

Excerpt of
Legends of Wrath

Fury Falls Inn

Book 5

By

Betty Bolté



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About

Legends of Wrath

Fury Falls Inn in 1821 Alabama. A place for ghosts, witches, and magic. A place of secrets and hidden dangers. A place where Silas Fairhope must rewrite his vengeful family's history to preserve its chance at a future.

Answering his sister's frantic summons, journalist Silas discovers not only life-changing concealed powers but also a ruthless witch hunter out to kill her along with two witches, his aunts, who'll stop at nothing to possess her powers. Silas uncovers the truth lurking in his deceased grandfather's twisted plans of fame and power. The aunts—both powerful, vindictive witches—seek to fulfill those evil plans with his sister's reluctant help. Can Silas rewrite the shocking truth of the family's deadly past before it's too late for them to have any future?

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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—Sue, Alicia, Danielle, Crystal, Mandy, and Chris—who read a prepublication version of *Legends of Wrath* 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 other books I'll write in the future. You can also learn more about me, my other existing 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 *Legends of Wrath*.

Betty

Chapter One

Northern Alabama, October 1821

The foothills stretched away from the wide, rutted dirt road along which Silas Fairhope trotted his bay-colored Morgan horse. He only had to ride a short while farther to finally see his beloved, estranged sister Cassandra. Keeping his eyes peeled for the turn up the lane leading to the Fury Falls Inn, he posted with the movement of his sturdy gelding. Everywhere he stopped at a tavern or inn, the people had known of the renowned inn. Many had seemed envious of his destination. What would he find there? He could sense his sister's eagerness, through a surprising new ability he'd discovered but couldn't explain, where they could connect silently with their minds. The link grew stronger as he neared the turn. Anticipation of reuniting with her filled him with joy.

Suddenly, a figure dressed in black burst into the road from the yard of a cottage off to one side. Silas pulled hard on the reins to avoid running over the fleeing man, his horse rearing and then dropping back to the ground. The man's sense of success and glee coupled with an underlying fear invaded Silas's chest. As the horse settled beneath him, Silas peered in the direction from which the man had come to try to determine the atmosphere of the quaint abode. The thatched roof, dark windows, and scraggly front yard seemed to hunch against the surrounding forest. His probing was met with silence and sadness.

He swiveled his head to stare at the empty road. What was the man running from?

Dare he investigate?

No. He shouldn't. He didn't know anyone in these parts. Nor did he desire to become involved in anything nefarious. He only wanted to see his sister and brothers for the first time in years. Someone else, like the local sheriff, would need to find out what had caused that man to run. Surely, it was none of his business as a complete stranger.

Relieved with his rationalization, he urged his horse into a trot again. After a few minutes he espied the lane he sought and urged his bay into a canter. His active imagination made him wonder about the mystery he left behind. He'd probably never discover the answers to the many

questions in his head. Questions his writer's curiosity demanded answers to. However, his boss had not assigned him to investigate and report on what he found. No. Better to stick with his mission of answering his sister's summons, of journeying to the inn like his other three brothers before him. Besides, he simply couldn't wait to once more embrace his beloved sister.

Notes of a familiar song drifted through the open front doors to rest uneasily on her ear. Cassie Fairhope paused in arranging flowers in the vase in the entrance hall of the Fury Falls Inn, unease blending with a growing sense of danger. A fair fall day allowed for the windows and doors to stand open to the fragrant flow of air. Air which also carried the sounds of a busy place: horses clomping up the carriageway, men greeting each other with a shout and a laugh, cows mooing in their field by the stable, dogs barking at approaching carriages and coaches. Sifting through the other sounds, Cassie detected the strum of a guitar and sensed in her core her oldest brother probing her emotions, checking to assess her comfort or concern. With a final glance and tweak at the arrangement of red mums, cattails, and various fronds, she wiped her hands on her apron as she stepped onto the wide front porch.

Giles Fairhope, her brother and the family's Guardian, relaxed on a chair with his guitar in his lap. He picked out an opening set of notes, then settled into strumming the strings with strong and reverent hands. She soon found herself humming along with him. His version of her song, the one she'd written as a first attempt at crafting a calming spellsong. She liked the tune just fine, but the lyrics... they left a lot to be desired.

