

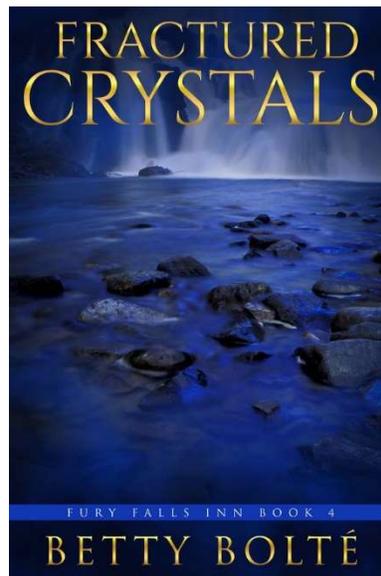
Excerpt of
Fractured Crystals

Fury Falls Inn

Book 4

By

Betty Bolté



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About

Fractured Crystals

Fury Falls Inn in 1821 Alabama. A place for ghosts, witches, and magic. A place of secrets and hidden dangers. A place where Daniel Fairhope's family kept life-changing secrets from him.

His sister's magic is coveted by two powerful, angry witches intent on her willing compliance with their demands. Worse, a witch hunter is on the loose, determined to rid the area of all witches. Struggling to cope with those threats, Daniel discovers his own unique and powerful ability as well as those of his estranged brothers. Abilities they'll need to unite to protect their sister and the family secrets. But these challenges all pale in comparison to convincing the captivating woman he meets at the inn to trust him before she breaks his heart.

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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 who read a prepublication version of *Fractured Crystals* 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 and all of my others at www.bettybolte.net.

Again, thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy *Fractured Crystals*.

Betty

Chapter One

Northern Alabama, September 1821

The time had finally arrived. He'd acted upon his best instincts and business sense. He wouldn't change his mind even if his recent actions might upset the girls. Now all he could do was wait for the desired response. Flint polished the mahogany bar with a soft cloth, the dining room nearly ready for the imminent mid-afternoon dinner rush. He nodded to a pair of men dressed in refined suits relaxing at a table, enjoying some quiet conversation over a drink on the far side of the room. The patrons of the Fury Falls Inn deserved the best service. They'd been loyal and supportive of his efforts over the last several months in improving their experience when they visited. Even if they weren't aware of the hidden magical and spectral qualities of the people who lived in – or rather haunted – and worked at the remote inn.

Cassie sashayed into the room, her stylish uniform gracing her slender form as she approached. The blue skirt and white blouse combined to enhance her features and give her a polished look. She'd done a fine job of taking meal orders and providing what the customers wanted. Her caring nature was one of the reasons he'd fallen in love with her. Her generosity and intelligence all came wrapped up in a pleasing package. Long blonde hair braided but left to hang down her back. Pale blue eyes that twinkled when she looked at him, drawing him into her enchanting realm with ease.

Petite and slender, he loved when she smiled with her not quite even teeth. A beautiful young woman he was proud to call his girl. However, with the senator's visit only a couple of months away he'd had to make some more changes to bring the inn up to snuff. He swallowed hard as she neared, dreading revealing to her what he'd committed to without forewarning her.

He snapped the towel and then hung it on the rail behind the bar. Propping his hands on his hips, he surveyed the large room filled with twenty cloth-covered tables. Cassie and Mandy had already laid the tables and arranged the vases of flowers and refreshed the candles on each, ready to light. He knew the kitchen staff were hard at work putting the finishing touches to the menu items. He sniffed the subtle scent of spice and the aroma of baking bread. This afternoon's dinner included one of interim cook Matt Simmon's specialties, curried chicken and rice, which had become popular after the cookery competition the previous month. With Sheridan Drake, the renowned cook of the inn, and Zander off to Savannah to find the cook's wife, Matt had filled the role with ease. Which didn't come as much of a surprise since they'd recently discovered Matt and Zander were actually Sheridan's long lost sons. But Flint really hoped the older man would return before the senator arrived. Two excellent cooks on staff would be far better than one.

