

# WIND OF THE SPIRIT

The American Patriot Series

Book 3

By

J. M. Hochstetler

Copyright © 2007 by J. M. Hochstetler

## Chapter 1

The sailboat heeled sharply to starboard, bucking against the intruding tide and contrary winds at the mouth of the Hudson River. As soon as it entered New York's Upper Bay, it tacked to hug the lee of the dark New Jersey shoreline where several small islands curtained it from the sleeping British men-of-war that swung lazily on their anchor cables off Staten Island.

Above Elizabeth Howard's head, the July wind boomed in the bellying sail of the small vessel, incongruously dubbed *Implacable*. Fluttering Elizabeth's loose farmer's smock, it tugged at the broad brim of her battered hat and teased the exposed strands of the brown wig that concealed her own deep auburn curls.

Instinctively she shifted her weight with the deck's rise and fall to maintain her balance, in the same movement clamped her hand over her hat's crown to keep it from flying off her head. After a moment, she glanced uneasily back at the black silhouette of the muscular Negro youth who held the tiller steady.

From what she could make out of his countenance in the fitful light that reflected up from the waves, he appeared unperturbed. Reassured, she swung back to probe the indistinct, wooded shoreline of Staten Island drawing rapidly closer off the port bow. To their good fortune, the waning quarter moon had not yet risen, and only faint starlight danced across the fast-running, choppy sea.

"You're certain this stretch of the island is safe, Pete?" she hissed, keeping her voice to an urgent whisper.

"The nearest farm is more'n a mile that way," he assured her in an undertone, gesturing off to the west. "Ever' time I come before, this cove been deserted. I scouted it extra careful."

Nodding, she took a steadying breath, consciously releasing the tension that clamped her stomach in a knot. "Then let's pray no one's developed the urge to wander tonight."

With practiced skill, Pete negotiated the narrow Kills between the looming bulk of the large island and Bergen Point jutting out from the New Jersey bluffs. After reefing the sail to slow her speed, he brought the nimble craft into the breakers close to shore.

Elizabeth wasted no time clambering out into the seething surf. “Be back an hour before daybreak. If I’m not waiting for you...” Her voice trailed off.

“I’ll do what I can to find you,” Pete responded, his voice low and grim.

With a grunt, she shoved the sailboat back into deeper water. Pete’s only response was to touch his hand to his hat brim, then he feathered the *Implacable* into the current and once more hoisted the graceful sail to the top of the mast.

Elizabeth waited only a moment to watch the boat tack out of reach before turning to wade through the hissing waves to the narrow strip of beach. When she turned again, the vessel’s sail had already diminished to a barely discernible, paler triangle against the gloom that wrapped the New Jersey shore. Though by habit he spoke little, she knew that Pete, the younger son of Isaiah Moghrab, the sergeant of a black platoon in her uncle’s regiment of Continentals, would keep his word.

Her heart pounding, she melted into the dense underbrush that cloaked the low, sandy hills above the beach, found a concealed vantage that allowed her to observe her surroundings unseen. For some moments she waited, motionless, watching and listening intently. No unexpected sounds disturbed the sibilance of waves gurgling across the shingle, the sigh of wind in the full-leaved treetops, and the creak and groan of branches rubbing against one another.

At length satisfied there was no one in the vicinity, she transferred her attention to her damp attire. Although the lower edge of her breeches had been thoroughly drenched by the waves, thankfully her tight fitting, knee-length boots had spared her feet and most of her lower legs. More than two miles lay between her and the British camp, she estimated, a less than pleasant walk with brine-soaked shoes and wet feet. At least, dressed as one of the local farmers, she should attract little attention in the unlikely event she encountered another wayfarer abroad at this late hour.

Frowning, she struggled to focus her thoughts on her mission. Her safety and the fortunes of the badly outnumbered Continental Army, whose lines stretched all the way from New Jersey to Long Island, depended on her using both caution and daring to secure the intelligence General George Washington needed if he was to counter an attack by British General William Howe’s overwhelming invasion force. But her thoughts stubbornly kept drifting to more personal concerns.

It was past ten o’clock, Sunday, July 7, 1776. It had been a year since Washington had denied permission for her and Brigadier General Jonathan Carleton to wed. A year since the American commander had sent Elizabeth back into the besieged city of Boston to continue spying on the British, and Carleton far to the west to negotiate with the Indian tribes to support the colonists in their rebellion against the British king.

A year since Carleton had disappeared into the wilderness.

In that time, all she and Carleton's aide, Colonel Charles Andrews, had been able to learn was that he had been captured by the Seneca and enslaved, a fate that, she had been told, was worse than death. In spite of every effort, they had not been able to find him or even to learn if he was still alive.

At least neither had the British. For they sought Carleton as well—on charges of treason. And the reward offered for his arrest was calculated to tempt even a loyal Son of Liberty to betray the man who, as the spy Patriot, had transmitted crucial military intelligence to the rebels in Boston while serving as British General Thomas Gage's aide-de-camp.

Thinking of Carleton now, Elizabeth blinked back stinging tears. Even her deepening relationship with Pieter Vander Groot, a young, Dutch doctor in whose surgery she assisted several days a week, had not been able to erase her longing for the shelter of Carleton's arms nor the love that refused to relinquish its claim on her heart. In truth, her growing attraction to this handsome, gentle colleague had only intensified her anguish and confusion.

Lifting her face to the warm sea breeze, she stared toward the western horizon, beyond which stretched the vast forests into which Carleton had vanished. Despair flooded over her, as it had that afternoon on the terrace at Montcoeur, the temporary home she shared with her aunt Tess Howard in New York City.

Every fiber cried out to go in search of him, to track him down if it took the rest of her life. But sober reflection assured her that such a course would only cause worry and hardship to those she left behind, and in the end would be destined to fail. For now, all she could do was to keep on blindly trusting that, though she could not understand what good could ever come of hers and Carleton's suffering, the Almighty had a hidden purpose even in this painful season.

