

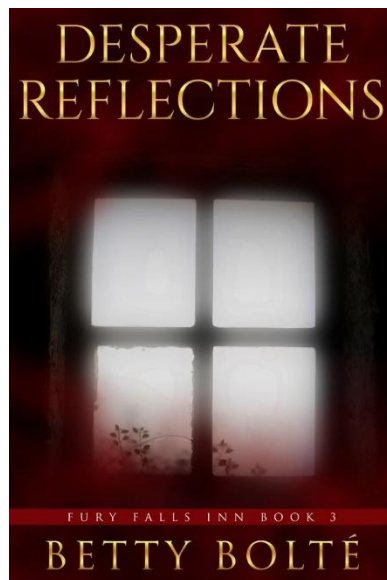
Excerpt of
Desperate Reflections

Fury Falls Inn

Book 3

By

Betty Bolté



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About

Desperate Reflections

Fury Falls Inn in 1821 Alabama. A place for ghosts, witches, and magic. A place of secrets and hidden dangers. Abram must protect his vulnerable sister from all of it. Before the dark side of magic ensnares her.

When Abram Fairhope grudgingly travels to the inn at his beloved sister's request, he has no idea of the dire revelations about to upend his life. His only desire is to fulfill his familial duty and then get back to his job as senator's aide. But the shocking truth of his very nature destroys all of his carefully laid plans. Worse still, he must use his newly revealed ability to shield his sister from terrible danger. Threats exist from within and without, especially the surprisingly pretty woman his jaded heart can't seem to ignore. Can he keep his sister safe and still protect his heart?

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Dedicated in loving memory to fellow author, chapter mate, critique partner, and dear friend, Anne Parent

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

This story continues the series of six supernatural historical fiction stories set in 1821 northern Alabama. With each of these, I fully expect I'll discover more about the history of this state I call home.

I'd like to thank my beta readers—Sue, Alicia, Danielle, and Chris—who read a prepublication version of *Desperate Reflections* and provided invaluable feedback. I appreciate your time, observations, and suggestions for improving the story!

I'd also like to thank readers like you who continue to inspire me to write stories with joy and passion. I always enjoy hearing from my readers, so please drop me a line at betty@bettybolte.com any time.

If you enjoy this book, please subscribe to my newsletter via www.bettybolte.com to be informed of the release of the rest of the books in the series. You can also learn more about me, my other books, and read excerpts of each book at my website. You may also enjoy learning more about the behind the scenes research and recipes included in this story at www.bettybolte.net.

Again, thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy *Desperate Reflections*.

Betty

Chapter One

Northern Alabama, August 1821

The time had come for a change. If they were meant to impress, then they would need to improve more than the furniture of the inn.

Cassie Fairhope paused at the doorway to the noisy dining room, quickly scanning the twenty cloth-covered tables, each surrounded by low-backed wooden chairs. Many of the chairs were occupied by working and business men, a tankard or mug in hand as they gestured while they conversed. Each table featured a candlestick and a small vase of flowers from her garden behind the inn. An immense fireplace centered on the left wall with vases of wilting flowers on the mantel. Ones she'd need to replace soon. The square piano she used to entertain guests graced the front corner, its fine wood workmanship evident in its gloss and detailing. Her fingers itched to dance over the ivories and sing some songs but she had more urgent business at the moment. She glanced to the right where the huge carved wood bar claimed dominance and a loving smile eased onto her lips at the scene before her.

Flint Hamilton rubbed a red rag over the new mahogany counter, his muscles flexing beneath the white sleeves of his dress shirt. His tan vest and black string tie made him look competent as well. As always, he was clean shaven and neatly turned out. He made a fine innkeeper for the Fury Falls Inn and an even finer suitor. Especially when he aimed smiling green eyes her way.

Despite her initial surprise at his presence a month ago, she now recognized her father's sound judgement in hiring him to take care of the place during his absence. Her ma had never forgiven Pa for leaving on an extended trip to Savannah to obtain new furniture for the inn while she and Cassie were in Nashville shopping for dresses and hats and other irrelevant bits and baubles. Leaving Flint in charge instead of Mercy. Since her ma's murder and subsequent haunting of the inn, Cassie doubted she'd ever forgive him. But then, Cassie doubted she'd ever forgive herself for her role in her mother's death either.

