostly a noise.

"I could take it down to Ludingtonville, see if anyone there wants to buy some."

Mama had looked up at that. Ludingtonville was named after us: the Ludingtons. It wasn't a town or a city or a village—those had churches and schools—but Ludingtonville was a tiny hamlet on our land, consisting of our two mills, a postal office, a shared stable, and a stretch of homes on either side of

a single road, occupied mainly by the families who worked the mills.

“It’s right over the hill,” I had added, if that was Mama’s concern. I knew it was. She didn’t like me or my sisters leaving the clearing by ourselves. But Ludingtonville was still on our property. I could walk there in no time. My arms would be plenty tired by the time I got there. Now, if I had a cart and horse

Then Mama had shaken her head. “You’ll get nothing but strange looks if you try selling our goods. Peddling isn’t an appropriate occupation for a girl.”

I had sighed then.

I sighed now.

I stared into the vast darkness, the only light illuminating from a single candle at my side. What was beyond our many acres and the trees I saw from Johnny Whitaker’s cart on the way to the schoolhouse?

I stretched out my legs and I felt it in my bones that twelve was to be a big year for me. I wasn’t sure why, exactly. But feelings didn’t always need to be explained. Papa always told me that. Mama was more down-to-earth.

I smiled at the fireflies. There was a blink here, a blink there. I enjoyed guessing where the next light would appear, the activity beginning to tire my brain. I yawned, just as a sound drifted from the woods, the yawn muffling the noise in my ears. It was likely an owl. I stood, a second yawn coming over me. But, before I could turn to go inside, something happened.

Something magical.

The fireflies blinked all at once, in harmony.

Despite the balmy night, my skin erupted with goose bumps. I couldn't believe it. They had done the same thing for Papa, asking him to follow them to safety, when he was on the battlefield.

What were they trying to tell me?

To follow them?

All together, the fireflies flickered again, and again. Each time, it was as if the grouping moved away, closer to the tree line.

Not a single stitch of me was tired any longer.

They blinked, now within the trees.

"Wait," I said and stepped from the stone porch and into the grass, bringing my candle with me. The darkness suddenly felt everywhere. I shuddered as I took a few steps, lengthening and quickening my pace while I strengthened my resolve, and then I was running. The trees loomed closer. Between the trunks, the fireflies were still blinking as one.

My quick movements snuffed out my candle. I paused. The ground's wetness seeped through the sole of my thin slippers.

Follow us I imagined them saying. *Don't be scared.*

That was easier said than done. At the tree line, I stopped and peered into the darkness. I knew I shouldn't go into the forest alone at night, not when the nocturnal animals came alive. There were bobcats and coyotes and wolves. I listened. Wolves and coyotes were noisy creatures. Bobcats preferred

prey of a smaller size. In my case, I hoped tinier than a twelve-year-old, one who was tall for her age.

The fireflies blinked in unison once more.

Over here they seemed to say.

But why?

I drummed my fingers against my nightgown, deliberating. And then I stepped into the trees. I was a tall and brave girl, I reassured myself. And surely, as twigs snapped, branches rustled, and my breath increased, I made enough commotion to scare away anything with a mind to eat me, or at least take a bite out of me. I felt each rock and root beneath my slippers, but I didn't look down to watch my steps. I kept my eyes trained ahead; holding my breath while the bellies of the fireflies went dark, until again, they glowed as one. I heard a noise again. Not an owl, as I had thought. But it also wasn't a growl or a howl.

This way.

I followed as quickly as possible, doubt beginning to set in that I'd easily find my way home again. Then, the fireflies stopped moving forward. Maybe ten paces ahead, they hovered, their bellies lighting up every two seconds. It was like a beacon, calling me to the very spot they blinked. *Here* they said.

I obeyed, creeping closer, now being careful with each step I took. Something lay on the ground ahead. Something trembling. Something small, but larger than our dogs. Something closer to the size of one of our goats.

A foal?

The young horse cocked his head at me. His spindly legs

were tucked beneath his quaking body. His left ear twitched, then his right.

My mouth hung open. I swung my head in all directions in search of the colt's mother or his owner. But then again ... whom had I expected to see in the darkness? Ludingtonville was in the opposite direction. Otherwise, our closest neighbor lived miles away. And while there were horses in both places, Papa never mentioned any of them being pregnant.

Yet here was this baby horse. All alone.

I kneeled.

The day's earlier rain seeped through my nightgown at my knees.

The horse's eyes widened, like he was about to hop to his feet and flee.

"Shh, it's all right, boy," I whispered. "Where's your mama?"

I peered once more into the still and quiet darkness. I realized the fireflies blinked elsewhere now, having said what they needed to say. I was meant to find him here. I gathered that much. But why me?

A thought instantly came to me. Nearly everything that was mine was my family's. There wasn't much that was mine and mine alone. I shared the same brown hair, freckles, and long limbs as Rebecca. Throughout the night, a single quilt was yanked and pulled between my sister and me. Of course, there was the daytime, where I had to fight for Mama's and Papa's attention, where my clothing was borrowed, where I bathed in that shared tub.

But this horse ... this horse could be mine.

I could use this horse to take myself to school. Thinking about that freedom and being Sybil the Unknown and Unexplored puts ants in my pants. But even when we didn't leave the property, we could go for rides, devouring acre after acre of our land.

Who knows where this horse could take me?

He shivered. It wasn't cold, so he must've been scared. I reassured him again, "It'll be all right, boy."

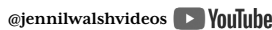
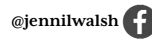
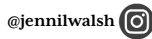
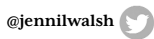
The foal raised his head, moonlight catching a white mark between his eyes. This type of marking, Papa once told me, was called a star.

"Star," I said. "How's that for a name?"

Then, I smiled—because, in that moment, I *had* claimed him as my own. Star was mine. I smiled again. The fireflies had given him to me.



Jenni L. Walsh's passion lies in transporting readers to another world, be it in historical or contemporary settings. She is a proud graduate of Villanova University, and lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with her husband, daughter, son, and various pets. Jenni writes nonfiction and historical fiction for middle-grade readers and adults, all focused on powerful women. To learn more about Jenni and her books, please visit jennilwalsh.com.



The author will be virtually visiting schools in the fall of 2021. For more information and to schedule a visit for your school, please reach out to Jenni directly at jenni@jennilwalsh.com.