Cassie braced her hands on the edge of the bar top, leaning forward to peer closer at his eyes. "What's on your mind? You look far away."

In some ways, he really wished he were far away. But he'd not turn his back on his girl when she needed him. His right hand gravitated to the flintlock pistol on his

hip. He'd not leave her unprotected only perhaps disappointed. "I have something I need to tell you."

"You're worried. What have you done?"

Of course she could sense his feelings. He'd nearly forgotten her unique ability in the midst of stewing over how she'd take his news. "I placed an ad in the paper, looking to hire men to wait on the customers." There, he'd said it. He studied her reaction as she processed what he'd said. "I think it's time."

"Really?" She mulled over his statement and then gave him a big smile. "When will they start?"

"You're not upset?" He examined her expression, seeing only her lovely features. No hurt or disappointment lingered in her eyes or drooped her tempting lips.

"No, I'm glad to have more time to manage my garden." She clasped her hands together. "And I'll be able to sing more. I really want to be better at singing. Then we'll have more entertainment for the senator you're so worried about."

Relief swept through him at her easy acceptance of what he considered a momentous decision. Until her brother Abram had come to the inn and told him about the expectations of more refined customers, such as the senator, to have male waiters instead of female, he hadn't given it a second thought. But if the higher quality establishments in the nation's capital only hired men to wait on the customers, he had to make the change. Reginald Fairhope had hired him to not only manage the inn but to make the necessary improvements to suitably impress the esteemed official.

"I'm glad you're not offended." He dropped his hands to slide them into his front trouser pockets. "I'd hoped you might appreciate having more time for your other concerns."

"You may want to hire some more people to help Matt, too. At least until Sheridan comes home."

"Is he struggling? He hasn't said anything." What else had the younger man been keeping to himself? Flint would have a talk with him, make sure he had everything he needed.

"I don't think he's struggling, but it would make it easier with a couple more scullery maids."

"I'll think about it." He pulled his hands free and rested them on the bar. "We should have a good crowd this afternoon. It's a nice day and Matt is preparing his curry chicken again."

"That always brings them out. Will you do another competition?" She swept her gaze around the room and then met his eyes. "The first one was a fine time."

"We'll see what your father has to say when he gets back from his trip." He hoped the man would return sooner rather than later and bring the new furniture for the inn with him.

The inn's owner had departed in late June to oversee the building of new beds, tables, chairs, wardrobes, and more. He'd contacted a company in Savannah, Georgia, which he had been told made fine wood furniture suitable for the inn. The expense of the large order prompted Reggie to spontaneously decide he needed to go supervise, to

ensure it indeed met his expectations. Reggie had ridden into Huntsville to speak to Flint's father about having Flint fill in for him while Reggie was away. Then Reggie left for Georgia while Flint took up residence at the inn. He'd never forget the fury evident on the face of Cassie's mother, Mercy, when she found Flint in charge after she and Cassie had returned from a shopping trip to Nashville. Things had been rocky between them ever since.

"I want him home, too." Cassie shook her head, the light in her eyes dimming as her blonde braid whipped side to side. "I need to talk to him about so many things."

"Maybe you could write to him..." But honestly how could she possibly share all the revelations and secrets in one letter?

After Mercy's murder, and her ghost subsequently haunting the inn, Cassie had written to her brothers, asking them to come to pay their respects and to help her until their father returned. But then she discovered she could sense emotions in others as well as affect those emotions through her singing. As each of her brothers arrived, they'd discovered a unique ability they hadn't known they possessed. First Giles with his superhuman strength and role as Guardian of the family, in particular of Cassie. Then Abram with his shapeshifting. The other two, Daniel and Silas, hadn't yet arrived so remained mysteries as to their abilities. He imagined receiving a letter from her with the details of their abilities and pressed his lips together. A letter with such information would prove difficult to believe.

She shook her braid harder. "I'd much rather sit down and witness his reaction to everything Ma has told us."

She stilled then, her gaze turning inward for several seconds. He waited, assuming she was sensing something with her psychic abilities. Then she grinned at him.

“What?” He couldn’t possibly guess what she had discovered, but it was obviously something good.