At last, with a lingering sigh, she dashed away her tears and turned reluctantly toward the island's interior and the duty that called her.

\*\*\*

*"Hsst! Quiet, or I'll slit yer throat!"*

Pulsating purple spots danced in front of Elizabeth's eyes as her shadowy captor's fingers dug deeper into her neck. Struggling against his relentless hold, she fought to suck air into her burning lungs.

*"Let go! Didn't mean ... no harm."* The words emerged in a hoarse croak.

Warily the man loosened his grip. When her knees buckled, his arm kept her from collapsing to the ground. She could feel him shaking as much as she was.

*"Not a sound now!"* he hissed, gesturing toward the rows of tents and campfires short yards away

on the other side of the densely overgrown sandbank where they crouched. “If we be discovered, I swear ye’ll be dead afore they get to me!”

She nodded, helpless, the breath wheezing in her lungs. He jerked her roughly backward, dragging her to the narrow lane down which she had crept with what she had thought exceptional stealth ten minutes earlier.

It was obvious he knew every foot of the vicinity. No crackle of fallen branches or dry leaves betrayed their presence to the camp that sprawled across a broad meadow behind them.

From the beach she had easily found her way to the British encampment between Castle Town and the island’s eastern shore, where the Narrows gave passage from the Lower to the Upper Bay. Only to be promptly captured, she reflected in dismay, icy fear trickling through her veins.

Through the fog that still muffled her head, she made out the crunch of footsteps approaching down the lane to the left. Clamping his hand over her mouth, the man swung her back under the cover of a thicket and shoved her to the earth.

For tense minutes she cowered beside him. Her pulse thundered in her ears, and she fought to still the rattle of her breath. Out of the darkness loomed a burly figure. The glimmering rays of the rising moon slanted across his coat, lighting it to a dull crimson, and shimmered on the sharp point of his bayonet.

The sentry’s footsteps slowed, stopped. For what seemed an eternity he hesitated at the edge of the lane not twenty paces away, his eyes searching the underbrush that concealed them. Her nameless captor’s fingernails clawed into her cheeks, and his rough palm ground her lips against her teeth until she tasted blood.

When she was certain she could not suppress a whimper any longer, the sentry’s taut form relaxed, and he moved on. The sound of his footfalls receded out of her hearing.

At last her captor dropped his hand from her face. She rocked back onto her heels and let out a shuddering breath.

Gradually the pace of her heart steadied. She became aware that her companion’s breath was coming in short, sharp pants and that a tremor shook his limbs. After a short interval, he dragged her unceremoniously to her feet.

Too weak to resist, she stumbled in the direction he prodded her. A short distance farther along, the undergrowth thinned out into a narrow clearing where the moon’s quarter crescent cast misty bars of light and shadow through the trees.

Grabbing her by the shoulders, her captor spun her around and peered into her face. “Why ... ye ain’t a soldier! Yer no mor’n a boy—and a spy to boot, I’ll wager.”

She gingerly rubbed her throat where his fingers had bruised the flesh. “The pot would appear to

be calling the kettle black,” she croaked when she was able to resurrect her voice.

Even in the moonlight she could see the flush that heated his face. “What I be doin’ here ain’t none o’ yer business,” he growled. “Who be ye?”

She glared at him. He had come very close to strangling her, but in his favor, he had clearly believed her to be a British sentry and feared capture.

Who was he spying for? Dared she trust him? Unfortunately, it appeared she had no choice. After a brief hesitation, she said, “I’m a son of liberty.”

He instantly broke into a grin and pounded her on the back. “Then ye be right lucky I stumbled onto ye ’stead o’ one o’ the local turncoats. Ye’ll forgive my discourteous introduction. I took ye for one o’ the king’s men.”

“So I gathered. You all but strangled me.”

His expression became contrite. “Ye’ll understand my caution with near ten thousand o’ Howe’s troops just over the way, and the island riddled with Tories. They welcomed these cursed bloody backs like they was long lost brothers. Where ye come from?”

“New York.”

Eagerness lit his face. “Ye’ll be able to get a message through to Washington?”

When she allowed the possibility, he grasped her by the arm. “Then follow me, my friend. My wife and I have intelligence the General can make good use of.”

He quickly led her to where his horse was tethered. Indicating that she was to ride, he helped her to mount, then took the reins and led the animal at right angles away from the bay, putting ever greater distance between them and the British encampment.

By degrees, the reassuring rhythm of her mount’s movements caused the knot in Elizabeth’s stomach to relax, and she began to look around her. The thick, fragrant forest of fir trees interspersed with wild nut and fruit trees and flowering vines soon gave way to cleared land. Following an overgrown path that meandered around and over the gently undulating landscape of wooded hills and valleys, her guide gave a wide berth to several scattered villages and farms. Elizabeth was pleased to see that they moved back in the direction of the beach from which she had come, thus shortening the distance she would have to go to meet the *Implacable*’s return.

An hour’s walk brought them to a cluster of buildings nestled at the bottom of a secluded valley intersected by a sparkling stream that meandered through a dense woodland. Native stone formed the thick walls of the square, two-story farmhouse, the barn and outbuildings, and the stone wall that enclosed them. The misty, silver light of the quarter moon, now pouring down from well above the treetops, gave the compound somewhat the illusion of a fortress.

Despite the late hour, a shaded lamp glowed in a downstairs window. As soon as they passed through the gate into the farmyard, a woman threw open the side door and stepped outside, her shawl drawn over her head, the tension in her stout frame evident even at a distance.

Elizabeth's companion helped her to dismount, then led the horse into the barn. After a moment, he returned to usher her inside the house. He carefully barred the door behind them, before introducing himself and his wife as Thomas and Marie Mersereau.

