

REFINER'S FIRE

THE AMERICAN PATRIOT SERIES

BOOK 6

J. M. HOCHSTETLER



ELKHART, INDIANA 46514

Refiner's Fire

Copyright © 2019 by J. M. Hochstetler.

Published by Sheaf House®. Requests for information should be addressed to:

Editorial Director
Sheaf House Publishers
1703 Atlantic Avenue
Elkhart, IN 46514

jmsboup@gmail.com
www.sheafhouse.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, audio recording, or any other form whatsoever—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019901579

ISBN: 978-1-936438-46-4 (softcover)

All scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

The scripture verses quoted on p. 76 are Psalm 29:3, 10-11. The verses quoted on p. 92 are Isaiah 30:19-21. The verses quoted on p. 93 are John 5:24-25. The verses quoted on p. 94 are Ezekiel 37:9b-12, 14a. The verse quoted on p. 224 is Ephesians 2:19. The verses quoted on page 308 are Psalm 91: 3a, 4b, 5. The verses quoted on p. 420 are Ecclesiastes 2: 4; 3:1-2a, 4, 8a, d. Verses quoted on p. 421 are Song of Solomon 1:2; 2:4. Verses quoted on p. 422 are 2:11-12a; 4: 9-10a, b.

Cover design by Marisa Jackson.

Cover image: *L'Attesa* by Arturo Ricci from Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain in the United States.

Map by Jim Brown of Jim Brown Illustration.

CHAPTER ONE

“IT WOULD BE SAFER for all of you if I’m away. Then General Clinton would have no further reason to send his agents here to . . . to murder me.”

Elizabeth Howard looked from her father to her mother and younger sister, sight blurred, throat painfully tight. It was just past sundown on Thursday, February 19, 1778, following an attempt on her life early that morning by agents of General Henry Clinton, the British commander at New York.

“We’re not going to let that happen, daughter,” Dr. Samuel Howard snapped as he paced restlessly across the room, hands clasped behind his back. Rounding on French Admiral Alexandre Bettár, le comte de Caledonne, he growled, “I appreciate your concern, Alexandre, but I’ve no intention of allowing you to wrest my daughter from her home and family after all she’s been through. Beth hasn’t fully recovered from her ordeal aboard that wretched prison ship, and I’m afraid a long sea voyage would do her irreparable harm—if she even survived it.”

“Aren’t you being a bit dramatic, Papa?” Elizabeth objected. “Surely I’m fully recovered by now. It’s been over three months since. . .” Her voice choked.

He stopped beside Elizabeth’s chair to frown down at her. “There are still hollows in your cheeks, my dear, and you’re too thin and pale. You eat hardly more than a bird—”

“I’m stronger than you think.”

“You think you’re stronger than you are!”

“That’s why I enlisted Jean and Marie to accompany us to France—to ensure that her health isn’t compromised,” Caledonne pointed out, his calm demeanor a settling counterpoint to Dr. Howard’s vehemence.

Forcing a teasing tone, Elizabeth said, “Faith, Dr. Lemaire, I’m astounded that you’d desert *Destiny* even for such agreeable service as that aboard *Néréide*.”

Slender, handsome Dr. Jean Lemaire exchanged a wry smile with his companion, Marie Glasière. He and the beautiful, dark-haired young French nurse had kept Elizabeth alive after her rescue from the horrors of a British prison ship in New York Harbor.

“This hardly qualifies as desertion, mademoiselle, though I think General Carleton would not begrudge it in this instance,” he protested.

He referred to Major General Jonathan Carleton, the man Elizabeth loved. Commander of Carleton’s Rangers, a renowned brigade of the Continental Army under General George Washington, Carleton also owned a fleet of privateers including the 100-gun warship that had led the successful raid on the British stronghold.

“I know he’d not begrudge any means of keeping you safe and well,” said Carleton’s portly, balding French agent, Louis Teissèdre.

Elizabeth averted her eyes quickly from the Frenchman’s searching gaze. He had arrived unexpectedly that morning as the attack against her unfolded. After ensuring that her aunt’s property was secured, he had gone to fetch Caledonne and returned under cover of darkness with the admiral and his son, Lucien, accompanied by the physician and nurse. All of them had been heavily muffled in dark cloaks, with Caledonne also substituting plain civilian dress for his ornate French naval uniform.

“Should Beth go to France, it’ll be a great comfort to know she’s in your care,” Elizabeth’s Aunt Tess said to Marie and Lemaire. “God forbid that she fall ill again!”

She turned a warm look on Caledonne, which he returned with one that caused the color to bloom becomingly in her cheeks. Noting it, Elizabeth suppressed a smile.