“Daniel is getting closer.”

Flint blinked at her, struggling to grasp how she could possibly know. “How can you tell?”

“He’s emoting a sense of urgency, like he’s flustered and anxious. He’s nearly here now.”

“Great.” Another brother of hers that he’d have to win over. Despite his own lack of magical abilities or even anything special about him.

He was a simple man with simple desires. His only supposed ability was being able to speak to ghosts. But most everyone could do so with Mercy’s haint so even that didn’t prove special. He wished he had some capability which would set him apart, make him seem worth being part of her family. But he found himself striving to measure up with a family filled with witches and warlocks, psychics, shapeshifters, and who knew what else. He faced a tough road ahead competing with magic. What ability would Daniel have? Only time would tell.



The nondescript borrowed nag half trotted, half walked up the long dirt lane leading toward the Fury Falls Inn. No amount of kicking or clucking could convince her to increase her pace despite Daniel's former frantic efforts. He'd given up urging her to go faster because nothing worked to make his desire reality. His sturdy gelding had unfortunately bruised a hoof and he'd been forced to leave him behind in Knoxville. The only other horse available proved to be barely sufficient and slow to boot. At least the mare's slow pace gave him the opportunity to now assess the property where his sister waited for him. Had been waiting for him much longer than he'd prefer. He hated the thought of people waiting for him, especially when he should have already arrived.

The large building dominated the hillside. He passed a lattice-sided gazebo off to the right, covered in flowering vines. An inviting retreat he'd need to investigate. The two-story red brick and stone inn ahead of him was actually two structures joined together with a covered porch between them, a structure also known as a dog-trot house. Glass windows sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. A pair of chimneys flanked either end of the shake-shingled roof. A welcoming front porch stretched across the entire front of the structure with a table and pair of chairs to the left of the double doors leading inside. A single door provided an entry point on the right side. The dirt lane ended at a circular carriageway with a crushed stone surface. Very clever and progressive idea. Such an enhancement would reduce the mud and dust guests would otherwise encounter upon arrival.

Off to the left a fair-sized barn with fenced pastures boasted not only horses but also cows and hogs. Chickens pecked in the dirt in front of the barn. Four dogs nosed

about the several coaches and carriages as well as men mounted on horses. Obviously, the popular inn and its hot springs attracted a steady flow of folks to visit. Clouds drifted across the pale blue sky, hinting at rain later in the day. In the distance the foothills rose in their fall glory. The entire place invited him to ride closer and become part of the hustle and bustle.

He found a spot at one of two hitching rails and dismounted, looping the leather reins over the warm wood. Several men in work clothes and brimmed hats stomped up the few steps to the wood plank floor of the porch and through the open double doors. No point in standing outside when his mission waited inside. He snatched his saddlebags from behind the saddle and hurried after them. Surely Cassie was anxious for his appearance since receiving his letter announcing his impending arrival after so many delays. At least, he hoped for her welcoming greeting.

Pausing a few strides inside the entrance hall, he surveyed his surroundings. Sparingly furnished, the inn was clean and refreshing. A side table beside the door held a large vase of colorful flowers to scent the air. A swinging wood door in front of him across the wide expanse revealed a bustling kitchen as a young brunette woman in a tidy blue skirt and white blouse pushed through with a tray of steaming plates. She hurried around the corner to enter the large dining room replete with cloth-covered tables he could espy through an arched doorway to the left of where he stood. A single door to the right led outside to the covered porch between the buildings. Cassie's home was not fancy but in a rustic sort of way it welcomed nonetheless. He needed to find her and then get the hell out of the inn. His real life, friends, and students all waited for him

back in Tennessee. Back where he had the respect and admiration he'd worked so hard to attain in his short life. Unlike in this relatively wild outlying area, one so remote it seemed even worse than he imagined. Voices sounded from the dining room and he started to turn toward them when a pair of tall, black-haired men emerged from inside and then hesitated when they saw him.

"Daniel?"