"It'll be safer if you don't know my real identity," Elizabeth cautioned them, lowering her voice to a deeper timbre. "Call me Joseph."

When Mersereau had explained the circumstances of their meeting, his wife welcomed Elizabeth to their home with heartfelt relief and delight. She seated them at a rustic trestle table whose broad board was worn to the smoothness of marble. Bustling around the low-ceilinged kitchen, in short order she laid before them platters of cold roast beef, thick slices of bread and yellow cheese, and mugs of foaming cider, refreshingly cool from the cellar.

Speaking rapidly and interrupting each other in their exuberance, the Mersereaus explained that in the three days since the British landing, they had already developed a thriving business supplying the troops with fresh provisions from theirs and the neighboring farms, while gathering every scrap of information that came their way. That night, in fact, Mersereau had been trying to get an accurate count of Howe's force in hopes of finding a way to transmit the information to Washington.

"We been prayin' every day for a contact on Manhattan," Mrs. Mersereau confided.

Still ravenous, Elizabeth gratefully accepted a second generous helping of beef and bread from her rotund hostess. "And tonight the Lord answered your prayers," she noted between bites, waving her sandwich for emphasis, "though had just a tad more pressure been exerted on my throat, the Almighty's purposes would—unhappily—have been thwarted."

Again Mersereau offered profuse apologies, a tide of mottled red climbing from his neck to his brow.

"Ah, my Tom's all bluster and blow." Her merry blue eyes twinkling, Mrs. Mersereau flapped her apron to shoo away the fly that droned around the platter of beef. "Why, he'd never hurt so much as a fly."

"I wouldn't vouch for that." Laughing at Mersereau's pained expression, Elizabeth decided to pardon the chagrined farmer.

The Mersereaus needed no urging to tell her all they had learned. According to gossip, Howe was spending most of his time aboard his ship, *Greyhound*, entertaining his mistress, Betsey Loring, the wife of his brutish commissary of prisoners. Engrossed in endless card parties, they whiled away the time waiting for the arrival of the general's elder brother, Admiral Richard Lord Howe, with 150 more ships.

With the admiral would also come additional soldiers, including the hated German mercenaries called Hessians, to bolster the general's force, which already decisively outnumbered Washington's army. By now the younger Howe's troops had set up a tidy camp and were occupied in raising earthworks and building what appeared to be a flotilla of boats—for use in transporting an invasion force to either Manhattan, the New Jersey shore, Long Island, or all three at once, Mersereau supposed.

The Mersereaus had also learned from a Tory neighbor, whose friendship they diligently cultivated, that from aboard the ship *Duchess of Gordon*, New York's royal governor, William Tyron, had sent couriers throughout the region to plot a Tory uprising. While General Howe attacked the American front, armed loyalist units were to attack the rear, blow up the Continental Army's powder magazines, seize their artillery, and block their escape from Manhattan. Washington and a number of his top officers were either to be kidnapped or assassinated.

Amazed, Elizabeth soaked up the wealth of information the Mersereaus had gleaned. Finishing a last bite of cheese, she washed it down with an energizing swallow of cider.

"Happily, their plans for sabotage were discovered," she mumbled, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "They went so far as to infiltrate even General Washington's Life Guard. Mayor Matthews and more than twenty of the conspirators were arrested, and two weeks ago one of them, Thomas Hickey, was hanged."

"Thank the good Lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersereau. "We could get no news from the outside and had no way o' alertin' anyone. We been prayin' night and day ever since we learned o' their schemes."

"Your prayers are having a good effect," Elizabeth responded with a smile. "Please don't stop. We need all the aid from on high that Providence is willing to lend us."

"As long as ye can get to us regularly," Mersereau put in, "we'll do our part to discover anything that may be helpful."

"With so many British ships patrolling the waters, getting here is not an easy task," Elizabeth warned them. "But I will come as often as possible. Keep your eyes and ears open, and confide in no one—not even in your children."

"Ah, both our girls is grown and gone," Mersereau assured her.

Mrs. Mersereau's eyes took on a far-away look. "Our boy Tommy, he's been gone these eight years now. Always wanted to go to sea, and soon's he was old enough, he took off on a merchantman." Her voice broke. "In all these years we heard nothin' o' him nor the ship."

Mersereau reached to take her hand. "Time's come we got to stop hoping," he pleaded. "We finally got to accept he ain't never comin' back, Mama. Why, for all we know, he's in heaven." Mrs. Mersereau glanced over at him, her eyes brimming tears. "I won't never stop hopin' for my



boy to come home, Tom. Not till my dyin' day."

Clenching her hands involuntarily, Elizabeth looked from one anguished face to the other. *Eight years* rang in her ears.

If the boy was not dead, it was likely he had been impressed into the British navy, a fate that was only a minor improvement over shipwreck. Or—depending on the captain one ended up with—not.

The passage of eight years had not diminished the couple's grief at loss of their son. And she had to wonder whether the bitter, unyielding ache that gnawed at her own breast would ever fade enough to become endurable.

\*\*\*

"We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Standing stiffly in front of the long lines of his comrades, the soldier lowered the document from which he had been reading.

As he watched Washington ride forward on his long-legged white horse, Dr. Pieter Vander Groot shook his head, the breeze ruffling his blond hair. His clear blue eyes reflected deep apprehension.

"Well, there's no turning back now. If the Continentals fail to win this conflict on the field of battle, these colonies will be ground under the heel of George the Third's boot, and all of us will suffer grievously."

Elizabeth met his sober gaze with a tentative one. Three weeks earlier he had tenderly confided how dear she had become to him. Although she had managed to forestall a more serious declaration, the incident left her emotions in a tangle that seemed to grow more knotted with each passing day.

To his credit, the young doctor had done everything possible to resume the easy companionship that had quickly developed between them after she and Tess moved to New York. And Elizabeth

was determined to pretend the undercurrents that now ebbed and flowed between them did not exist.