Cassie's heart lifted as Flint continued smiling at her, drawing her to him with a wink. She hurried toward him, forming her arguments as she stopped to rest her hands on the edge of the gleaming bar.

“Flint, I have an idea.” She tapped a finger on the bar. “About our serving attire.”

He carefully folded the towel and set it aside. “Such as?”

“A cleaner and more flattering appearance.” A clank drew Cassie’s attention to the door. Mandy Crawford hurried into the room carrying a tray loaded down with steaming plates. Mandy’s plain gray dress and rumped white apron appeared as bad as Cassie’s own. Indeed, the petite woman needed some color about her instead of wearing gray with her brown hair. She turned back to Flint. “What if I were to make Mandy and I some new matching outfits?”

“Is that necessary?” He stopped polishing the shiny surface. “Really?”

“Don’t you want to make a grand impression on Senator Graham when he comes in a couple of months?”

“Of course.” Flint pressed his palms onto the bar. “That’s why I replaced the scarred pine wood with this mahogany top.”

“Well, so do I. For my pa’s sake and yours. He’s coming all the way here because he’s heard of the benefits of the hot mineral springs. He’ll discover we offer much more than just the springs like so many others already have. Which is why people come here so frequently and repeatedly. But wearing these old rags won’t impress anyone.” She motioned to her dress with a grimace on her face. A tear split the cuff of her blouse. The dark green skirt had faded to lime in places and the hem was beginning to fray. “All I need is the material and to purchase some dressy collars and cuffs and buttons. I’m sure we could find what I need in Huntsville.”

Mandy strode over, tapping the empty tray against her leg as she halted. “What do you need in town?”

Flint picked up the towel, draping it over his arm. “Cassie wants to make you both some uniforms to wear while serving. What do you think?”

Cassie peered at the other woman, noting her brown hair pulled into a loose bun on top of her head. She wasn’t a beauty by any means but she was pretty and her quiet demeanor and simple goodness shone from light brown eyes. Perhaps a dark blue skirt and white blouse would best emphasize her features.

“I don’t know why it’s necessary.” Mandy rested the tray against her leg. “Am I not dressed decently enough for you?”

Guilt swept through Cassie when she sensed the unease emanating from the other waitress. “It’s more that I think it’s important to present a neat and clean appearance for our guests.” She hadn’t intended to hurt the other woman’s feelings by

suggesting anything amiss but the other woman didn't know that. "It's not anything you've done wrong, I promise."

Mandy pursed her lips for a brief moment. "Fine with me. Can you manage or do you need help with making whatever you're making?"

"I'd welcome your assistance if you'd like." Mandy didn't linger after her shift ended, instead immediately heading for wherever she lived. "I won't have time to work on them until after the evening rush, though. Do you mind staying?"

"I'd prefer to go home before it gets dark." Mandy shrugged and hefted the tray, preparing to go back to the kitchen. "But if you need help, I can do so once in a while."

"Then thank you. Perhaps you'd consider staying overnight when you do. You can share with me."

"Sounds like a fine idea." Mandy tapped the tray against her leg again. "Right now, I've got to get fresh linens for the tables."

"Go on, then." She gave Mandy a brief hug and then addressed Flint. "When might we go into town for supplies?"

The sooner she could begin the better she'd like it. She had become self-conscious of her attire and longed to freshen her wardrobe. At least when serving meals and drinks in the dining room. Or when she entertained the guests at the square piano.

Flint opened his mouth to reply and then glanced at the doorway. Cassie followed his astonished gaze. A young man sporting sideburns and slicked hair hesitated in the door, dressed in the most elaborate outfit she'd ever seen. Obviously he'd hired a tailor to make the bright blue frock coat with wide collars. His light-colored trousers included straps that wrapped under his square-toed shoes. He held a tall silk top hat in one hand and a saddle bag in the other as he paced toward them.

Flint reacted first. He crossed the room to greet the stranger. "Welcome to the Fury Falls Inn, sir. How may I be of service?"

"I have come on business." The stranger stopped, glancing around the room and then meeting Flint's carefully arranged countenance.

Mandy smiled shyly at him as she hurried out of the dining room to finish preparing for the next rush of customers. He didn't appear to notice her, continuing to regard Flint with cold disdain.

Flint shrugged and shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not interested in whatever you're selling today."