The somewhat shorter of the two men peered at him as he resumed his progress across the space between them. A burly man, with a powerful stride, indeed. The other man was a couple of inches taller but not as stocky. They resembled each other, both having the same jet black hair and strong jaws. The taller man also wore a small scar on his chin that looked familiar.

Daniel glanced between the two and suddenly knew them. His older brothers. Despite the years since he'd last seen them, they hadn't changed all that much. Taller and stronger, they had matured into self-confident men. Unlike him. Even his dark blond hair marked him as different. "Giles. Abram."

Giles, the stockier of the two, started to hold out his hand and then switched to pull Daniel into a brief bear hug. "It's good to see you."

The strength of the hug nearly crushed his chest and tipped him forward until he was released. When had Giles become so blazing strong? Regaining his balance with some little difficulty after the unexpected embrace, Daniel glanced at Abram. "Why are you guys here?"

"Cassie asked us to come." Abram shrugged with a smirk on his lips. "Just like

you.”

“I’m sorry I’m so late getting here. I hate that it took so long, that I’m late to the game, so to speak, but I had to…”

“Finish business. Yeah, we know,” Giles said with a brief chuckle. “Are you still taking on more tasks than you have time for?”

“No, I don’t—” He’d had to wait for a substitute professor to arrive to teach his natural science students before he could leave the college. Leaving in the middle of the term felt like abandoning them. They relied on him and he’d let them down. But he agreed with Cassie that he had an obligation to come ensure her safety with their father away and her left alone with strangers. Apparently Giles didn’t want to hear the reasons for his delay. Bristling at the interruption to his explanation, he glared at his brothers. “What do you mean?”

“That’s a surprise if so. You used to overcommit all the time.” Abram tilted his head as if to examine him from a different perspective. “I remember trying to teach you how to say no to requests but it didn’t take. But I guess it’s possible you’ve changed since then.”

“I have changed in many ways since last we were together.” Daniel blinked at his brothers, grappling with the implications. He drew in a deep breath and released it slowly, striving to calm his flustered self. Best to do what he came to do and extricate himself from the situation. “Anyway, where is Cassie? I came to see her, not you two.”

“She’s preparing for the afternoon rush but I know she’s anxious to see you. I’ll get her.” Abram spun around and went back to the dining room with long strides and

disappeared through the arched doorway.

“So, what took you so long to answer her request?” Giles folded his arms over his broad chest. “Playing teacher still?”

“I’m a professor, not just a teacher.” A distinction he would have loved to make to his mother. She’d scoffed at the idea of him becoming an instructor of any kind when he’d declared his intention as a boy. Sadly, her untimely death meant he’d missed any chance of talking to her let alone indulging in a bit of bragging over his success.

“I know. Don’t get your drawers in a bunch.” Giles chuckled again. “I’m sure you try your best.”

“What is your problem? I have only just arrived and you’re giving me a hard time.” He straightened his spine, looking down slightly at his oldest brother. He may not feel confident all of the time, but he did when it came to his profession. The stellar education he’d received ensured he could teach others about those topics he was most knowledgeable about. Nobody could take that away. “Why?”

“No reason. Just joking with you.” Giles dropped his arms to shove his hands into his front jeans pockets. “I’ll stop if it’s bothering you.”

Daniel refrained from rolling his eyes with an effort. “Thank you.”

The supposed banter didn’t settle well on his tense shoulders. He’d not traveled so far to be insulted by his oldest brother. Nor did the poking at his ego after not seeing his family in so long. How could any of them know how he’d changed from his many challenges and experiences? Giles simply stood there with a steady look, as if assessing him and finding him lacking in some inexplicable way. Or perhaps waiting for him to

do or say something worthwhile. But what?

“Daniel!” Cassie’s sweet voice called across the entrance hall as she trotted toward him. She flung her arms around him, pulling him close. “I’ve missed you.”

“Hi, Cassie.” He hugged her for a moment and then stepped back to look at her more closely. “You’re all grown up into a beautiful woman. Look at you.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She blushed at his compliment, a smile flashing onto her lips before her expression sobered. “Now that you are, we need to talk.”