Determination was easier than practice, she was learning. The two of them were inescapably thrust together every few days during regular social visits and attendance at worship with him and his family at the New Dutch Church.

Their professional association further complicated their relationship. Trained as a surgeon by her father, Elizabeth assisted Vander Groot in his medical practice several days each week. And as they worked side by side to care for their patients, her respect and admiration for him steadily deepened.

At the same time the nagging ache for Carleton that tormented her thoughts day and night continually tore apart every resolution to lay aside what was past and open her heart to another love. It felt as though her breast had also become a battlefield.

Now, seeing Vander Groot's eyes warm as he looked down at her, she hastily transferred her gaze to the motley lines of soldiers drawn up in ragged rows down the length of the Common across from where she and their companions stood in the crush of onlookers at the edge of Broad Way. It was a little past six o'clock, Tuesday evening, July 9. Astride his mount, Washington regarded his army with earnest intensity. His voice reached them across the triangular green, clearly audible in spite of the distance.

"I hope this important event will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer and soldier to act with fidelity and courage, knowing that now the peace and safety of his country depend, under God, solely on the success of our arms, and that he is now in the service of a State possessed of sufficient power to reward his merit and advance him to the highest honors of a free country."

A roar went up from the troops, echoed faintly by a minority of the assembled crowd. Here and there a hat flew skyward in jubilation.

As Washington and his staff rode from the field, a number of the troops fired their muskets into the air. Dismissed by their officers, they surged down the wide street toward Fort George, the decaying British fortification inside the Battery at Manhattan's extreme southern tip, shouting to one another in rough glee.

Mrs. Van Cortland, Dr. Vander Groot's elderly great aunt, leaned heavily on her cane, her wizened face quivering. "You mark my words, they're out after mischief. Someone's going to get hurt."

A head taller than the older woman's shrunken frame, Tess Howard placed her arm around Mrs. Van Cortland's bent shoulders. "It sounds as if their object is the king's statue on the Bowling Green. I'll wager George the Third is the only one in danger of losing his head—in absentia, of course."

Tess had been shopping at the docks when she had overheard rumors that the infamous

document declaring the colonies' independence from Britain was to be read to the Continental troops that evening. She had hurried to Vander Groot's surgery to alert him and Elizabeth. After collecting Vander Groot's great aunt, they had gone directly to the Common on the north end of the city, Elizabeth still clad in the plain, blue linen gown and long, white apron she wore in surgery.

Neither Vander Groot nor his great aunt appeared amused by Tess's humorous attempt to reassure them. "For all their vaunted courage, our brave Provincial Congress has fled in panic to White Plains," Mrs. Van Cortland pointed out acerbically as her nephew helped the women back into his chariot. "They evidently find the king's guns to be a more daunting adversary than his statue."

The horses were beginning to shy at the press of the milling crowd. Concern creasing his brow, Vander Groot directed his driver to steer the carriage into the clear a short distance down the street.

"The Continental Congress undoubtedly hopes to draw France into the conflict on their side. With the colonies declaring their intention to separate permanently from England, they open the door to alliances with other nations. And the French have a large score to settle for their defeat in the French and Indian War and the loss of their American territories."

Elizabeth hardly heard him. As the chariot rolled south along Broad Way, a wave of exhilaration swept over her. At the same time, she felt as though all of them together stepped off the edge of a very high precipice.

She did not have long to wonder what would happen next. At midday that Friday, the batteries along New York's Hudson River docks came to life in a sudden, roaring barrage. Startled by the thundering reverberation, she wasted no time donning masculine garb, then stealthily slipped away from the sprawling, Italianate mansion she and Tess leased along the steep bank of the Hudson just outside the city.

Hurrying south along Greenwich Road, she arrived at the nearest of the Continental Army's batteries in time to see a modest fleet consisting of three British tenders escorting the twenty-gun *Rose* and the forty-gun *Phoenix* up the Hudson as though to flaunt British power and remind the Continentals of their vulnerability. To her dismay, the only apparent damage the ships had sustained from the Continentals' furious cannonade was some torn rigging and a few holes in the sails of those closest to the near shore.

While she watched, the two men-of-war together unleashed a massive broadside. Solid shot traced fiery arcs overhead before plowing through the roofs and walls of several nearby houses, sending geysers of earth and missiles of splintered beams, shingles, bricks, and other debris flying through the air all around her. Involuntarily she ducked and crouched to the ground, eyes squeezed shut, shielding her head with her arms.

Before she could run to safety, the surrounding streets had become a seething tide of refugees. Gunpowder-laden clouds of smoke from the ships and the shore batteries burned her eyes and

throat, while the screams and cries of terrified women and children and the repeated roar of cannon deafened her ears. Tears pricking her eyes, she watched the panicked mob scurry by, struck by the realization that the inhabitants of that pleasant, bustling city—whose concerns until now had revolved around accumulating wealth while enjoying all the pleasures and comforts of their luxurious society—were destined to experience at first hand all the destruction and horror of war.

Elizabeth spent the afternoon wandering through the city, with sad thoughtfulness taking in the reactions of the fearful or defiant crowds that swirled around her. A little before sunset she made her way to the Battery, the ancient stone battlement that curved around the tip of Manhattan from the mouth of the East River to the Hudson. There she paused, her gaze drawn to a distant ship that was threading its way through the Narrows into the Upper Bay, its sails tinted golden by the lowering sun.

Skimming over the swells with delicate grace, it drew steadily nearer until at last it dropped anchor just off the northern tip of Staten Island. While she watched with apprehension, signal flags and the pipe of whistles transferred messages from one man-of-war to another. In short order, sailors began to flood on deck all across the bay, crying out in jubilation, while the closely crowded vessels fired repeated salutes, echoed by the British batteries on Staten Island.