“Jean and Marie will rejoin *Destiny* as soon as you’re safely delivered to the home of my eldest daughter, Cécile, la marquise de Martieu-Broussard,” Caledonne assured Elizabeth. “Once there, you’ll be under the care of her personal physician.”

“You see, Samuel, there’s nothing to worry about.” Anne Howard drew her younger daughter, thirteen-year-old Abby, onto the sofa between her and Elizabeth.

She was the source of both her daughters’ delicately modeled features and slender, graceful forms. Abby had also inherited their mother’s blue eyes and fair coloring, while, in addition to her father’s passionate nature, Elizabeth had inherited his expressive brown eyes and curly hair, the latter a rich, dark auburn in contrast to his black locks.

“There’s always something to worry about when it comes to sea travel, even for one who’s in perfect health—which Beth is not! Surely you haven’t forgotten the weather we endured on our voyage back from London last fall, my love. And the winter storms are even worse.”

“There’s equal, if not greater, danger if she stays here,” Tess pointed out. Older than her brother, she shared his coloring and classically handsome features, though her hair was streaked with silver.

From his post behind his father’s chair, leaning on the mantel of the drawing room’s blazing fireplace, Lucien Bettár agreed quietly, “Mademoiselle Howard’s very life is at stake, sir.”

Elizabeth covertly studied Caledonne’s son, whom she guessed to be slightly younger than Carleton. In appearance the two could not have been more different. Both were strikingly handsome, but Carleton was tall, lean, powerfully muscled, and deeply tanned, with blond hair and intense blue-grey eyes. In contrast, Lucien was slender, dark-haired, and pale complexioned, of middling height, his heavy-lidded brown eyes giving him a languid appearance. She detected little of his father’s easy affability or martial discipline in him and more the manners of a French courtier.

As though sensing her scrutiny he met her gaze with a direct one that caused heat to rise to her cheeks. She dropped her eyes, unaccountably flustered, and hastily returned her attention to Caledonne.

“Beth will be much better able to regain her strength where she’s safely out of Clinton’s reach and needn’t worry about further attacks.”

“As much as I want to keep Elizabeth with us, I have to agree,” Anne returned, her brow furrowing. “Samuel, after that . . . that horrible incident this morning you can’t possibly believe we can keep her safe here any longer.”

“You said it was not the first attempt, monsieur.”

Teissèdre turned to Tess. “It was not, madame, and this time the effort came far too close to success. I shudder to think what might have happened had General Carleton’s Marines not intervened in time. Nor was the man alone. Had I not arrived when I did—*mon Dieu!*” He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped the perspiration from his bald pate.

Involuntarily Elizabeth’s hand flew to the plaster that covered the raw scratch on her cheek. She suppressed a shiver at the unsettling memory of the man she had briefly glimpsed prowling through the fog beneath her window early that morning. Convinced that he had to be Carleton, she had hurried outside after him only to have a bullet whine past her head, terrifyingly close. Had the crack of a rifle fired at the intruder not come first, startling her and causing her to slip and tumble into an ice-crusting snow bank, the musket ball aimed at her would have struck its target.

She was certain now that that brief glimpse of the stranger, whose height and form were uncannily similar to Carleton’s, had not been mere coincidence, that he had meant to lure her outside to her death. Mercifully his malicious intent had been foiled by the Marines Carleton had secretly stationed around her aunt’s estate shortly after bringing her home.

In addition to commanding a brigade of Rangers with Indian scouts, Carleton was also the feared Shawnee war chief White Eagle, the adopted son of the renowned sachem Black Hawk. It was the revelation of the latter that had caused the bitter confrontation with her parents in early December and his abrupt departure while Elizabeth slept upstairs, unaware.

She had received no further communication from him. And at the turning of the New Year she had learned that he had taken all his warriors and returned to his people as Washington's envoy to negotiate the Shawnee's neutrality in the war with England.

Looking up, she met Caledonne's concerned gaze. Carleton's uncle was imposing in appearance, tall and lean with neatly coiffed white hair. His deep tan testified to years of service at sea, as did the fine lines that creased his forehead and crinkled at the corners of eyes an intense blue-grey disconcertingly like Carleton's. Indeed the close resemblance between the two men struck her as forcibly as it had at their first meeting and caused her heart to contract painfully.

She felt suddenly as though she would suffocate despite the cold draughts that seeped along the floorboards. Springing to her feet, she went to the nearest window and pushed back the heavy winter draperies. With her handkerchief she violently scrubbed at the thick layer of frost that coated the panes until she cleared a circle on the glass large enough to peer through. Heavy clouds obscured the black heavens, and in the gloom she could make out only the dim shadows of the nearest trees buffeted by an icy wind, a prospect as bleak as her emotions.

