

Excerpt From Native American Colonial Romance Novel Through the Fire



Chapter One

June 1758, the Colonial Frontier, the Allegheny Mountains of Western Virginia



Even the scent was different here, an earthy musk of living plants and crumbling leaves as ancient as the giant chestnuts. High above the forest canopy, a shrill cry sounded.

Rebecca Elliot glanced up and saw a red-tailed hawk plummet through the blue, snatching a dove on the wing. Buff-colored feathers exploded in a cloud, then, nothing. Limp dove in its talons, the hawk flew out of sight.

A chill prickled down Rebecca's spine. What other predators lurked in this ocean of trees? The stout walls of the log cabin she'd passed by earlier seemed a haven; a sturdy fort would be safer still. Urging her mare on, she caught up with her younger sister, Kate, riding just ahead of her.



Branches snagged Rebecca's blue linen skirts. She freed her hem, only to have a limb grab her wide-brimmed straw hat. Halting the mare, she tugged at the satin ties under her chin, arching in the sidesaddle to disentangle herself.

"Easy, Mrs. Elliot," Lieutenant McClure cautioned in low tones from behind. He guided his roan horse alongside hers.

She studied the young officer in his homespun shirt, breeches, and worn riding boots. The angle of his firm jaw, roughened with brown whiskers, reminded Rebecca of her late husband, John. But no man could be as handsome as her English captain, she thought, with the familiar ache.



Lieutenant McClure freed her hat and handed it to her. "Best keep it in your lap and your skirts well tucked up."

"Thank you," she said, smoothing back strands of blond hair that slipped loose from the knot at the nape of her neck. "Tell me, does this mountain have a name?" To know it would make this strange land seem somewhat tamed.

His watchful gray eyes met hers. "Shenandoah, Ma'am."

"Like the valley? I'm told Shenandoah means Daughter of the Stars. Such a lovely name."



His mouth tightened. "I suppose so. It's Indian."

Her sister Kate glanced back over her shoulder, the green bonnet framing her delicate features, warm brown eyes alight with curiosity. "Do you think we'll see any Indians, Lieutenant?"

"God, I hope not," he muttered.

Rebecca gazed at the blue-green ridges looming above her like the storm swells of an uncharted sea. "How much farther to the fort? My sister and I are eager to join our uncle."



Lieutenant McClure shrugged. "You'll be united with him soon enough. Lord willing," he added, and waved them both on.

In contrast to the men's guarded silence, a gold warbler chattered among the leaves. Shafts of late day sunlight streamed through breaks in the thickly clustered trees to touch the nodding heads of columbine and rosy mountain laurel. The woods were like a garden long ago abandoned.

She jerked up her head. A big black bear ran across the path just ahead of the lead militiaman and sent a flock of wild turkeys flapping from the laurel thicket. The soldier slowed. Rebecca steadied her nervous mare. Any comparisons to an idyllic garden took flight with the scattering birds. Nor could the lush fern and flowers relieve her growing fatigue. Legs and back aching, she shifted uncomfortably in the saddle.



Kate turned again, furrows creasing her brow.

“Are you dreadfully weary?”

“A bit. I’m not the horsewoman you are.”

“Perhaps we’ll make camp early,” Kate offered.

“Not if yesterday’s journey is the standard.” Rebecca summoned a reassuring smile. “Don’t fret for me, dearest. I’ll manage.” Somehow, she always had.

She looked beyond Kate to the soldiers guiding their mounts over



the rocky trail. What did this rugged militia, sent to reinforce Fort Warden, think of the two young English ladies traveling under their protection? No one had said anything, but the women’s presence had to be unusual, to say the least.

How far away Philadelphia seemed now; London was unspeakably distant. Was she mad bringing her sweet sister into this remote place? Whatever lay ahead couldn’t be worse than the life she and Kate had left behind.

Even so, doubt plagued Rebecca as the company rode into a grassy clearing among the trees. Deer lifted their heads in the muted evening light while a thrush trilled from high up in the boughs. This seemed a fair spot to make camp, and yet, her stomach fluttered uneasily.



Lieutenant McClure reined in his mount and held up a silencing hand as if he sensed something hidden in the leaves. Men warily turned their heads from side to side. Rebecca's eyes joined several dozen others searching fern-filled shadows—but only for an instant. Then the shadows came violently to life, and an explosion of musket fire tore through her every nerve.



Soldiers struck by the hail of lead shot screamed out. Some slumped over their horses. Others tumbled to the ground. Wounded men writhed in the crushed grass, their piteous cries in her ears, while the dead lay where they'd fallen. Crimson stains pooled beneath them.

