

River of Ice

Hunched over to massage his frostbit toes with near-frozen fingers, the soldier peered from under his snow-encrusted tricorn, scanning nearby for unclaimed blankets or clothing. Anything extra would do to keep the Pennsylvania cold and snow from seeping into his bones. He'd used his laces to fasten the loose soles to his boots, but the soles still flapped, inviting in ice and pebbles.

The flickering fire spit and sizzled, as dry firewood was hard to come by. *A low fire is a good thing*, he decided, *so the British across the river won't spot us*. Sitting on a duffel close to the chow wagon away from the blowing snow, he wrinkled his nose at the smell of the smoldering wet wood—and the stink of his own damp wool clothing.

Spotting a tangle of blanket tucked under the wagon, the soldier gave it a kick.

“G’wan, le’ me alone,” the pile groaned. “I ain’t bothern no one. Lemme sleep.”

“Well, well, it talks,” said the soldier, grabbing his musket. “Who the blazes are you?”

“Who’s askin’?”

“Sergeant Lucas Morgan, serving Gen’ral George Washington, Commander of the Continental Army. An’ you?”

“Al...Silas Owens, sir. Don’ shoot. I left home near Trenton to enlist with the Patriots. Don’ send me back. I come to do my part. Ma’s home takin’ care of my little sis an’ the farm.”

The boy unraveled himself from the dirty blankets, stood up smartly, and gave the sergeant a crisp salute.

“How’d you get here, son?” Sergeant Morgan relaxed his weapon.

“I’ve a hidden place close to home where the river’s froze, so I snuck to this side in the dark,” Silas said. “Hear’d the Patriots got chased outta New Jersey. Got somepin to eat?”

“I’ll find you some hardtack an’ jerky,” said Sergeant Morgan. “I must report you so the captain knows we have a young ‘un in camp.”

“Tell ‘im I wanna spy. I know my way o’er the river an’ back. Played there all my life.”

“All your life?”

“Well, eleven years, sir. I can do it. I been near their camp. The British don’t pay no mind. I’m jus’ a alone kid wantin’ food. They took some a our chickens, but Ma threw the young layin’ hens under the floorboards in our house. They was so scairt, an’ so was Sis an’ me, we dint make a sound. Where are we?”

“Why should I say? How do I know you’re not spyin’ for the British? You probly beg for food across the Delaware jus’ like here.”

“My pa, he’s kilt, but ‘e fought fer the Patriots. ‘No King George,’ ‘e said, ‘rulin’ across the ocean. This is our country.’ Please lemme help.” Silas looked up, the tragedy of his dead pa clear in his glistening eyes. He straightened his tricorn and pulled his buttonless coat across his thin chest.

“Stay put. I’ll be back with a bit of food an’ word from the captain. So’s you know, we’re at McKonkey’s Ferry.”

Teeth chattering, Silas wrapped himself up in the raggedy blanket and slipped back under the wagon. He watched a few boots stumble past and listened to the snoring of the restless men in the camp. He shivered as he lay curled up on the frozen, wagon wheel-rutted ground.

“Silas! Here’s hardtack, beans an’ a jug of water. We’ll use you. Word’s been sent to Gen’ral Washington. Your assignment’ll come down soon.”

Silas savored one bean at a time and the hardtack crumb by crumb. Sighing, he sipped the water, trying not to make a sour face at the brackish taste. “Thank you, Sergeant Morgan. May the good Lord bless you fer this food. My pa in heaven thanks you, too.”

Another Patriot sidled over to Sergeant Morgan. “Silas, this is Captain Hughes. He wants to talk.”

“Yessir! I’m ready, Captain sir.”

“Okay, Silas. Today is December 21st. We have word that British General Howe stayed in New York but left hundreds of Hessian troops in New Jersey right across the river,” explained the captain. “Are you brave enough to cross the river again to get information ‘bout British tactics?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I hunted with my pa. I’m quick an’ quiet as a mouse. Got in here, dint I? I’ll make like I’m a orphan, tryin’ to find my brother. I kin do it.”

“Okay, young man,” said Hughes. “Do you know what the British do when they capture a spy?”

“Umm, I heard th-th-they beat ‘em, torture ‘em, an’ lynch ‘em.”

“You willing to risk that?”

“Yessir, but they won’t get me. Pa said this war is fer our independence. I wanna be part of the Culper Spy Ring,” Silas whispered, looking around to make sure only the sergeant and captain heard him. “Some say they spy all ‘round New York an’ New Jersey.”

“Shh, never say that name aloud!” cautioned Captain Hughes. “You’re not even supposed to know about them.”

“Word travels,” said Silas. “I can be a Culper an’ do you proud.”