Behind her she heard her father say, "Surely there's another alternative to sending Beth three thousand miles across the ocean."

"Where on this continent will she be safe from General Clinton's reach?" her mother demanded anxiously.

"You think she'll be safer aboard a French warship when England will declare war on France the instant they sign a treaty with us—if that hasn't happened already?" Dr. Howard's voice scaled upward.

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder as her mother protested, "But from what we've heard it's only to be a treaty of alliance, nothing more."

"It's very much more, as the British well know," Caledonne broke in, his eyes glittering with anticipation. "It will have the same effect as waving the *muleta* in the bull's face. We've already passed through the *tercios* of lances and flags in this *corrida de toro*, and now will enter the third of death, our sword, our *estocada*, at the ready. Our countries will be fully engaged at sea by summer at the latest. That's why we must sail now to ensure Beth is safely in France before our navies collide."

Teissèdre lifted his shoulders in an expressive shrug. "There can be no safer place for your daughter than aboard such a ship as *Néréide* in the midst of le comte de Caledonne's fleet. I assure you that the British will think twice before they dare attack such a convoy."

Dr. Howard snorted. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, considering the number of naval engagements France lost to the British not so long ago during our French and Indian War."

"*Touché*," Caledonne conceded dryly. "But they will find that twenty years has done much to shift the balance of naval power."

When Dr. Howard began to speak, Anne turned to her sister-in-law in frustrated appeal.

"Samuel, for once please listen to what Alexandre and Louis have to say before you dismiss their arguments out of hand," Tess pleaded.

Elizabeth returned to her seat. Abby immediately clasped her arms around her waist and leaned her head on her shoulder.

"Please don't send my sister away!"

Anne reached over to gently brush straying tendrils of the child's hair back from her flushed face. "We may not have a choice, dearest."

“I disagree. I’ve no intention of doing so, Abby,” Dr. Howard broke in. “We’ve been home from England for hardly four months, and I don’t need to remind you how close we came to losing Beth then. But we kept her alive and safe, and—”

Marie had held her silence, but now enquired politely, “Will you keep her a prisoner in this house then? Otherwise she’ll be in danger whenever she ventures outside.”

“Obviously Jon’s Marines have—though unknown to us—protected her quite effectively,” Dr. Howard blustered.

“They cannot remain here forever,” the young nurse pointed out.

He frowned. “It’s to be hoped that General Clinton will finally abandon his efforts to get at her since they’ve all come to nothing. At any rate there are other methods of defense we can employ. I simply don’t think it necessary to take such drastic action as sending Beth to live among strangers in a foreign land!”

He rounded on Caledonne. “Come to think of it, how is it that a French admiral of your reputation is free to bring his entire fleet to rescue my daughter?”

Caledonne raised one eyebrow. “As I’m sure you’ll understand, Samuel, I’m not at liberty to divulge our mission. Suffice it to say that it involves something other than plucking Beth out of Clinton’s clutches, important as that is to me personally. Officially, one of my squadrons escorted several merchantmen into the harbor loaded with supplies for your army, by now a not unusual occurrence. No one knows I accompanied the squadron; we came ashore at nightfall and will return the same way. We’d bring Beth aboard secretly as well.”

Frowning, Dr. Howard rubbed his brow. “If I were to agree, can you assure me that there are no British agents in Louis the Sixteenth’s court who might find out where she is and become a danger to her?”

“But of course there are such agents—as we maintain agents in George the Third’s court.” Caledonne leaned forward, the calculating light in his eyes reminding Elizabeth that despite his easy manner he was a man to be feared. “But all British officials will be recalled the moment we conclude our treaty with your government. As for agents who operate in the shadows, I guarantee to you that *my* agents are quite capable of . . . removing them should that become necessary.”

Elizabeth shivered as he sat back in his chair. “You need have no fear for your daughter, Samuel. She’s as dear to me as she is to Jonathan, and I will give up my own life before I allow harm to come to her—on sea or land. And once in France, she’ll be under the protection of my son-in-law le marquis as well. He is also a man of high connections and power.”

When Dr. Howard bristled, Tess snapped, “Oh, lay down your hackles, Samuel! Even you can’t be in control of everything. And in case you hadn’t noticed, Beth’s a grown woman, in her right mind, and capable of making her own decisions. In fact, she’s been doing it for years.”

Bending in a slight bow Lucien cut off Dr. Howard’s response. “You can trust my father to always keep his word, sir.”