She'd struggled with the words because what she held in mind didn't flow to the page. She wanted something she could sing that wouldn't reveal her intent to calm another's agitation. More of a ballad she could infuse with her will. A gentle story to encourage the listener to relax and be open to suggestion. In other words, generic enough to entertain and yet allow her to work her magic.

The guitar fell silent, drawing her attention.

"Why'd you stop?" She crossed in front of him to slip around the small table and settle onto the matching chair. "It sounds fine."

He shrugged and rested his large hand on the curved body of the instrument. "Do you mind that I chose to play your song?"

“Not at all. Maybe it will even help. I wrote it as a calming song, but I like what you did with the tempo so I may copy that idea.” She leaned back in her seat but couldn’t relax. Alert and tense, she scanned the area in front of the popular roadside inn. Beside her, Giles also tensed and set his guitar on the floor, leaning the gleaming wooden instrument against the table. She glanced at him, catching the look of concern in his expression. “You feel it, too?”

He nodded but kept his gaze moving. “I had hoped it was just me being too on edge, or rather that I was sensing you’re on edge. But now that you’re right here, it seems even more apparent.”

Cassie closed her eyes to concentrate entirely on reaching out to sample the emotions of the other people close by. Relatively speaking, given she could now sense emotions from miles away. At first, she’d only sensed others’ emotions standing nearby. But each time her brothers showed up, her powers increased. Most of the business and working men stomping in and out were intent on their own needs and desires. But among them, some number of others kept close watch on her activities. She reached out farther and a flare of joy filled her heart. Her final brother, Silas, neared and should arrive in a matter of minutes. Then all four of her brothers would have answered her plea to come to the inn, to come to her aid after the murder of their mother while their father was away on business. Little did she know when she wrote those letters months ago that she’d be faced with both a killer on the loose and two demanding aunts who insisted she unite with them. Something she would not and could not do.

Soon their father would also arrive, bringing the commissioned furniture. Then the family would finally be together again. Even their mother lingered as a ghost, waiting for something Cassie wasn’t clear on. Yet this sense of urgency, a hint of danger growing, drifted on the autumn breeze. The sensation rattled around inside her like a neglected bean in a tin can.

Giles stood and paced to the edge of the porch, propping a hand on a support pole. “I can tell you’re sensing the threat, because you’re very uneasy.”

“I feel like I’m being watched all the time. By more than one pair of eyes.” She shivered as the sense of danger inched higher. She longed for her father to return because he was her only hope of putting an end to this threat. Her ghostly ma told her he would know what to do. Surely, a powerful warlock like him could quell the dangers swirling about the inn. Could stop the killer with his powers, and persuade her aunts to stop haranguing her. If he couldn’t, then what?

“It’s the witch hunter I bet. He’s probably growing impatient and desperate to finish his apparent intent to annihilate witches around here.” Giles spun around to stalk toward her, stopping when he stood a foot in front of her shoe tips. “He’s employed others to do his dirty work. That’s what you’re sensing, the others who are waiting for their opportunity. Don’t give it to them.”

Having his large, muscular frame looming over her, casting her in his shadow, deepened her unease. She stood and met his intense gaze. Better to be on her feet, able to react more quickly. “What do you propose I do?”

She studied him, anticipating from recent experience what he’d ask. A guard or chaperone to be with her at all times. Poor Teddy had tried his best, but the young boy couldn’t deter the attack she’d already fought off.

“I’m going to stay close to you as much as possible. If I can’t be with you, then you stay inside and away from strangers. Can you do that?”

She blinked at him, counting to five as she struggled to not lash out at him. Not again. Her muscles ached from a bow-string tension. She forced herself to relax. “I refuse to be a prisoner in my own home, Giles. With all of my brothers here along with Flint, surely I’m safe on this property.”

“I know your fiancé will try to protect you, Cassie, but he is limited to mortal means. Please, keep me or one of our other brothers with you at least. You shouldn’t be alone. Ever. We can use our abilities to ward off anyone who might threaten you bodily.”