“If you’d like.” Something in his sister’s suddenly serious tone set his teeth on edge but he could tell she felt it was an urgent matter. A jolt of concern squared his shoulders. “I assume you mean now?”



“It’s important but doesn’t need to happen immediately.” Cassie regretted the worry in her brother’s expression after her declaration, but it couldn’t be helped. He needed to be made aware of the situation he’d walked into but she didn’t want to scare him in the process of revealing all of the family secrets. Still, surely he’d expect to visit his mother’s grave. “Do you want to pay your respects to Ma’s grave out back or settle in first?”

“You mean, she’s buried here? I hadn’t considered where she might be resting in peace.” He blinked his deep green eyes at her several times. Cleared his throat and glanced at his brothers. “I suppose settle in and freshen up before embarking on that personal chore.”

"I see you have your bags." She'd not correct him in his assumption that their mother was resting in peace yet. Still, she didn't blame him for delaying the moment when he went out to the family cemetery. He'd not had any dealings with their parents in years and to come to the inn at Cassie's summons was a gift in and of itself. His reluctance and nervousness felt normal as a result. She nodded as she looked to her other brothers. "You two need to determine where he'll sleep."

"I have room in my chamber for now," Giles said. "Until Zander comes back."

"Who do we have here?" Flint approached the group by the front doors. Curiosity blanketed his features as he approached. He wore his auburn and gold hair loose about his shoulders, making her fingers itch as always to run through it. Tall and kind, he glanced at her with his jade green eyes before meeting Daniel's expectant gaze. Flint held out his hand to Daniel when he reached Cassie's side. "Welcome to the Fury Falls Inn. I'm Flint Hamilton the innkeeper."

Daniel clasped Flint's hand and shook once. "Professor Daniel Fairhope."

"My brother." Cassie smiled up at Daniel, tapping his elbow once. "We're only missing Silas now."

"You invited all of us?" Daniel frowned slightly at her. "Why?"

"I can answer that." Giles pulled his hands free and pointed at Cassie. "She was feeling alone and abandoned by our parents and wanted her brothers to come to her. To rebuild the family. Only..."

Cassie held up a hand in front of Giles. "Don't. Let him get settled and then we'll go out to the gazebo to have the real talk with him. It's more private. Will that suffice?"

Giles shrugged his broad shoulders. "Fine."

"It's kind of you to offer to share your chamber, Giles. But why don't Abram and Daniel share a room upstairs in the residence side? Giles is already sharing with Matt and Zander, or will when Zander returns." Flint glanced to see Abram's reaction.

"Would that suit?"

Cassie sensed confusion streaming from Daniel, acceptance from Giles, and reluctance from Abram. She met Abram's placid eyes with a quirked brow. "Are you in agreement with that idea, Abram?"

He hesitated, resignation in his mind, and then shrugged. "I believe so." Abram motioned for Daniel to follow him. "Come on, brother. I'll show where you can put your things."

Abram led Daniel toward the side door leading out on the dog-trot porch and closed it behind them. Cassie turned to Flint and Giles, Daniel's concern over the mare flowing through her. "His horse, a brown mare, needs to be taken care of."

"I'm heading out that way anyway to check the area. I'll take care of the horse." Giles flipped his hat onto his head then crossed to the double doors and outside.

She reached out to him, his concerns escalating inside as he departed. The farther apart they were the more he worried about what might happen in his absence. Her Guardian deeply cared for her and wanted to ensure her safety. The connection they shared grew taut, vibrating with tension and uneasiness, so she sent her own calm to him until his disquiet eased. Slightly.

"What are you going to do now?" Flint asked, grasping her shoulders lightly and

drawing her regard. "Wait on customers or sing?"

"Probably a little of both, actually. Depending on how many customers we have." She loved the care shining in his eyes and his kind strength. Who was she kidding? She loved everything about the man she'd promised to marry. "I—"

Her ma suddenly appeared behind Flint, the pale blue dress she'd been buried in dancing about her ankles as she hovered a few inches above the floor, a smile on her lips in place of her usual tense expression. Her long ash-blonde hair floated around her as her smiling aqua-blue gaze met Cassie's somewhat startled one. She sniffed and detected a hint of rosemary in the air, denoting the presence of magic.