Elizabeth detected a subtle, barbed undercurrent in his tone and saw Caledonne direct an unreadable glance at his son, his mouth tightening almost imperceptibly. But her mother’s voice distracted her from the questions the interchange aroused.

“What do you want to do, my dear?”

“Are you actually considering this proposal, my girl?” Dr. Howard protested.

Feeling her father’s troubled gaze on her, Elizabeth hesitated, not certain what she did want. “France is so far from all of you and . . . Jonathan.” Staring blindly at her hands clenched in her lap, she whispered, “But he made it clear he has no intention of ever coming back. So what does it matter?”

A strained silence hung over the room for some moments as Abby clung tearfully to her. Rising, Caledonne came to squat in front of her. He pulled from his pocket a folded paper and held it out—a letter, she saw.

“I received this from a messenger a short time after you left *Néréide* that evening.”

The address, hastily scrawled on the outside in a hand she knew well, read: “Admiral Alexandre Bettár, *Néréide*, Boston Harbour,” and her heart contracted.

Caledonne pressed it into her hand. “Please read it.”

She searched his eyes, then with Abby leaning anxiously on her shoulder, she unfolded the page, hands shaking, tears scalding her eyes even before she scanned the few short lines inside, written in French.

Uncle Alexandre,

It's become necessary for me to return to duty at once. I've given orders to my Marines to remain on alert for any intruders. Please instruct Louis to stay in constant contact with Captain Hartley and do everything possible to keep Beth from harm. If at any time he deems it too dangerous for her to remain at Boston, I desire that you take her to your estate at Marseille and keep her there until she may safely return home. Tell her it is my wish, should that make a difference—

Jonathan

Reading the last line, broken abruptly off, with only his name carelessly scribbled below, she bit her lip hard, fighting back a sob. Carefully she refolded the letter, conscious that the others watched as though hanging on her movements.

When she looked up, the kindness in Caledonne's eyes entirely undid her, and tears spilled. Taking her hand between both of his, he held it tightly.

“As it is his wish, I'll come with you—of course.”

When she extended the letter to him, he motioned for her to keep it and, releasing her, stood. She pressed the page to her bosom and thanked him, voice choked.

As Caledonne returned to his chair, her father cleared his throat, then asked, “Beth . . . may your mother and I read it?”

The pain in his voice pierced her. Brushing away her tears, she held the letter out to him. He came to take it, read it slowly in silence, then handed it to her mother.

Elizabeth lifted her chin. “I won't be gone forever. I'll come home the moment it's safe.”

“Well . . . it's doubtless for the best.” Sighing, Anne folded the letter and handed it to Abby. She motioned her to carry it to Tess, who scanned it, frowning, and returned it to her.

As Abby brought the letter back to Elizabeth, Tess asked, “Didn't you say your daughter lives near Paris, Alexandre?” At his confirmation, she said, “But Jonathan asks you to take her to Marseille.”

“Naturally he had no way of knowing that Cécile would offer to take Beth into her home. My younger daughter and her family reside at my ancestral estate near Marseille, and we'll visit at a convenient time. But Cécile and her husband have a large estate outside Paris that is much more secure and a more advantageous situation as they can introduce Beth to trustworthy people at the highest levels of society.”

Lucien moved to stand beside his father's chair. “Let me assure you, madame, that you could not ask for a better situation for your daughter than in my sister's household. She is the best of women and a musician of great ability, whose guidance and contacts within the arts will be of great benefit to mademoiselle.”

He spoke with reassuring sincerity. Seeing that her mother was clearly delighted at the prospects that residing with the marquise and her family would afford her, Elizabeth suppressed the nagging reflection that this was, nevertheless, not what Carleton had requested of his uncle.

Beaming, Anne said, "Then there's only the matter of a proper chaperon to decide."

"I'll have Marie and Jemma with me, Mama."

"That's hardly sufficient aboard a ship filled with sailors. You'll need someone older, with greater experience—"

"I believe I have a solution." Caledonne smiled at Tess. "I propose to take Thérèse with us—if she's willing."

As both her parents gaped, Elizabeth clasped her hands in delight. "Of course! I can't think of a chaperon I'd want more. You will come with us, won't you, Aunt Tess?"

A becoming hue suffused Tess's cheeks as she met Caledonne's intent gaze. "Well, I . . . the last time I made an ocean voyage was when I came to Boston as a young woman. At my age—"

"You're not as old as I, Thérèse," Caledonne scoffed, "and I've survived the sea. It's my very great desire that you come. You'll indulge me, will you not—for Beth's sake?"

And for yours too, I'll wager, Elizabeth thought, struggling to maintain an innocent expression.