What more might the mysterious attackers threaten her with? They’d tried to kill her twice now, both attempts thwarted. She’d grown stronger, more capable of defending herself. She needed space, air. She paced away from Giles, staring out at the people coming and going in the front yard of the inn.

Footfalls on the floorboards behind her had her spinning around, fear spiking. Her hand flew to her throat, sparking in preparation of throwing off an attacker. No need. She swallowed and drew in a deep breath. “You scared me.”

“My apologies.” Flint tucked a newspaper under one arm as his smile wilted into a worried frown. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” If she told him, then he’d agree with Giles and demand she stay inside. She had no inclination toward hiding or walking around afraid every minute. “Giles was just...showing me a different way to play one of my songs.”

“Cassie, tell him the truth.” Giles took two steps toward them. “He must know.”

“Know what?” Flint’s eyes narrowed as he searched her expression. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, thank you. It’s only a feeling I have.” She glanced at her brother when he cleared his throat meaningfully. “A feeling *we* have. Satisfied?”

“Go on.” Giles crossed his arms over his muscular chest. “You shouldn’t keep secrets. You know how upset you were about all the ones Ma and Pa kept from us.”

She rolled her eyes at him and then peered up at her fiancé’s concerned expression. Giles was right. Flint deserved to know all of it despite her preferences. “We’re sensing an increasing number of people who mean me harm. Giles wants to play guardian angel and be with me all the time, but I don’t think it’s actually necessary. Not in my own home.”

Flint’s expression turned stony. Then he pulled the paper free and unrolled it, only to roll it back into a tube. “The thing is, sweetheart, we have people, men, coming and going all day long. Most we know, but not all of them. Giles is right to worry.” Flint tapped the paper on his palm with a nod of mutual understanding at Giles then slid his gaze back to Cassie. “I agree with him.”

“I knew you would.” She heaved a sigh and let it out. “I will try to comply.”

“Promise me.” Flint jabbed the paper under one arm then pulled her close, lightly kissing her lips. “Please.”

When he put it that way, what else could she do? “I promise.”

“Thank you.” Flint kissed her again, and then tilted his head as he contemplated her. “Do you know when your other brother, Silas, will arrive?”

She smiled up at him as she reached out again, trying to measure distance in emotional strength. “He’s very close.”

“It will be good to see him.” Giles dropped his arms to his sides and moved to pick up his guitar. “Want to help me remember the rest of that song, Cassie? I think I’ve got it muddled in my memory.”

“Of course.” Cassie took a step toward the table and then turned back to Flint. “Did you need me for anything?”

Flint shook his head and gestured toward the vacant seat. “Go ahead. I’ll go inside to prepare for the afternoon rush. See you later.” With that, he tipped two fingers to his brow toward Giles and then strode through the open doors.

Cassie resumed her seat, raising her inner barrier so she could concentrate on the calming songspell instead of the emotions swirling around her. Listening to Giles pick out the tune Greensleeves, she hummed along and then broke out into singing the words. When Giles stumbled, she continued the tune so he could pick up what he’d forgotten.

When life seems hard and oh so wrong

And nothing goes so easily

Don’t fret and pine for days gone by

But hold to love and let it be.

Soft, soft be still and calm

Softly lay down your burdens.

Hush, hush now let things be

And trust in home and family.

Though storms may rage beyond these walls

And lightning flash across the sky

Within is calm and all is well

Our care and sweet love will brave the night.

Soft, soft be still and calm

Softly lay down your burdens.

Hush, hush now let things be

And trust in home and family.

When they'd finished the entire song, she smiled at him. "That's lovely. You should accompany me in the dining room. We could be famous."

He guffawed as he leaned on the guitar. "I don't know about that. Maybe infamous."

She chuckled but the idea took root. Her mother had once mentioned that if witches joined forces their magic became stronger. Would it work with her Guardian's strength and playing his guitar to strengthen her voice's effect on others? "I'm serious. I think the guests would enjoy having both of us play for them. You won't have to sing if you don't want to. Please?"

He stared at her for several moments and then slowly shook his head. "Are you sure?"