A sudden tightness squeezed the breath from Elizabeth's lungs. Shading her eyes with her hand, she climbed onto the ledge of the Battery wall, squinting in the attempt to make out any recognizable detail. The newly arrived ship was too far away to be certain without a spyglass, but she had a sinking feeling that the commotion could only mean one thing.

Admiral Howe had finally arrived.

If she was right, then his fleet could not be far behind. And the suspense that had held the city in thrall for months was finally nearing its end.

## Chapter 2

“Wolfslayer seeks to stir up bad medicine against you, White Eagle. And the number of his followers grows like the spring corn.”

White Eagle briefly met Spotted Pony’s concerned gaze before returning to his moody contemplation of the dancers. Although his mouth tightened, he held his silence.

He did not need to glance at Red Fox on his other side to know that the older warrior’s expression was equally grim. The two brothers’ handsome countenances, graceful movements, and forceful personalities were so similar that, although Red Fox was a year older than White Eagle and Spotted Pony two years younger, the two brothers could have been twins.

As tall as White Eagle, they were equally lithe and muscular. Their dusky, coppery complexions, long black hair, and luminous, dark eyes made a startling contrast to his own sunburned bronze skin, flowing blond locks, and deep blue-grey eyes.

The Shawnee war chief stood with his companions in the shadows at one side of the town’s wide central clearing, directly across from the imposing, new council house. A short distance in front of them, a large party of men, their faces and bodies painted with intense slashes of color and clad in their finest ceremonial garb, moved in and out of the flickering light cast by the blazing pyre in the center of the broad space. With rhythmic steps, they circled to the pulsing throb of hand-held drums and the silvery, hissing, click-clack of the rattles bound to the dancers’ ankles and upper arms.

“He hates you all the more because you hold the favor of the tribe—and worse, of Moneto,” Spotted Pony observed after some moments, referring to the Shawnee’s Supreme Being of the universe. “You have brought us great success against the Long Knives, and jealousy eats away at Wolfslayer’s heart. I know him—he will stop at nothing to destroy you.”

“I still hold the confidence of our people,” White Eagle returned. “Every council has strongly supported my decisions.”

On White Eagle's other side, Red Fox moved restlessly. "Wolfslayer is cunning enough that few of those who follow him suspect his true intent. He does not yet dare to attack you directly, but works to capture our people's hearts with subtle lies."

"Like this dance," Spotted Pony broke in. "He says he seeks a vision that will show him Moneto's true path—and he will claim to find it. Already some of those who at first accepted the word you brought us about Moneto's son, Jesus, now follow Wolfslayer's teaching that we must reject all the ways of the Long Knives—especially the white man's religion. He means to use the ancient traditions to turn them against you."

Red Fox laid his hand on White Eagle's shoulder, his hawk-like face even more commanding in the fitful light. "Spotted Pony speaks truth. Heed our words, my brother, or Wolfslayer will overcome you."

White Eagle frowned, knowing he would discount the two men's counsel at his peril. His most trusted lieutenants in the war to expel the white settlers from the Shawnee lands of the Ohio Territory, set aflame by the murder of White Eagle's adoptive father Black Hawk the previous spring, they took careful note of the shifting alliances among members of the tribe as well as among the allied tribes who had joined the Shawnee in their fight against the Whites.

More urgently, Red Fox continued, "If he succeeds in gathering power into his hands, I fear he will lead our tribe to destruction."

"He will not, while I live," White Eagle returned, his voice hard.

In the firelight, he could see the line of Spotted Pony's jaw harden. "It would have been better if you had taken his life that day in the forest in vengeance for Pathfinder's death."

"It was an accident," White Eagle reminded him. "He meant to kill me instead."

"All the more, then, it would have been your right to take his life—not only in return for your brother's, but because Wolfslayer surely would have killed you had Pathfinder not stepped between you and taken his bullet," Red Fox said.

"That is not Moneto's way. By killing, do we serve the one who created life? No, my brothers. I have sworn not to kill unless I am given no alternative."

Spotted Pony made an impatient gesture. "If Wolfslayer continues on his path, there soon will be no choice."

"Your teaching is a hard one, yet the great white eagle that came to protect you brought Moneto's vision to you and to no other." Red Fox indicated the three white feathers tied into the crown of White Eagle's hair. "The *opa-wa-ka* he left you confirms it."

"All of us there that day saw what happened," Spotted Pony agreed, "including Wolfslayer and Raging Bear. Yet now they deny it. And they seek to kill you."

“Of all the people who saw the miracles and signs Jesus performed, many did not believe either. If they do not accept Moneto’s own son, why would they accept me?”

White Eagle returned his attention to the dancers. For some moments he and his companions watched without speaking. The shaman Wolfslayer whirled in the dancers’ midst, a dominating figure wrapped in the fresh pelt of a great, grey wolf and daubed liberally with its blood.

Strung on a rawhide cord around the shaman’s neck, the beast’s fangs and teeth splayed across his collarbone. The gaping skull, minus its lower jaw, crowned his head, while the dripping pelt draped his shoulders, the skin of the forelegs hanging across his chest while the rest trailed down his back. His movements caused the tail to brush back and forth across the ground as though the creature’s spirit still inhabited its skin.

It was a fantastic scene, made even more foreboding by the firelight. The primal, pounding pulsebeat of the drums, the high warble of the flutes, and the hiss of the rattles lent a trance-like quality to the dancers’ movements, and the townspeople watching from the clearing’s periphery stood motionless as though suspended by an unearthly spell.

If his opposition to Wolfslayer had not been so implacable, White Eagle admitted to himself, he also would have found it difficult to resist the seductive power the music and dance cast over the assembly. He let out his breath slowly, forcing the tension of his body to relax.

“I know you are right. Wolfslayer will oppose me until the end to our conflict can be delayed no longer. But I will be the one to choose the time and the place.”

“Do not wait too long,” Red Fox cautioned, “or his medicine may become too strong for even you to overcome. I hear he seeks a token from your possessions to conjure evil against you.”