“Never mention the name again, do y’hear? Now sit down an’ listen,” ordered Hughes.

“Only General Washington, Sergeant Morgan, an’ me know about you, got it?”

“Yes, got it,” said Silas, saucer brown eyes looking straight at the captain. “Sorry.”

“You stay here tonight an’ most of tomorrow. Get rest, stay out of sight. We’ll make sure you have some eats. You leave tomorrow at dark. We’ll let the night watch know so he don’t shoot you.”

“Got a secret password?”

“Yes. It’s ‘Common sense,’” said Hughes. “Can you remember that?”

“Hey, that’s Thomas Paine. I hear’d a him,” said Silas. “He’s the one wrote ‘bout summer soldiers an’ sunshine patriots, right? Dang! Down with the king!”

“Atta boy!” said Hughes and Morgan.

“Now, when you get across the river, sneak into the Hessian camp. Crawl, cry, beg. Give ‘em your orphan bit, whatever you have to do. Stick to your story,” said Hughes. “Huddle around the campfires. Listen to the men talk. Do not ask questions. Lie down, pretend to sleep, but stay awake an’ alert for awhile.”

“I’ll be plenty tired walkin’ the icy river at night,” said Silas. “What if I fall asleep?”

“Sleep when the camp quiets down,” said Hughes. “We need you to find out General Howe’s plans. See if the British and Hessian troops will overwinter where they are. Are they planning a secret attack? Will they steal across the river to surprise our troops? Where will they celebrate Christmas?”

“Okay, so I wait a day an’ sneak over at dark tomorrow? I stay with the Hessian troops all day. If I have good information, I come back here in the dark of the 23rd. I gotta sneak outta

their camp so's the night watch don' know. Cross the river afore daylight an' hightail it back here an' say 'Common sense' to the guard. Right?" asked Silas.

"Smart young man," said Morgan as Hughes nodded in agreement.

Silas slept fitfully the rest of the night, jerking awake to the cold and the men cursing and arguing. Sergeant Morgan brought Silas a boiled egg, hardtack, and some thick, black coffee. *Bettern nothing*, thought Silas, as he choked down the bitter brew. He napped sporadically during the day and watched the snow blow into drifts. Later he and the sergeant reviewed his assignment.

As the regiment ate their meager supper, Silas chewed some jerky, thinking about what he would do and say the next day. Sergeant Morgan walked Silas to the edge of the encampment, whispered "Common sense" to the night guard, and gave Silas a good luck shoulder squeeze.

"God speed. Not a word about where or who we are," Morgan reminded Silas. *At least the boy don't know we have almost 6000 troops bivouacked here.*

Silas trudged through the soft new snow, not making a sound except for the occasional boot crunch. *Two days to Christmas, huh?* He thought about his ma and sister at home, exactly the direction he was taking now. *Mebbe I go straight home an' not be scairt about gettin' hanged. No, I can't, I promised the captain an' the sergeant I'd get information.*

The snowfall was lighter now, and he could make out the waxing moon through the big flakes. *It's gonna to be full in two more days, an' the British will see me against the bright snow. Gotta get this done.*

Silas crouched low in the ghost-like shadows of the naked catalpa trees at the river's edge, testing the ice with a heavy stick. *Still solid an' coldern a night ago when I crossed this way. Oh Lord, please help me through.* He stepped full onto the frozen river and tread lightly,

steadying himself with the stick. Though the river was eerily quiet, he could see campfires on the other side. When he reached the far shore, he snuck around and approached the camp from the north.

“Halt! Who goes dere?” The challenge stopped Silas in his tracks. *Oh, I’m dead!*

“I’m cold,” he snuffled. “Tryin’ to find my brother. My ma an’ pa got kilt an’ he’s the only one I got left. Please kin you help me?”

“Who’re you?”

“Do y’ know my brother J-J-Johnny Carothers? He’s fightin’ fer the k-k-king. I’m Tad.” Silas coughed and sniffled, begging “Please.”

“Kom here slow wit yer hands high. Den we see.”

“Please, sir, couldja spare me some jerky er water? I been walkin’ all night. Mebbe I could jus’ bed down by the fire? Don’ even know where I am.”

“No need you know vere you are,” said the guard, yanking Silas close to his face. “I take you to Colonel Von Donop. Kom wit me.”

Still coughing and with tears frozen on his red cheeks, Silas limped along as the guard dragged him by his scarf toward the colonel’s tent.

“Git over dere, you little clod,” said the guard, sticking a bayonet into the back of Silas’s shabby coat. “Don’ move or I shtick it right trew you.”