"Definitely. We'll be brilliant." And stronger together, with any luck.

Golden rays of sunshine alternated with long dark streaks of shadows up the lane as Silas rode toward the Fury Falls Inn. Cassie anticipated his arrival. He sensed her eagerness as well as her anxiety. How he was able to sense what she felt, or anyone else for that matter, he didn't fathom. He'd awoken one morning several months previous and found he was aware of what others felt, whether he wanted to know or not. After some trial and error involving blanking his mind and pushing away all of his own feelings, he'd managed to control when he let others in. Thank goodness. Those first weeks had seemed like a lifetime in purgatory. How long the unwanted ability would plague him remained an open question.

The inn nestled at the edge of a forest blanketing the mountains beyond. He'd heard of the wilderness of these parts but he'd not had reason to venture out to experience the area for himself. Seeing the foothills bedecked in the colors of autumn gave them a warmth he didn't feel. He sensed an uneasy peace, as if it held its breath.

Men in work clothes and fine suits dismounted from their horses or emerged from fine horse-drawn vehicles to head inside the two-story stone and red-brick structure. Looked like a new wooden section had recently been added, the wood fresh and glowing in the late afternoon sunlight. He scanned the oak shake-shingled roof, noting several chimneys, and then noticed a

strange shimmery blur at the right end of the roof. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Gone. He must be more tired than he realized. He slowed his mount from a canter to an energetic walk, taking a moment to survey the property his sister called home.

He rode past a gazebo off to his right, draped in vines preparing to doze through the coming winter. Ahead, the inn comprised two buildings connected by a covered passage and wrapped with porches to create a welcoming edifice. He'd visited many fine establishments over the last several years, and this one could hold its own. Not a fancy place, but the atmosphere suited the kind of inn he imagined he'd find inside. Wide double doors on the left part with a table and two cushioned rocking chairs beside it seemed to be the public tavern as so many people came and went through the open doors on this fine fall afternoon. He suspected the quieter right side was the family residence. He halted at one of two hitching rails and swung out of the saddle, the leather creaking as he dropped with a thud to the crushed stone. He tied his horse to the rail and turned to mosey on inside, only to have a girl launch herself into his startled embrace.

"Silas!" Cassie hugged him hard for a moment and then composed herself, standing demurely smiling up at him. "Welcome to the inn."

"What a surprising and energetic welcome, too. You've certainly grown." He scanned her head to toe, seeing how much of a young woman she'd become. "I'm glad to see you again."

The curvy young woman smiling up at him looked little like the blond, blue-eyed girl she'd been as a child. Long curls bounced about her straight shoulders. Energy and sparkle emanated from within, lighting her eyes. A slightly twisted front tooth, the result of a childhood fall, endeared her pleasant countenance to him all the more. Making her appear human despite the ethereal quality surrounding her. Despite her being younger than him, Silas had looked up to her. Her thoughtfulness, caring, and teasing all blended into the upbeat person she'd become. How he'd missed being with his sister, seeing her grow and mature into such a fine lady.

He'd been separated from his family for years. Spent most of that time in the company of strangers, interviewing them and learning about the places they called home or their places of employment. He'd write up a pithy description, include a few quotes, and mail his article back to his boss in Boston. Weeks later, he'd receive a clip from the newspaper his work had appeared in, which he'd add to the slowly expanding packet in his saddlebags. His most prized possessions

resided within the leather walls of battered bags. Always on the road, he didn't have anywhere else to keep them.

"I'm so glad you're finally here. I've missed you so much." Cassie hugged him again and then stepped back, brushing her long skirts with her hands.

"It's been a long time, but I'm here now." Silas blinked as her worry flashed through him, then it was gone. Had he imagined it? Or had she shielded herself from others detecting her feelings? Protecting himself proved a useful thing to know how to do. "Are you here alone? Where's Pa?"

She shook off his question with a half-smile. "Come in. We'll take care of your tired horse for you." She looked toward the stable and motioned toward a lanky boy emerging from the shadowy interior. "Liam, come see to this horse."