Startled, White Eagle stared at his friend. Cursing silently that he had not foreseen such an attack, he swung to face the young woman who waited close behind him.

She jumped at his quick movement, her large eyes widening in surprise, then softening with warm appeal. Tall for a woman, with a slender, shapely figure, fine, regular features, and glossy waist-length hair, she regarded him expectantly. In all the months of his presence with the tribe, her devotion had not wavered in spite of his efforts to discourage her attentions.

“Blue Sky, go quickly to my wigewa. Stay there until I come and let no one enter.”

He pretended not to note the surge of hope that lighted her eyes. Pathfinder’s widow, Blue Sky made no secret of the fact that she considered White Eagle her dead husband’s successor in all matters, even in the ways of love.

For the sake of Pathfinder’s memory and Blue Sky’s grief, White Eagle took pains to treat her as kindly as he dared allow himself to. He genuinely liked and admired her for her beauty, intelligence, and winsome nature. He honored her as his brother’s widow. But he had to tread

carefully for fear of encouraging an affection he refused to share.

The trouble was that she was far too desirable. And far too willing. Resisting her tender ministrations was becoming more difficult by the day.

Without answering, she ran to do as he bade. White Eagle turned back to find his companions smiling.

“You are wise to take every precaution,” Spotted Pony observed. “And if you had a wife to guard your things at all times—”

White Eagle raised his hand in protest. “This is not the time to take a wife.”

“That you have not taken one from among us only lends credibility to Wolfslayer’s charge that you still have a white heart,” Red Fox pointed out. At White Eagle’s dismissive gesture, he added forcefully, “When your white blood was washed away, you became Black Hawk’s son as surely as Pathfinder was. You are as much Shawnee and Kispokotha as Spotted Pony and I. But taking a wife to bear your children would bind you to us the more tightly and prove Wolfslayer’s accusations false to even his own followers.”

“I do not need a wife,” White Eagle repeated through clenched teeth.

Unbidden, the memory of Elizabeth flooded his mind and heart. *She is forever beyond my reach*, he reminded himself with dogged determination. *Resurrecting the ghosts of the past will only hinder me now.*

Yet the brief vision shortened his breath as though he had been kicked in the gut. Steeling himself, he shook the memory off and hastily changed the subject.

“Tomorrow the full council will decide our course, not Wolfslayer—or me. Continue to pray for Moneto’s will to be done, not that of any man.”

For a long moment both men regarded White Eagle intently. At last Red Fox said, “We know you carry the Spirit of Moneto, and you speak his words of wisdom. We will follow the path you walk, come what may.”

“No,” White Eagle countered. “Follow me only as I follow Moneto.”

After the drums fell silent and the dancers dispersed to their wigewas, White Eagle and his companions withdrew into the shadows of the trees above the river to pray for Moneto to grant them wisdom, guidance, and protection before they parted. At last alone, he headed toward his wigewa near the town’s southern boundary some distance away.

Grey Cloud’s Town spread out for a mile along the bank of the Little Miami in northern Ohio Territory, with hastily cultivated fields stretching still farther. The unprovoked murder of the old



sachem, Black Hawk, that spring had ignited a border war that with every passing week was becoming more ruthless. Under pressure from the settlers' brutal retaliation, large numbers of the Shawnee had been forced to withdraw from towns along the Scioto to this safer location. Daily, additional members of the tribe swelled the town's population, and increasing numbers of the region's Miami, Kickapoo, and Mingo tribes were joining them.

It was nearing midnight, and on either side of White Eagle's path the spacious dome-shaped wigwags, freshly constructed of saplings covered with wide strips of bark and cured deer hide, stood silent and dark, their inhabitants by now asleep. He moved without making a sound, the heavy, humid air weighing him down like a physical burden.

No hint of wind stirred the indistinct black webwork of the treetops overhead. From the murmuring waters of the river off to his left, gossamer streamers of dense mist rose over the banks, blurring the outlines of trees and habitations and settling on his skin as the moisture condensed in the already sticky air.

By his calculation, it was the end of July. The sudden realization that more than a year had passed since he had left Boston on Washington's orders to treat with the Indian tribes struck him forcibly. In that time, his life had changed far beyond what he could then have thought possible. In truth, he had lost the man he had been, wondered if it would ever be possible to find him again or if he even wanted to. For that man seemed an unfathomable stranger to him now.

The previous day he and a large party of his warriors, drawn from the Kispokotha, Piqua, and Chillicothe divisions of the Shawnee tribe, with a substantial party of Miamis, had first reached the town's new site after carrying out a series of lightning raids on two forts and a number of small farms strung along the southeastern border of Shawnee lands, just north of the Ohio River. Although they had been repeatedly driven away, the Whites stubbornly kept filtering back into Ohio Territory, drawn by the fertile soil and abundant game, and eager to wrest the land from its native inhabitants. To the Long Knives, as the Shawnee referred to the American colonists, the native peoples who had lived on the land for untold generations were of no more significance than vermin to be killed or driven out.

White Eagle's fists clenched unconsciously at the thought—and at the nagging concern that ultimately all his efforts and those of his warriors would be in vain. Already reprisals, such as the vicious attack against Chillicothe less than a month earlier that had left scores of women and children as well as warriors dead and the few survivors crippled and mutilated, were taking a harsh toll.

That Wolfslayer harbored no scruples against taking advantage of the Long Knives' increasing pressure against the tribe for his own purposes, White Eagle had no doubt. The fact that he and Cornstalk, the Shawnee's principal sachem, had bluntly warned the tribe against following this course had already been forgotten as a result of the shaman's cunning attacks against White Eagle's leadership.

What troubled him more at the moment, however, were Wolfslayer's continuing efforts to subvert the carefully reasoned strategy White Eagle sought to employ against the Long Knives.

