

### Excerpt from "The Missing Heir" by Gail Ranstrom

Grace's bedroom door flew open and Mrs. Dewberry stood there, looking for all the world as if the sky had fallen.

"Oh, Mrs. Forbush! There's a man downstairs—a Red Indian! He wants in. I've tried to send him away, but he will not go."

Dianthe stood and glanced toward the corridor, her eyes round with excitement. "A Red Indian? How very intriguing. I wonder what he could want."

"I cannot imagine." The last thing Grace wanted to deal with at the moment was a confused foreigner. Well, she'd simply have to give him directions and send him on his way. "Where did you leave him, Mrs. Dewberry?"

"In the library, Mrs. Forbush. Couldn't very well leave him on the stoop, could I? What if the neighbors saw?"

Grace sighed. She was less concerned about what the neighbors would say than she was with the stranger himself. A Red Indian could be dangerous. What if she could not make him understand her, as Mrs. Dewberry had been unable to do? She composed herself and hurried down the stairs. She wanted to be rid of the man before Lord Barrington arrived.

Dianthe followed close on her heels. "I've never seen a Red Indian before," she whispered. "I wonder if they are as fierce as I've heard. Should I fetch a pistol?"

"Of course not," Grace said, bracing to open the library door. "But if he begins to make trouble, fetch Mr. Dewberry. I believe he is in the coach

house." She lifted her chin and opened the door silently.

A man, tall and lean, stood at the side table with his back to her, holding a brandy bottle and a glass. He was dressed in buckskin leather breeches, a jacket with fringed arms and yoke, and moccasins that extended to his knees and, above that, a long, lethal-looking knife strapped to his right thigh. His hair, long and bound back with a leather thong, was a medium brown with glints of light playing through it from the firelight. The set of his shoulders shifted almost imperceptibly and Grace knew he was aware of her presence.

Behind her, Dianthe drew in a soft breath and touched Grace's arm as if she would pull her back. Grace shook her head to warn Dianthe to silence. She sensed that she could show no weakness or uncertainty.

Taking two steps into the library, she affected what she hoped would pass for a pleasant but firm countenance. "Good evening, sir. Is there something I can do to assist you?"

He turned to her and she nearly gasped. He was definitely not an Indian. He appeared to be perhaps four or five years older than she, his skin was deeply tanned but his eyes were a greenish hazel. He had a strong, straight nose—an aristocratic nose—and full sensual lips. A shadow of whiskers darkened his jaw and, when he moved toward her, the brandy in his glass scarcely shifted for the smoothness and grace of his gait. He moved like an animal, silent and steady. His chest, bare beneath the loose laces of his jacket, was strongly muscled and Grace found her gaze riveted there. She *wanted* to look away, but she just couldn't. She was mesmerized.

He smiled, and the flash of white teeth completely disarmed her. Her heart pounded wildly and her breathing deepened. He extended one large hand to take hers and bowed over it. His lips were firm and cool, and the contact made her head swim. Heavens! What was wrong with her?

When he straightened, he flashed another of those startling smiles. "Hello, Aunt Grace."