“You think I’m selling something?” The man pressed his lips together for a moment, annoyance simmering in his eyes. “I’m here on personal business, not sales.”

Cassie joined Flint as he addressed the tall stranger. Or was he? His piercing blue-eyed gaze met hers and she blinked. Those eyes seemed very familiar. Tall and broad-shouldered he reminded her of her oldest brother, Giles, in the way he carried himself. He had the same dark hair, too. Then she noticed a thin jagged scar on his strong chin and she squealed with delight.

Flint startled and twisted around. “Cassie?”

She didn’t blame him for being confused by her reaction. A wave of joy crashed through her as she smiled at her brother’s quizzical expression. He didn’t recognize her. She could see it in his wary expression. She’d fix that right away.

“Abram!” Cassie ran to her brother and threw her arms around him, uncaring she might rumple his dandified self. “You came.”

He dropped the bag and then gripped her waist with one hand to brace against her impact. “Cassandra, I presume?”

She gave him one last squeeze and then stepped back. “It’s been too long. I’m glad you’re finally here.”

“I am very pleased to see you looking so fine.” He glanced around the room and then back to her. “Not that I will remain in this god-forsaken part of the country, of course.”

“Oh, but you must.” He acted so pompous and distant she almost didn’t recognize the carefree, laughing brother she once played games with. He had to be inside this haughty creature somewhere. “Wait until I tell you what Ma has finally revealed about our family.”

Abram stiffened, pulling his shoulders back and lifting his chin to look down his nose at her. “I shall only be here long enough to pay my respects to her grave and then I must return to my employment with Senator Alexander Thompson. He can only spare my efforts for a brief time.”

Her brother’s attitude irked her but she strove to hide her irritation behind a smile. He’d journeyed all the way from the Territory of Columbia to treat her like she was a pesky child. He had much to learn about her and the rest of the family, but she’d just start with his specific request and see what happened next. “Then I guess you want to follow me out back to where she’s buried.”

Flint hung the towel on a rail. "I think I shall tag along. You never know who you might find out back."

Abram lifted a brow at Flint's remark. "And you are?"

"My apologies. I should have introduced myself. I'm Flint Hamilton, the interim innkeeper while your father is away on business."

"And he's my beau." Cassie wrapped an arm around Flint's waist.

"I see." Abram tapped his top hat into place. "Shall we go?"

"Do you want me to find Giles?" The surprise flashing in her brother's eyes made her smile. "I know he's been looking forward to seeing you."

"How is my older brother?" Abram glanced around the room as if afraid Giles might pop out and grab him.

"Doing just fine." Cassie took hold of Abram's arm to draw his gaze. "Since you want to see Ma's grave and pay your respects, let's go before I have to get back to work. Ready?"

"I am as prepared for the event as I can ever be." Abram tapped his hat again as his Adam's apple slid up then down. He kicked his bag behind the bar and nodded once. "Lead the way."

The sight greeting Abram as his sister pushed through the door onto a covered porch made him sniff with disdain. The structure, a large dog trot house with two separate buildings connected by a covered passage, must have been built by farm hands since it appeared roughly slapped together to his trained eye. True, the brick and stone structure looked solid and sturdy, but the floor boards of the covered passage were not snugged together properly. Then when she led him through and down the wooden steps into the backyard he barely restrained a weary sigh at the row of clapboard outbuildings. He'd never resided in such a mediocre hostelry. Not since finally achieving his goal of working for the national government.

He heard Flint close the door to the inn, followed by his heavy footsteps as he hurried to catch up to them as they neared the one place he knew he must go but did not want to. He'd only made the trip to satisfy a duty not a desire. After his parents sent him and his brothers away to fend for themselves, he harbored no love toward either of them. Only his sister, if he was being honest. She was the only one who held sway over him.

"The family cemetery is over this way, Abram." Cassie sauntered beside him, obviously in no hurry to cross the grassy expanse toward the picket fenced area.

"We put in the marker a few days ago," Flint said as he fell into step with Cassie's leisurely pace.

"A decidedly appropriate and respectful touch." Abram would rather be anywhere but strolling through the grass toward his mother's grave, so he didn't rush either. "You never said how she died."

Cassie glanced at him and then away. "She was shot in the head in her bedroom."

"What? Why?" Shock ripped through him at his mother's violent death. He had no idea she'd been killed. Thinking instead she'd had some accident or illness. He swallowed the bile rising at the grisly image forming in his mind.