The shaman viewed with open contempt White Eagle's tactic of burning the settlers out and driving them off the land, while taking no prisoners and killing as few of the enemy as possible. More than once White Eagle had rescued women and children from Wolfslayer's hand, actions that deepened his rival's hostility.

The sibilant hiss of rattles abruptly shattered his reverie and drove a bone-deep chill through him, prickling the hairs on the back of his neck. Preoccupied with his thoughts, he had passed into the thick mist beneath a dense stand of pines along the river, and he came to an abrupt halt, a vivid sensation of malevolence tightening his gut.

Probing the gloom, he made out an enormous rattlesnake coiled on the path three feet in front of him, fangs bared, its rattles raised and quivering. Without the need for thought, reflex brought his right hand to his hunting knife, and tearing it out of its sheath, he spun it through the air. The razor-sharp blade drove into the moist earth up to its hilt.

Impaled to the ground, the snake writhed in violent, heaving death throes. When it finally went limp, White Eagle wrenched the knife free, severing the snake's head from its body as the blade slid out of the ground.

When he bent to wipe off the smeared blood in the dew-wet grass, a foul stench like the odor of unadulterated evil washed over him, arresting his movements. He came erect at once, caught a slight movement between the tree trunks a short distance farther along the path. As he stared at the menacing shadow lurking there, breath constricted, the spectre glided noiselessly toward him.

It was Wolfslayer. Still clad in the wolf's pelt, from which clotted gore dripped down his deeply seamed face and muscular arms, he approached, teeth bared, eyes glittering.

He held something in his hand, but White Eagle did not wait to determine what it was. Crouching, with a fluid movement he brought the keen point of his knife through the air between them to ward his enemy back.

The shaman stopped in his tracks, for a suspended moment stared hard from him to the blade glittering dimly in the faint starlight. Then, giving a guttural snarl, he swung on his heel and stalked off.

Straightening warily, White Eagle waited until the shaman's shadow disappeared between the nearest wigewas. By degrees he became aware that his breathing was labored and that the blood pounded in his ears. Although with Wolfslayer's disappearance the breeze dispelled the fetid aroma that had surrounded him, the feeling of danger and threat did not diminish.

He sheathed his knife, then covered the short distance to his wigewa with swift steps. There he found Blue Sky crumpled on the ground in front of the opening, sobs wrenching her body.

He knelt to draw her into his arms, quickly ran his hands over her trembling limbs. To his relief, he found no wounds.

“Did he hurt you?”

Shaking her head, she clung to him. “I ... didn’t see it. I didn’t know ... you’d left it there.”  
Terror and apology edged her tone.

“What didn’t you see?”

She gestured weakly toward the wigewa behind her. A short distance to the left of its opening, his quiver and bow leaned against the structure where he had carelessly left them on returning from the raid the day before.

“It was so dark, and I ... I went inside to lie down until you came. A few minutes ago, I thought I heard someone outside. At first I thought it was you, but when you didn’t come inside, I looked out. Wolfslayer was standing there holding one of your arrows.”

The fog had deepened, yet even in the filtered light of the three-quarter moon overhead, he could make out his beaded quiver and, protruding from it, the ghostly gleam of the snowy eagle feathers with which he fletched his arrows.

He released her and stood up, rage washing over him. Teeth clenched, he stared off into the darkness.

He was the only one from the tribe who fletched his arrows exclusively with spotless white feathers taken from a bald eagle. And it occurred to him suddenly that they could be easily identified. Surely by now the Long Knives recognized that they were used by only one warrior.

It took little imagination to guess what uses the shaman might put the stolen arrow to.

He swore.

Blue Sky covered her face with her hands. “You are right to be angry with me. I behaved foolishly—”

Forcing himself to calm, he reached down and drew her gently to her feet. “I am not angry at you, but at myself for leaving the quiver there. You did nothing wrong. Go to your wigewa and forget this happened—it is only an arrow, after all. But tell no one.”

She looked up at him, anguish in her brimming eyes. “He will use it to make bad medicine against you.”

He gave her a wry smile. “Undoubtedly he will try. But we will pray against him. Is not Moneto more powerful than any bad medicine or any evil spirit?”

“Yes, but—”

He hushed her and over her protests sent her to her wigewa next to his. When she had

disappeared inside, he caught up the bow and quiver, lifted the deer hide flap that covered the opening of his own wigewa, and entered.

Inside, freshly woven rush mats covered the beaten earth floor. Cherry-red embers sizzling in the sunken fire circle cast a dim light onto the sleeping platform constructed against the far wall. This was covered with mats over which lay a bearskin, with a blanket folded across one end.

Making sure the pole sewn to the door flap's lower edge held it firmly closed, he stowed his weapons, including his tomahawk and knife, on the sleeping platform where they would be close to his hand. Peeling off moccasins, leather leggings, and breechclout, he stretched out across the skins naked.

He found it difficult to quiet the frustrated, angry thoughts that circled through his mind. Although he did not fear Wolfslayer's sorcery, neither did he underestimate the shaman's power to stir up demonic forces against him. Finally he rose to sit cross-legged on the sleeping platform, and for some time prayed for guidance and protection from any attack, whether physical or spiritual. By degrees his tension eased, and he again lay down, a quiet assurance lulling him toward sleep.

That treacherous territory between waking and slumber held the greatest danger, as he had learned well during the course of too many nights during the past months. It was then that the memory of Elizabeth haunted him most vividly, and not even his most resolute efforts to suppress the ache of his arms to enfold her had any effect.

During his enslavement among the Seneca, he had determined to escape and to return to her across the miles that separated them, no matter what the effort cost him. But it had not worked out that way.

Instead, his Shawnee rescuers had carried him long miles westward, yet farther from her. Now, with the town's move to the Little Miami, the distance between them had become even more dauntingly long, the odds of making it alive through the dangers he would face on the journey across miles of unfamiliar, rugged, and hostile terrain, overwhelmingly against him.