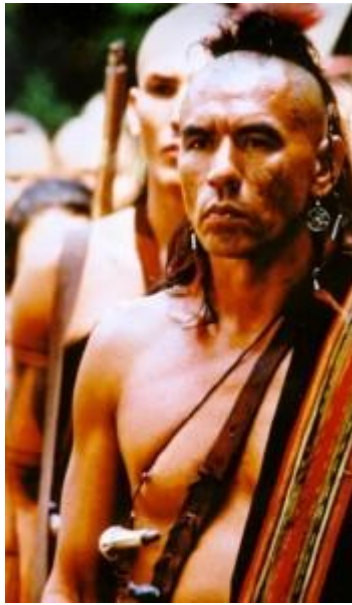
"Dear God!" Heart in her throat, Rebecca wheeled her frightened mare toward Lieutenant McClure.

He snatched the musket from his shoulder. "Stay low!" he yelled, leaping from his horse.

Soldiers scrambled to the ground to meet the unseen foe, but Rebecca and Kate crouched in their saddles fighting to control their skittish mounts. Abandoning the horses would leave them with no means of escape.

It crossed her desperate mind that neither she nor Kate knew how to reach the fort.

Another volley of shots flung more men to the grass.



Nothing could have prepared Rebecca for such an enemy. Elusive as ghosts one minute, a second later, bloodcurdling war cries rent the air as halfnaked warriors swept from the trees—so many more than the fast-falling soldiers. Bare arms swung lethal tomahawks with hellish fury.

Those men still able to stand fired into the surging tide, bloodying one brave's shoulder, grazing another's leg. Faces contorted, wounded men heaved themselves up from the grass and raised long knives to strike at their attackers.

She gaped in horror through the acrid haze of gun smoke—the taste of burnt powder in her mouth—as more soldiers fell screaming under brutal tomahawks. Sightless eyes stared up. The stench of battle filled her nose. She wanted to retch.

From the corner of her eye, Rebecca saw a warrior tearing right toward her and Kate. “Lieutenant!” she cried, battling the reins to twist her frantic mare away.

He planted himself before the two women, musket leveled. He fired, hurling the warrior back, but had no time to reload.

“There are too many! Get out of here, Mrs. Elliot!”



Throwing down his musket, he grasped his own tomahawk and disappeared into the smoky chaos of clashing men and bolting horses.

Rebecca fought numbing panic and turned to her sister. Kate sat wide-eyed atop her mount, her gaze riveted on the warriors as they wielded bloody scalping knives, stripping hunting shirts and powder horns from the fallen men. Rebecca's mare reared, tossing its head, eyes rolling in fear. She wrestled the reins for control. Kate's big gelding was also frantic, but she checked him with instinctive expertise.



"Kate! Give him his head! Go!" Rebecca shouted, slicing through the paralysis that gripped her sister.

Kate's gelding sprang away and galloped past several riderless horses with warriors lunging at the reins. Bent low over the horse's straining neck, she flew across the hazy clearing into the woods beyond.

Rebecca hauled on the reins with clammy palms, turning her mare's head to follow Kate.

A sinewy brave rushed at her, his mouth gaping in a fierce cry, bare arms outstretched. She



shrieked, lashing him across the face with her crop. He tore it from her hand and twisted a quick bunch of her skirts to rip her off the horse.

Jerked down by the force, she clung to the saddle with one hand and smashed her fist up under his chin. His head snapped back. She raked his painted cheek with her fingernails.

“Get away!” Kicking out hard, she drove her foot into his chest.

He stumbled back with a grunt, surprise on his bleeding face. But he’d be at her again in a tick. She thrust trembling fingers into the saddlebag and closed her hand around the loaded pistol that had belonged to her husband. With deadly will, she drew it out and pointed the gleaming barrel. She cocked the hammer just as John had taught her.

The brave jumped aside as she fired. The shot exploded uselessly. The mare whinnied, dancing sideways, pitching like a ship.

Rebecca clung shrieking to the sidesaddle. If she fell, she’d be trampled—or worse.

“Hold on!” a man yelled, his voice deep, arresting.



Black hair flying, dark eyes riveted, a powerful warrior sprinted toward her, his long legs vaulting over downed soldiers, muscular arms shoving other warriors out of his path.

“Naga! Ambelot!” Shouting strange words, he seized her assailant and flung him reeling over the grass.

The lesser man lifted conciliatory hands and spun away.

Rebecca met the newcomer’s black eyes in astonishment. Did he truly think to help her? If not, she might get off a clout to his jaw with the pistol butt before he grabbed her.

He extended one hand to her frenzied mare. “Easy, steady.” His calm manner and commanding presence soothed the alarmed animal. He stepped nearer, reaching for the bridle.

Triumphant whoops of victory rose around them.

The horse whinnied and reared again, hooves pawing the air. With a despairing cry, Rebecca flew from the saddle and tumbled to the unforgiving ground. She cracked the back of her head and lay in a fog. The riotous jubilation reached her as if from a distance. Vaguely, she sensed someone near.

“So fair you are,” a low voice said near her ear.

Strong arms lifted her, and she had the unreal sensation of being safe before blackness claimed her.



The French and Indian War, a Shawnee warrior, an English lady, blood vengeance, deadly pursuit, primal, powerful, passionate... **THROUGH THE FIRE**~

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*Scene from the 1992 film, *The Last of the Mohicans* pictured above.