"Cassie, there you are."

Flint dropped his hands from her shoulders and spun around to face the ghost. "Mercy, you startled me." He glanced quickly around the entrance hall. "You shouldn't be here."

"I can go where I want to, Mr. Hamilton. This is my home, too." Mercy floated a few inches from the planks of the floor. "Even if I am a haint."

"I don't want the customers to know you're a ghost, and that the inn is haunted by you." Flint ran his hand through his hair.

The loose, flowing hair invited Cassie's fingers but she resisted. Especially in front of her ma. She needn't stir up that kettle of aggravation. "What do you need, Ma?"

"I'd like to spend some time with you." Mercy turned to face Cassie with another inexplicable smile. "When do you want me to teach you how to use your wand?"

A surge of joy enveloped her core at the offer. Her number one priority was to

learn how to use her magic, her unique abilities, to best advantage. Improving control over her voice's unique quality of influencing the mood and compliance of others in ways to make their lives better, more enjoyable, seemed like a worthwhile endeavor. Even more, discovering how she could protect herself, create her own defensive techniques, might ease her Guardian's deep-seated concern for her welfare. But she had some other things she must do first.

"I want to wait until after we talk to Daniel about...everything going on here at the inn. I think that will be a little later this afternoon and then I plan to entertain the guests this evening. So tomorrow morning before I have to work?"

Ma shifted to one side and then back again. "That's fine with me. I'll be sure to join you for the conversation with Daniel, too. He came all this way to see me, right?"

Cassie stiffened. "Not exactly. He doesn't know about you still being here. Please, Ma. Stay away until we can warn him of everything, give him time to adjust to the situation before he sees you the first time. It's only fair to him. Remember how frightened Abram was when he first saw you?"

Her poor brother had bolted from the gravesite, racing inside the inn and crashing into Mandy before he'd stopped his flight. It had taken both her and Flint to calm him down. She didn't want Daniel to have such an alarming introduction to the news of their mother's ghost and their magical abilities.

"True. But how will Daniel know what his special gift is without me to tell him?" Mercy shimmered and then briefly solidified, her agitation evident in her tight expression. "I should be there."

She held out her hand to her mother, wishing she could really touch her. "You will be, only after we talk to him. Please?"

Flint draped an arm around Cassie's shoulders. "He'll appreciate your graciousness by giving him a chance to adjust to the new realities he'll face, Mrs. Fairhope."

"Said like the haughty whippersnapper you are." Mercy folded her arms over her translucent bosom, her mouth a flat compressed line, as she swung her gaze back to Cassie. "If you insist."

"Thank you, Ma. I appreciate your forbearance." Cassie sighed, unable to stop the expression of relief. "So, I will see you tomorrow morning in the attic for my lesson?"

"Very well." Mercy shifted to one side, hovering over the floor like a low storm cloud.

Footsteps sounded on the covered porch, coming toward the trio in the entrance.

"Mercy, you have to go." Flint flashed his glance around the open space. "Before someone sees you."

"Don't be bossing me, young man." Mercy glared at him for a long moment, the booted steps growing louder. "I won't tolerate it."

Flint opened his mouth but Mercy shook her finger at him until he closed it again. He looked helplessly at Cassie.

"Please, Ma. For me?" Cassie could only hope her mother would comply. She couldn't control her mother as a ghost any more than she could when living. Once her

ma became upset at Flint, there was no telling how long she'd harangue him. The finger in the face motion indicated her annoyance with him. "It's for the best and only for a little while."

"Very well. For Daniel's sake, not Flint's." With a darkening glare, Mercy shimmered and disappeared just as the side door opened.

Cassie glanced sharply at the sound of deep voices bantering. She pasted a smile on her face, her pulse beating in her ears, as Daniel returned with Abram, blissfully unaware of the recent exit of their mother's ghost. She planned to keep it that way for a little while longer, too.

Continue the journey!

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