She pulled him to a halt. "Some men thought she was hiding a treasure in her room."

"Cassie, don't." Flint took her free hand and interlocked his fingers with hers. "I'll say it again. It's not your fault."

"What exactly is not your fault?" Abram peered at her as she chewed her lower lip for a second. She'd grown into a beautiful young woman, but her guilt shaded her features. Dimming the light in her eyes and flattening the lines of her mouth.

"I let it slip in the dining room that I'd been helping Ma with her treasures." She met his surprised gaze with tearful eyes. "It's what she called her trinkets and memorabilia."

"But you didn't pull that trigger, so stop beating yourself up about it." Flint tugged her around to face him.

Abram stood silently, giving himself a moment to consider what she'd said. What she blamed herself for.

"I know in my head I didn't kill her but my heart still mourns for her." She accepted Flint's light kiss and then sighed. "Let's go. I have much to tell Abram after he pays his respects."

Flint arched his brows. "That's going to be quite a conversation."

"Why is that?" So many questions and mysteries seemed to simmer around his sister. He'd not anticipated stumbling into such a situation but he would only stay a day or two and then turn his black gelding toward home and the hustle and bustle of

government hearings and senate business. He skimmed the area, a foreboding filling his chest as he did.

Cassie gave him a searching look and then started humming a lullaby as they continued toward the metal gate leading into the cemetery.

"Why are you humming?" Abram sucked in a long breath as they drew closer to the grave. He held it for the count of three and let it out slowly.

"I'm told my voice helps calm people." She grinned mischievously at him. "Right, Flint?"

"Indeed." Flint chuckled as he opened the gate to the family cemetery.

"I don't need a lullaby. I'm not a child." Abram inspected the enclosed space before him as tension built in his core. He really didn't want to move any closer but that was one of the reasons he'd come. The other more important reason was to make sure his little sister whom he'd always adored was properly taken care of and in a safe situation. Then he'd feel comfortable going about his life as planned.

Within the surrounding fence, a dark gray marble stone glimmered in the shade of the trees. It wasn't a very big space. What struck him most forcefully was its lone occupant. Only one marker in the cemetery. The only grave, too.

"We had to bury her quickly because of the hot summer days when she died." Cassie stopped in front of the gate. "A simple ceremony led by Sheridan and it was over."

"Who is Sheridan?" Abram stood beside her, reluctant to move closer to his mother's gravesite.

"The inn's esteemed cook and a dear family friend." Flint held the gate while Cassie strode through. "After you, Abram."

"Sheridan is my best friend, truth be told," Cassie said. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

Abram walked past the other man, sensing disapproval in his eyes. He lifted his chin a touch. Flint's opinion was of no importance. Abram stood beside Cassie, reading the simple inscription carved on the face of the stone. His mother's name and dates of birth and death. Very plain and factual. But then what more would he expect from such a place?

Flint stiffened beside him with a brief intake of air. "Cassie."

She followed his gaze and Abram glanced to where they both looked. Then he peered closer at the woman's figure hovering near the fence. Wearing a light blue dress, her ash-blond hair flowing down her back, and her unique aqua eyes twinkling at him. Slowly he realized the identity of the translucent woman.

"What...how?" He stammered at the image of his mother and fell back several strides.

"I should have warned you." Cassie turned toward him, reaching out with one hand as if to take his hand. "It's okay. Don't be afraid."

He stared at the specter for another second and then shook his head. "No. It's not possible. It's a terrible trick or a horrid joke."

"Welcome, my son. Don't be afraid." Mercy drifted closer to him with a slight smile. "I won't hurt you."

Never would he have imagined he'd encounter a ghost. Definitely not his mother's. He had not prepared himself. He'd had no expectation of seeing his mother, alive or dead. As she closed the distance between them, fear built inside like a volcano preparing to erupt. With a terrified scream, he fell back a step, then another, and then found himself spinning around and racing across the yard.

The image of the ghostly woman in a blue dress—his *dead* mother for goodness sake—hovering above the earth refused to dissipate in his mind's eye. Her gentle smile did nothing to calm the terror clawing inside at the thought of her haunting the inn and its inhabitants. More to the point, haunting him. One comforting thought in relenting and making the journey to the inn was that he'd not need to see or talk to his mother. Ever again. Yet there she stood—or rather floated, welcoming him to her gravesite. Her burial place. His shoulders rocked at the idea of her presence as a specter. Why was she lingering and not going on to the next realm where she belonged?