Silas’s eyes fluttered for a moment before he collapsed onto the hard ground. Half-conscious, he could hear muffled voices and felt himself being roughly lifted off the ground. He sensed the warmth of a fire. Someone tried to pour brandy through his lips. He choked and sputtered and opened his eyes.

“Anyone know m-m-my b-b-brother Johnny Carothers?” he croaked between coughs. “I been lookin’ fer days.”

“Nein, no one ever hear of ‘im,” said the ruffian who held a knife to Silas’s throat.

“Oh. I jus’ thought...” Silas stopped and tried to sit up. “Kin I stay a little bit? Please, I’m so tired.”

“Shtay right dere an’ don’ move. You know vat ve do wit people kom into our camp? Ve don’ let dem out alive.”

“I don’ mean no harm, sir. Jus’ want my brother.” Silas closed his eyes, laid his head down, and soon breathed the sounds of a deep sleeper. He listened to the whiskey-talk of the soldiers grousing about the food, the cold, the Patriots, their next move. Before long, fatigue and sleep overtook him.

Next morning, Silas lay there with his eyes still closed while he took in the din of the awakening camp. When he heard nearby officers talking, he silently repeated everything ten times so he wouldn’t forget. *Time to wake up an’ move ‘round a little*, he decided. *Make friends with the cook an’ the quartermaster—they allus know ahead what’s goin’ on.*

Silas yawned, sat up, and rubbed his eyes. The soldiers looked at him with little curiosity, as if a stranger in their midst were an everyday occurrence. One threw him a piece of jerky, another some hardtack.

Would they hang a kid? They seem friendly enough. Gotta get back today afore the full moon.

“Where’s the necessary,” Silas asked no one in particular. *I need them to see me walkin’ around an’ ignore me.*

A Hessian soldier pointed him north toward the perimeter—away from the troops and the chow wagon. *Yeah. Same direction I need to take. Oh Lordy, broad daylight.* Silas limped toward the crude privy and sized up the surrounding area. Snow. Woods. A path. Boot prints all around. The guard.

He hobbled back to the mess to befriend the cook.

“Here, kom get dese biscuits, Junge. We got plenty a dem. We gonna be here awhile—da whole dern vinter,” said the cook. “Take dis salt meat, und go find zome wasser.”

“I’m mighty grateful, danke,” said Silas, creeping away. When he saw the guard dozing, he kept going, quietly, quickly.

Silas ran through the snow, zigzagging, and then running in the opposite direction. He dragged a branch, walking backwards to confuse the soldiers if they decided to follow him. The snow was falling heavier now. Silas raced to the riverbank and in several places, backtracked on the ice, laid down different prints, and then headed across the frozen Delaware to meet the captain and the sergeant. *Mebbe the snow will cover my footprints?* No one followed. No one cared about the little orphan boy who couldn’t find his brother.

Bending over and hardly able to catch his breath, Silas stopped for fear his lungs would burst. *What’s the dang password? Thomas Paine? No. Summer soldier? No. Independence? No. Oh, I know—Common sense.* He eased up near the watch and shouted out “Common sense.”

“Who goes there?”

“It’s me, Silas. D-D-Don’t shoot!”

“That’s not the password. Hold up!”

“Please, please, send a message to Captain Hughes an’ Sergeant Morgan that Silas is here. I got real importan’ information fer Gen’ral Washington. Hurry!”

“Don’t move, sonny.”

The captain and the sergeant dashed over. “Victory or death,” Hughes said for Silas. “Let ‘im pass.”

“I made it, Captain!” whispered Silas, saluting. “Please tell Gen’ral Washington the British troops are stayin’ the winter in New Jersey. Christmas, too. About fourteen hundred Hessians are at Trenton garrison an’ eight thousand soldiers dug in at Princeton an’ New Brunswick. I hear’d a officer say that mebbe Howe would try crossin’ the river an’ attackin’ this way but decided agin it. I had to come back early. They threatened to throw me into their stockade. Almos’ got bayoneted an’ my throat slit. Lucky, the guard was rot-gut stewed and sleepin’.”

“Now General Washington can finalize his plans,” said Captain Hughes. “You’re a true Culper. Stay with Sergeant Morgan. Get some chow an’ sleep.”

Silas did sleep, through the 24th into Christmas Day. He awoke to a garrison filled with frenzied activity yet quiet, the troops packing food stores, weapons and ammunition. He saw horses and big guns, wagons, flags, and boats of all sizes.

“Good work, young fella.” said Sergeant Morgan, thumping the kid on the back. “We’re crossin’ tonight, Silas.”

“My best Christmas ever!” Silas grinned and took off his tricorn. He untied the leather thong on his plaited queue, shaking free long chestnut curls. “Jus’ so’s you know, my name’s Alice.”