"That would allay all our concerns, Tess," Anne said hopefully. "It's much to ask, but you'll do this for us?"

Struggling to hold back her own smile, Tess finally nodded. "Well . . . I suppose I must. After all, it's my duty to the family."

Seeing the light in Caledonne's eyes, Elizabeth reflected that her aunt had never married, and Caledonne had been a widower for a number of years. There was no disguising the attraction between them. As at his previous visit, he had immediately claimed a place at her side and made no attempt to conceal his warm regard.

"But if both you and Aunt Tess go away, I'll be left here all alone with only Mama and Papa for company! I was away from you ever so long, Beth, and—"

"Ah, but you see, little mouse, the second part of my proposal is to bring you with us."

Abby stared at Caledonne, openmouthed, before impulsively running across the room to fling herself into his arms. "Truly? Oh, *Onkel* Alexandre, you're not teasing—say you're not!"

Pleased by her affectionate appellation of uncle, he laughed. He tugged playfully on the blue ribbon that held back her golden hair and returned her embrace with a kiss.

"Not at all, *ma petit*. I must have you as well."

He turned to Elizabeth's parents. "I know it's a great deal to ask after having asked so much already, but I pray you'll consent to part with Abigail too—for a little while." Seeing Dr. Howard's face cloud, he continued quickly, "It was Cécile who suggested it as she can provide both of your daughters the finest instruction in the arts—especially music, which is her forte, as Lucien mentioned. I assure you that she is a woman of the highest morals and discipline, and her youngest, Charlotte, is barely a year older than Abigail. They'll be delightful companions, and with Thérèse to supervise them—"

Anne pressed her clasped hands to her bosom. "Oh, Samuel, think of what this means for our girls! I have such fond memories of my own education at the abbey in Paris—"

"Oh, very well," Dr. Howard conceded, throwing up his hands. "I can see I'm not going to win this debate—as usual! And . . . well, I can't deny my daughters the benefits they'll gain from a stay in France."

Abby ran to embrace him, and he bent to kiss her. Straightening, he turned back to Caledonne and shook his finger.

"But I'll not have my daughters turned into Papists, Alexandre."

"Even nuns didn't turn me into one, now did they?" Anne snapped in exasperation.

Teetering between dismay and laughter, Elizabeth began to speak, but Caledonne cut her off, from all appearances completely unruffled.

“I promise that no one will make any attempt to convert your daughters. I respect your Anglican faith as I hope you respect my Catholic faith. Are we not all Christians after all?”

“Indeed we are,” Elizabeth said firmly, fixing her father in a look that evoked a grimace.

“And I’ll be there to supervise their religious instruction,” Tess reminded him.

Dr. Howard raised his hands in surrender. “I meant no disrespect, but I’m sure you’d feel the same about your children were the situation reversed.”

Regarding him with a wry smile, Caledonne said, “My greatest concern would be that they remain believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The heat rose to Dr. Howard face, and he inclined his head. “Point taken.”

“How soon do you mean to sail, Alexandre?” Tess broke in.

He took her hand. “Can you be prepared to sail early Sunday morning? I cannot delay much longer.”

Tess and Anne exchanged glances. “I’ll consult with Sarah,” Anne said, referring to her black housekeeper, Sarah Moghrab. “I believe we can manage it.”

She bit her lip, and Elizabeth noted with a pang the shimmer of tears in her mother’s eyes. Suddenly it felt all too real that she was truly to sail far away for an unknown time from the only place she had ever known as home.

Caledonne got to his feet, the others rising with him. “I hate to break up such charming company, but it’s growing late and I must return to my ship.”

Dr. Howard ushered their guests to the front door, where one of Carleton’s Marines now stood guard, with others manning concealed posts all around the estate. Dark clouds scudded low overhead, driven before the icy wind. Promising to return to join them at dinner on the morrow, Caledonne’s party wrapped their cloaks around them and hurried to the coach waiting on the graveled carriageway at the foot of the steps, while Teissèdre lingered.

He bent over Elizabeth’s hand, then straightened and fixed her in an earnest gaze. “Unfortunately, mademoiselle, I’ll not have the pleasure of joining you tomorrow as I leave at sunrise for Valley Forge, and from there for Ohio Territory.” He paused before murmuring, “I’ll find him and bring him back if it is a thing possible to do.”

She looked up into his kindly face, tear blinded. “And if he refuses?”

His fingers tightened over hers. “Then you alone will be able to persuade him.”

The knot in her breast tightened at thought of the letter she had sent to Carleton immediately after his disappearance, as yet unanswered. “Alas,” she said tremulously, “in that I’ve had no success.”