He'd made an utter fool of himself but his feet wouldn't stop carrying him toward the passage. If he were a horse, he'd gallop away. A strange tingling started in his hands and he glanced down to see black hair on the back of one. Shocked, he blinked and it vanished. Now he was seeing things. Must be the adrenaline flashing through his veins.

A few more strides and he slowed to trot up the steps and inside the first door he came to. Perhaps he'd go back to the dining room where Flint had been working at the bar and get a drink. Anything to remove the taste of terror from his mouth. He was unaccustomed to being anything but in control of the situation. He'd made a career out

of being prepared, steady in a crisis, and ready to tackle any problem with calm assurance. Or at least the appearance of calm, adjusting to lightning quick changes with aplomb, despite the turmoil around him. Until that moment when he'd seen his mother's ghost. Whiskey. That's what he needed. He burst into the large entrance hall of the inn and crashed into a woman carrying a stack of cloth.

"Oh!" The girl's hands flew up to protect herself from the impact of his larger frame into her slender form.

He steadied her, but the pile of linens landed in a heap on the floor. Her upper arms quivered in his grasp, alerting him to her shock. "Are you all right, miss?"

The mouse of a girl blinked at him from wide pale brown eyes, her brown hair mussed and gray dress rumpled. Her gaze sharpened as she took a calming breath. "Pray watch where you are going, sir. Now I've got to find fresh napkins before the dinner rush."

Scanning the unfortunate girl, he noted the dearth of color about her person. She was very plain and simple in every regard. Not worth his time or attention, yet he'd failed in his prime aim of presenting a sterling appearance and making the best first impression possible at all times. If not for the scary incident in the backyard, he'd not be in this position. He owed the woman an apology and then he'd depart and find that drink to calm down before he faced his sister and her suitor. He owed them an apology as well.

"Please forgive my abrupt entrance, miss." He nodded in deference to her. "I had a fright and didn't handle the incident well. My apologies."

She glanced pointedly at his hands still clasping her arms. "If you'd be so kind..."

He grimaced as he released her. "I am sorry." He adjusted his top hat which by some miracle remained on his head even if askew. At least he wasn't in a state of undress during his embarrassment. "If you'll excuse me, I shall leave you in peace."

"A gentleman would assist a lady in putting things to rights before removing himself from the scene of the disorder he created." She propped her hands on her slender hips and glared at him for a moment then shook her head in annoyance. "Never mind. I'll manage."

No girl had ever spoken to him with such vinegar in her tone. Finding women willing to go out on the town with him was a simple task. His most recent female companion had even kissed him goodbye and was sitting at home waiting upon his return. Of average height, she was graceful and sweet, matching her personality to her

appearance with perfection. In fact, he thought her perfect in most every way. Except, perhaps, in her tendency to cling. By contrast the wench staring at him was short and dull, except for her sharp tongue.

The young woman shook her head and then stooped to begin gathering the fallen linens while he lingered, unsure whether to help or flee. He'd botched everything since he'd arrived at the Fury Falls Inn. First, he'd been wrongly accused of being a salesman when he thought his attire entirely appropriate, then insulting his sister by not recognizing her, followed by proving himself a coward. But to have careened into a woman and caused such a disaster proved the worst thing he could have done. He bent over to pick up several of the napkins and add them to the pile she was rebuilding on the floor. She didn't even glance at him but finished folding the last square of cloth, then lifted the pile as she rose to her full height. Her head barely reached his shoulder as she hugged the pile to her chest.

"I suppose now you expect my gratitude?"

He shook his head. "I would prefer your forgiveness."

She inclined her head and then straightened. "Since you did help some, then yes."

He tipped his hat to her, relieved at the gentling of her voice. "Thank you. Now I must go before I embarrass myself again."

She nodded once and then spun on her heel and strode through a swinging door into what proved to be a busy kitchen. He hadn't even learned her name. She obviously worked at the inn, so he'd likely cross paths with her. With good fortune he wouldn't embarrass himself again in her presence. He stood there for another moment until the door closed behind her. Then foregoing the temptation of a drink he reversed direction and went back outside to find his sister to try to make amends for his cowardly actions.

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