The youth trotted across the carriageway and led Silas' bay back from where he'd come. Silas detected fatigue in his faithful horse in the droop of his neck and slow swish of his tail.

Take care of him, boy.

"He'll take fine care of your horse. Don't worry." She grabbed his elbow and tugged him toward the steps. "Everyone's inside."

He stopped, pulling her to an awkward halt. Who else but his brothers and parents was she referring to? "Everyone?"

She grinned at him. "Mostly."

Come on, Silas, they won't bite. He reared back a bit when the thought popped into his mind. "Was that you?"

Yes. We are linked both emotionally and mentally. Surely you've noticed by now.

I suspected. He swallowed the nerves threatening to make him remount and ride away. Coming at her pleading request took every ounce of his courage. To face his parents again after their strained past. Who else would he confront? One of Cassie's frequent thoughts involved their dead ma. Facing the ghost of his mother seemed a daunting prospect. Still, if Cassie could, then so could he. He'd come this far. "Let's get it over with."

"You should know that all of us have some special ability, but we try to downplay them." She led him inside to a somewhat rustic entrance hall.

He examined the large space, noting a side door to the right leading to the covered span connecting the two structures, a swinging door at the back of the area peeking at a bustling

kitchen, and off to the left a large arched door with tables and chairs occupied by a number of eating and talking guests. A long hallway stretched beyond the arched door into the new section to another side door leading outside. Nothing too fancy but it suited the region perfectly, much as he'd anticipated.

"It's a nice place to call home." He glanced toward the dining room when a pair of deep voices drew his attention.

The pair of men were large and burly, both with dark hair and piercing eyes. The shorter of the two was far more powerful, with massive muscular arms and thighs. The other's easy, confident expression bespoke a man comfortable in his own skin. He peered closer, exploring the nuances of their expressions, their way of walking, and relaxed his guard. He needn't fear them just protect his private thoughts from their prying.

"There they are. Giles, Abram, look who's here." Cassie tugged Silas closer to the two large men approaching him.

"Hey, Silas, it's about time." Giles grabbed him into a bear hug.

The embrace felt like a literal bear had him until his oldest brother released him.

"Damnation, man, when did you get so strong?"

A dark chuckle emerged from the other man's mouth. "A few months ago when our mother was murdered."

When she died, her binding spell broke and we got our powers back.

Silas glanced at Cassie, blinking rapidly at the message and the implications. "Binding spell?"

Abram peered closer at him and then glanced at Cassie. "You two can talk to each other without words?"

Cassie grinned. "Amazing, isn't it? It's a new power I've noticed as he's drawn closer. I could tell not only how he felt but sometimes knew what he was thinking."

Even though he had an inkling of the connection between them, Silas hadn't expected all his brothers also had special abilities. But as the reality settled in his conscious mind, he recalled glimpses from the past. When he and his brothers knew or could do things others could not. Once he left home, he no longer thought about any of those capabilities. As if they'd been erased from his memories. Until now.

“Ma did say you’d grow stronger with each of us coming home.” Daniel sauntered into the hall to shake hands with Silas, his long strides bringing him quickly to a halt. Silas studied his next older brother, amazed at what a tall, strong, and good looking man he’d become. His intense green eyes, crinkling at the corners, bored into him for a moment then softened.

“Welcome home.”

Whoa. Not his home. He’d been traveling around the country and writing about what he found. He’d been doing so for so long that he didn’t have a place to call home anywhere. He glanced around the entrance hall again, letting his senses absorb the emotions in the vicinity. The mixture of enjoyment and contentment from the guests bumped against the underlying anxieties of his brothers and sister as well as something more sinister. He concentrated on the sensation but couldn’t pinpoint the source. Still, it didn’t bode well for anyone. Perhaps he’d find a good story. Curiosity piqued, he intended to stay long enough to solve that mystery.

Silas nodded to Daniel. “Thanks. I’m glad to see you all looking so well.”

“Did Cassie fill you in on everything?” Abram glanced at Cassie, waving a hand in the air as he turned back to meet Silas’ gaze. “You know, using mind waves or whatever you use?”

