

## Victory or Death

Tick, tick, tick. The driving sleet batters William's young, unprotected face. He hears the booming voice of Commander Knox as he struggles through the most miserable, piercing cold he has ever experienced. His wiry 6'2" frame bends as he leans down to readjust the blood soaked burlap strips that he now wears as shoes on the ice covered ground. Knox's reading of Thomas Paine's inspirational words describes this momentous night perfectly; "THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." William is no "sunshine patriot". He stands it now; in biting cold that brings back the aching in his hand from the surgery that allowed him to be a part of this war for freedom. He remembers long ago how Henry Cobb had said they were fighting this war not for one city, one colony, or even one nation, but to show the world the strength of a united people. Although so many of William's friends and fellow patriots have died in the first year and a half of this bloody conflict, Henry Cobb's idea is still very much alive in the hearts and minds of all the soldiers surrounding William at the Delaware River that night.

William watches boat after boat of soldiers traverse the ice choked river in preparation for a surprise attack on the Hessians staying in Trenton. The wind whips up and he pulls his blanket cape tighter around his gaunt shoulders in a vain effort to block the frigid air. William grips the musket that Abe had wanted so desperately and counted so dear. A vibrant flashback instantly pops into William's mind. He remembers as Abe had told him all the things improved about this musket from its original state, and posed a brazen challenge to a cherished friend. William found himself 14 again, back in that sunny clearing watching as Abe nestled down into a comfortable position and steadied his breathing; hoping to use his prized musket to strike a distant rock three times to Will's one. William nearly laughs at the

thought of Abe's despondent face after sorely losing his own challenge. He cannot believe that it had been nearly four years, and remembrance of times like these never fails to stir an icy, choking emotion inside William. He cannot think on his childhood without Abe playing the leading role, instigating so many young and reckless adventures that landed them in loads of trouble. They had spent their youthful years raising hell together, constantly the first suspects when mischief was discovered, usually for good reason. Slowly and carefully, William admires the stained walnut stock and the exact angle of the steel that made this musket so much more reliable and sturdy than the standard issue Brown Bess. Every time he shot this gun he would think of Abe, and all the other brotherly companions that had, and will die for the cause of liberty. Each and every one of them fought for the same noble cause; to break free from the chains of English subjugation. William sees lines of soldiers disappearing into the fog on the other side of the river as he shuffles down the steep, frozen bank and waits to board the boats.

As the oars dip silently into the glacial waters of the Delaware, William thinks about Jenny. He remembers her distraught tears and shrieks when he told her the news of Abe's death; her younger brother and Will's inseparable companion. How he had cried right alongside her and they did their best to get through it together. William thinks of her beautiful smile when she saw that his hand was free and usable again, and her trying to stop him from going off to war. His heart broke at the thought of adding to her grief and misery but he knew what he had to do, and could not be swayed from his track. He remembers the misery of saying goodbye and walking off, musket in hand, to what was very possibly an excruciating death. His only motivation was to proudly serve this new and struggling nation of theirs. William shivers as the freezing rain and sleet hit his tender face, and at that moment, he vows to tell Jenny his feelings for her, and never let a moment together slip by uncherished. If he survives this war, he will ask Jennifer Turner to marry him.

William snaps out of his own dreamy world as a distant voice pleads to him quietly. “Will! Will! William! Are you okay man?” This voice belongs to Thomas Mather, a young boy of only 15. His once striking blond hair is now dirty and unwashed, with bits of ice hardening it into ratty clumps. His bright blue eyes glow with fear of the impending battle. Despite his young age, he, like every man in the boats that night, grasps the immense gravity of the situation. Even so, it was Christmas Eve, and he intends to make the best of it in case it proved his last. “Will say something!”

William replies puzzlingly “Yeah I was just thinking about something...are *you* alright?”

Thomas quickly speaks up “Yeah I’m okay, just a little scared. It’s just- your eyes looked so glassy and distant, I- I didn’t know what to think.”

“It was- nothing, don’t worry about it.” William chokes back.

Thomas’s teeth chatter in the cold as he carries on “Okay, well I was thinking, It- It’s Christmas Eve, and I have a gift for you. It’s a wooden eagle. I carved it myself, and I want you to have it. It will watch over you and keep you safe” From the first day Thomas entered the regiment, he and William had grown closer and closer. Thomas had sought out an older friend, and found a perfect match in William. Will had swept Thomas under his wing, and taught the boy everything he knew about surviving this venomous conflict. Thomas looks up into the compassionate eyes of his new older brother, takes a deep breath, and adds “Also, if I do- don’t make it, will you please get this note to my family?”

William chokes up at the incredible charity and courage of this frightened young boy, and knows the right words do not exist to express the emotions he feels. So he simply accepts the gift, and wraps his long, open arms around the smaller boy and hugs him as a brother. After a mere 6 months, both young men are firmly linked together in a common aspiration of freedom. As they sit there locked in each other’s arms, they both pray the same

prayer; to escape the cruelty of this war alive, in desperate hopes of returning to happier times wrapped in the cozy, loving embraces of their family.

William stretches his aching hand over his musket as he marched along the last few miles of the icy road to Trenton. Even this treacherous march is a welcome escape to watching hundreds of starving, dedicated patriots shiver as the piercing wind cut through their meager, war torn clothing. As William marches he remembers that day long ago when Doctor O'Leary had said his hand might be good and free once again. It seems like a lifetime ago that he stood on the Lexington Green and felt undaunted by either the surgeon's knife or Abe's death. How on that day nothing could hurt him; he was invulnerable to everything, including the shame of his injured hand. Before that day, William was so ashamed of his hand that he never showed it to anyone, not even a doctor willing to help. As the cutting storm goes right through William's clothes, he remembers with great anguish the Battle of Bunker Hill. How he and other patriots had repelled the British charges twice, inflicting great casualties on the enemy without suffering many of their own. William thinks of how O'Leary had valiantly stayed behind for the third British charge, and was struck in the head with an enemy musket ball, courageously surrendering his own life in the hope that someday his beloved and fledgling nation would be allowed to prosper. This vivid last image of Doctor O'Leary will remain in William's mind forever.

Disconcerted by this graphic remembrance, William's raw feet stumble and he falls to the bitter cold ground. As he staggers to his feet, he begins to mentally prepare for the coming battle. He thanks God for the fog that might just mask their movements and allow the surprise attack of these exhausted, ragtag troops to succeed beyond all odds. For if the Hessians are deployed and ready for battle, William and the rest of General Washington's troops will face certain annihilation. The General had rightly selected the pass code for the

night to be “Victory or Death”. For with the success or death of these troops also rested the success or death of a revolution. They could not fail.