That it had been Moneto's will to bring him to the Shawnee and give him a family among them, he could neither question nor deny. It was surely no coincidence that the blood brother from his youth had found him and secured his freedom, or that after all the years of his absence in England, Black Hawk had carried out a long-held intent to adopt him.

Everyone in the tribe, except Wolfslayer and his closest adherents, accepted White Eagle as fully one of them. Indeed, he felt himself completely their kin, so powerful had been the ceremony by which he had been reborn into their tribe and clan.

And yet ...

Yet still the memory of Elizabeth and the deep longing for her—no, the sense that his soul could never be complete apart from her—would not leave him or allow him to find genuine peace.

That somewhere in the world she lived and remained free was his greatest hope—and his deepest agony.

How to resolve the conflict between his present life and the sweet promise of a future with her that had once existed was unfathomable to his mind. Even in the unlikely event that the British no longer sought him for treason, as the Shawnee's war chief he had aroused the implacable hatred of the Americans. Traveling outside the tribe's protection would place him at the mercy of the settlers, who would be all too eager to execute him. Added to this, Wolfslayer posed another dangerous obstacle that would have to be reckoned with if White Eagle so much as hinted at returning to the Long Knives.

And if by some unforeseen miracle Elizabeth were to find her way to him? The thought drew him like a magnet, yet terrified him at the same time. For he knew that if he looked once more into her dearly beloved face, touched her, held her, only to be forced to walk away from her again, as he inevitably would be, would surely destroy him.

How could she ever understand or accept the man he had become and the things he had done to protect his kinsmen? During the months he had spent among the Shawnee, the very culture of the Whites had become distasteful, even repellant, to him—not only hypocritical, superficial, and materialistic, but willfully unjust. So how could it ever be possible to resolve his and Elizabeth's relationship?

Certainly he could neither expect her to give up her family and her life among the Whites for a people and a culture so alien to her, nor to accept him when he was personally waging a bitter war against her countrymen for his people's very survival—indeed, for the same freedom the Long Knives claimed to seek from England. Yet to turn his back on his Shawnee kindred, to whom he was bound by deep ties of loyalty, obligation, and love, would be equally wrenching.

Wrestling with this unsolvable dilemma for the thousandth time, he returned to the same conclusion he always reached. The likelihood that Elizabeth would ever discover where he was or, if she did, be able to travel such a long distance through such hostile terrain was small. Indeed, it was better for both of them that the barriers of distance and danger that stood between them remained unbridgeable. Surely in time the aching longing that persisted in tormenting his heart must finally die away.

Yet as soon as he pushed these painful reflections to the back of his mind, another nagging concern replaced them. What had happened to the Continental Army, and how was Washington faring? If the British had finally been driven out of Boston, had they given up the fight or merely transferred their base of operations to a more strategic location?

In this matter as in the other, he was left, as usual, with questions impossible to answer. All he could do was to remind himself that, although he could not fathom the future, there was One in control who knew the end from the beginning and for whom nothing was impossible. Clinging to that comforting assurance, he at last surrendered to slumber.

He slept only fitfully, however, and rose early. At midmorning the townspeople gathered in the

large, newly built log council house.

Its gabled roof was still only partially finished due to the younger men's frequent absences during raids. Since the day was cloudless and already hot, both women and men went shirtless, the women wearing calf-length skirts of doeskin or rough woolen stroud trade goods, while most of the men wore only breechclouts and moccasins. Underlying the murmuring of voices, the brittle whirl of insect wings pulsed in the humid air.

Wolfslayer did not mount a strong challenge to his leadership in the war against the Long Knives, as White Eagle expected. Instead, the shaman contented himself with questioning his refusal to take prisoners and the care he took not to kill unnecessarily.

"Of course, White Eagle has only been among us a short time," Wolfslayer noted, his malice cloaked beneath a patronizing smile. "He does not yet know the ways of the Shawnee well."

A low murmur passed through the listeners, but before anyone could speak, White Eagle said quietly, "I know the ways of my people as well as anyone here, for I have lived among you since I was a youth. Black Hawk himself taught me the traditions of our elders. And Moneto has shown me the path he would have us to walk, even though some among us oppose it."

Facing the assembly, his tone and posture humble, he continued, "Before I struck the tomahawk into the war post, both Cornstalk and I warned that we must act with restraint and only after careful consideration if we are to have any hope of prevailing against the Long Knives. Taking prisoners would only slow us down, and their kinsmen would be more likely to pursue us to try to take their people back before we could get away. To kill more of them would only make their response more violent—"

"Should we not make them pay in kind for the destruction of Chillicothe?" Raging Bear cut in.

White Eagle waited for the angry murmurs of agreement with the young warrior to die down. "When we slaughter their women and children, we say to them that they are right to treat our women and children without mercy," he pointed out. "If they act with cruelty, should we also do the same?"

A long debate followed, with the shaman's supporters arguing vehemently for meeting bloodshed with bloodshed, while the town's old sachem, Grey Cloud, urged support for White Eagle and a few of the elders advocated making any concessions necessary to end the war. In the end White Eagle received a strong vote of confidence from the council, along with the decision to send the war belt to the Cherokee, urging them to make war on the Whites along the Virginia and Carolina borders. He noted, however, that a number of the men hesitated before giving their decision, and that Wolfslayer and his party gained a few more votes than before.

Wolfslayer gave every appearance of accepting the defeat with grace. Since the shaman did not yet count enough supporters on his side, White Eagle reflected with grim calculation, he merely bided his time until he could add to his adherents.

White Eagle harbored no doubt that Wolfslayer would renew his challenge when he had worked his magic arts and when his supporters had increased to a sufficient number to ensure he would prevail. And Wolfslayer's dark glance as he left the council house gave him to understand that the next time the shaman mounted a challenge against him, he would not back down.