“Not yet. Where’s Ma?” The surprise on his brothers’ faces made him smile. “Yes, I know that much. I’m not surprised because she was so irascible alive, why wouldn’t she haunt the place?”

“Speaking of whom, look who decided to join us.” Cassie motioned toward the front doors.

A shimmer blurred his view again until his mother’s ghost appeared floating a few inches above the floor. She wore a long, blue dress and had her blond hair falling softly over her shoulders. She’d aged since he last laid eyes on her. She appeared harder, like life had dealt her a tough hand. Good. He blinked, unnerved despite knowing she haunted the inn.

Gathering his resolve close to his chest, he straightened his shoulders and nodded once.

“Ma.”

“Welcome, Silas.” Mercy drifted closer to him, a tentative smile on her lips. “It’s good to see you.”

“Is it? Then why did you send me away?” The anger he’d suppressed for years burst from him before he could think better of expressing it. He wrestled it back under wraps but the outburst lingered in the air. The frantic, frightful days and nights he’d suffered when he’d left

home. A boy really. He'd been fortunate to evade the worst of the men aiming to rob or hurt him. Then to meet the tavern owner who recognized his way with words and suggested he concentrate on a sound education. Reading and language consumed his life from then on.

"We had our reasons, son." She stretched a hand toward him as if to take one of his. "I can explain."

"Not here, please." Abram cast a worried glance around the hall. "The guests..."

"Good point." Giles motioned toward the dining room. "We don't need to stand out here. Come on into the dining room for some refreshments and we can quietly tell you what's been happening. You must be tired and thirsty after your journey."

"I'm used to riding long distances, but yeah, I'm tired." The blurry roof he'd thought he'd seen earlier demonstrated as much. "Got any ale?"

"Sure do." Daniel turned to lead the way into the dining room. "Follow me."

"I can't wait to introduce you to my fiancé, Flint Hamilton. He's been the innkeeper while Pa is away arranging for new furniture. And you'll want to meet our brothers' intended."

"Where'd Pa go?" Silas strode beside his sister as they entered the dining room, struggling to assimilate the flood of new information, both visually and by his overwhelmed senses, since his arrival. "But even more important, I can't wait to find out who would be daft enough to want to marry my brothers."

He skimmed his gaze over the room to take in its contents and get his bearings. To the right a mahogany bar gleamed in the lamplight, a display of colorful bottles of liquor against the wall behind it. A tall man rubbed the surface of the bar with a white cloth as he studied Silas for a long moment with clouded eyes. Ignoring the guarded look, he let his gaze roam the room. Some number of cloth-covered tables with six chairs around each arrayed throughout the room. An ornately carved and gleaming square piano occupied the front left corner of the room, with an empty blanket rack placed nearby. What was that there for? Cassie squeezed his arm to attract his attention and led him on inside.

"Pa went to Savannah, but he'll be home soon. He's on his way now with the furniture but also with others. Isaac, will you please get some refreshments for my brother, Silas Fairhope?"

The waiter crooked his left arm and draped a white towel over it. "Of course, Miss Fairhope. I'll return shortly."

“Thank you. Come on, Silas, over here.” She stopped beside a table close to the bar. “Have a seat. There’s so much to relay to you, Silas. We have much to discuss.”

Good or bad? He settled onto the hard wooden chair she indicated, observing the play of emotions on her face and sensing the conflicting ones inside.

Yes.

He could only nod at her once, acknowledging the cautionary tone in her silent communication. What had he walked into by coming to this place in the middle of the wilderness?

Another brother had arrived. Flint suffocated the sigh struggling for release. Giles sauntered toward the bar, trying not to laugh. Well, Flint didn’t find anything funny about the situation. Facing the inquisition of the newest stranger before he’d grudgingly grant his approval of the upcoming wedding of his sister. Flint rubbed the bar harder before realizing the futility of his action and snapped the towel up to hang it on the rail.

“I’ll take an ale. What’s the matter?” Giles slid onto the seat at the bar. “You look put out.”

“Is that Silas?” Grabbing a mug, he filled it and set it in front of Cassie’s oldest brother.

“Just arrived and already acting like he doesn’t really want to be here.” Giles took a swig of his drink then wiped the foam from his lips with the back of his hand. “Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed. I’ve been thinking about the sleeping arrangements with his arrival.” Anything to divert his thoughts from the anticipated questions and searing looks of dismissal.

“Where do you want to put him?” Giles asked.

“In with you, and we can let Zander and Matt have the spare room.” Flint had considered many other options but simply moving the two Simmons brothers in together so the Fairhope brothers could share seemed to make the most sense. “Does that suit you?”

Giles hefted his mug in a casual salute. “That’s sensible. I’ll introduce you to him, if you’d like.”

“May as well.” Flint braced his hands on the counter as Giles turned to beckon to his youngest brother.

The young man pushed his chair away from the table and strolled over to the bar. He resembled his brother Daniel most, having the same coloring and frame. Silas had curious blue eyes that assessed Flint with a quick sweep of his gaze. Flint could tell the other man was confident and easy going. A slow smile spread onto his mouth as he extended a hand toward Flint.

“Hello, you must be Flint Hamilton. I’m Silas Fairhope, Cassie’s brother.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance.” Surprised by the easy familiarity, Flint accepted the man’s firm grasp. “Was your journey pleasant?”

“Most of the time except for when I stumbled into a tavern in southern Kentucky where a band of highwaymen had also stopped for a rest.” Silas raised his eyebrows and made a face. “Weary as I was, I didn’t dare stay there. They’d have fleeced me but good. Old Traveler and I kept on down that particular road until we found a nicer spot.”

“Your pretty face wouldn’t be so pretty if you’d elected to linger.” Giles tapped a fist on the bar. “Do you travel much?”

Silas nodded, a gleam in his eyes. “All the time. It’s my job. I ride my sturdy Morgan all over the country, poking around to see what’s what. Then I write up a piece and send it to the newspaper or magazine that hired me to write about a specific place.”

“That’s an interesting lifestyle you have.” Traveling from place to place and then writing about the experience. Never staying in one place for very long. A wanderer of a sort. Intriguing. What must it be like to be in the saddle for days or weeks? Other than the obvious fatigue and sore muscles, Flint could envision the many interesting people he’d meet, the fine meals he’d enjoy in even finer establishments. Envy flashed through him. “Do you like it?”

“It has its moments, certainly.” Silas pointed to the mug resting on the counter between Giles’ hands. “Might I trouble you for one of those?”

“No trouble at all.” Flint quickly filled another mug and slid it toward the newcomer. “Welcome to the inn. You can settle in with Giles, if that is all right with you.”

“Bunk with my big brother? That’s fine.” Silas angled a grin at Giles. “I’ll try to behave unlike when we were boys.”

“You better.” Giles tapped his fist on Silas’ shoulder. “I can defend myself.”

Rubbing his shoulder, Silas flashed a mock frown at him. “You’re dangerous.”

“Don’t forget it.” Giles lifted his mug and swallowed a long draught then let a sly smile ease onto his face. “It’s my job.”

Silas opened his mouth to reply but Flint waved him off. “Don’t bother. He’s the family Guardian and takes his role very seriously.”

“Guardian of what exactly?” Silas asked, setting his mug on the counter.

“Cassie will explain everything later. Not in the dining room.” Flint glanced at Cassie where she waited at the table with her other brothers and their fiancés. Quite a group gathered in one place, each couple seated together around the table. He, too, belonged in that group, a thought which made him grin at Cassie. Silas’ curious gaze reminded him of his manners. “You should meet the ladies, though, while you’re in here. Giles, will you do the honors, please?”

“I’d be delighted.” Giles stood and motioned for Silas to follow him.

A commotion at the back of the room drew Flint’s gaze to where Allegro, the feisty blue-grey Merlin falcon, flew through the always open window to perch on Cassie’s shoulder. Allegro’s presence in the area was pure magic, as Merlins didn’t stray far from the coast. But he’d come on his own to help Cassie anyway she needed. Her familiar came and went as the lightweight bird deemed necessary. Nobody but Cassie had any control or influence over the fast and intelligent creature.

Flint moved out from behind the bar to trail after the two men. Silas was not as hard to like as he’d feared. Indeed, he could see them being friends over time. His willingness to engage with others even though he didn’t know them must be an asset while interviewing people from across the country. He halted at the table, standing behind Cassie’s chair just out of reach of the falcon. To his credit, Silas barely flinched, almost as if he expected the bird’s presence.

“You’ve met Flint, my betrothed.” Cassie glanced up and back at Flint. “And this little guy on my shoulder is Allegro. I’ll tell you more about him later. For now, I’ll let Giles introduce you to the rest.”

Giles performed a half bow toward Silas. “Silas, I’d like for you to meet your future sisters. Abram’s fiancé is Mandy Crawford, who works here in the dining room as the hostess.”

Abram lifted Mandy’s hand to hold, a possessive gesture if Flint ever saw one. The pair had literally run into each other after Abram first saw Mercy’s ghost. He’d fled only to knock into the young woman. And knocking his senses aflutter over her enchanting person.

“Daniel has claimed Wilma Hamilton, Flint’s sister, to be his bride.” Giles waved a hand in their direction.

“It’s amazing to me that I came here with the intention of staying only a pair of days but have fallen in love with this woman and this place.” Daniel slowly shook his head, but he couldn’t hide the delight in his expression.

“It’s nice to meet you, Silas.” Wilma smiled at the man as Daniel draped an arm around the back of her chair, his steady regard never flinching away. Wilma glanced at Daniel and then back to Silas. “I look forward to getting to know you, seeing as we’ll be related before much longer.”

Pride flooded Flint’s chest as he regarded his sister. She’d become a fine young person, easy to look at, sure. With her auburn hair and dash of freckles across her nose, her fiery green eyes warning or welcoming depending on the situation. She presented a friendly façade, but she had a stubbornness she hid behind the acquiescing persona. Quietly stubborn described her attitude. She might say she agreed but she’d find a way to make her will known and obeyed in the end. But she was typically correct in her approach so he couldn’t find fault with her. Plus she was superior with a bow and arrow, better than even their younger brother Julian.

Flint bit back a smile as Daniel exhibited yet another gesture of possession. These men obviously wanted to send the crystal-clear message their women were exactly that: theirs.

Giles glanced at Flint with humor twinkling in his eyes before returning his attention to Silas. “I’ll introduce you to my fiancé later since Miss Baker is not here right now.”

“You’re engaged, too?” Silas widened his eyes as he slowly shook his head. “That’s incredible.”

“If you stay here long enough, you may have the same good fortune.” Abram kissed the back of Mandy’s hand and then leveled a serious look at Silas. “You are staying for a while, right?”

“Probably not. I have several people in other cities to meet with and take a tour of the must-see sights of their city.” Silas pulled out a chair and sat down, resting his hands on his thighs. “I’ve allowed for a few days here, though.”

Flint stared at the youngest brother in awe. He stated his fantastic lifestyle so casually. Once, Flint had dreamed of working in elegant hotels in one of the major cities. Meeting people from all walks of life. Exploring towns and historic sites alike. Perhaps building a fine hotel to

attract the best of society. His gaze drifted around the mediocre dining room while the others continued their banter. Still much to do to raise the presentation to the standard he envisioned. But he'd stepped up its look considerably over the last few months.

How could he leave behind all the work he'd put into this inn? He shrugged inside. Mr. Fairhope might not require his assistance once he returned from his trip. Then where would Flint go? Back to his father's hotel in Huntsville most likely. He grimaced. Not a satisfactory situation any longer. Flint had worked on his own long enough now to want to continue in the same vein. He might have to convince Reggie to permit him to stay on as an assistant manager at least. But would that be enough? All his hard work and vision relegated to second place. His future loomed cloudy and unsatisfying.

"If you're only staying a short while, then we should talk soon." Cassie swept her gaze around the group and back to Silas. "Let's meet in the parlor after the supper rush is over. We can speak in private there."

Silas lifted one brow as he peered around the group's suddenly serious expressions. "Why not here and now?"

Flint laid a hand on the man's shoulder. "In private is safer. Trust me."

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