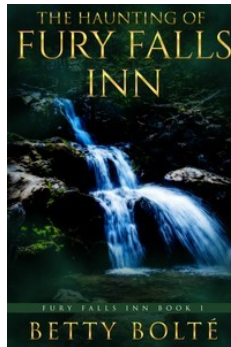


Excerpt from
The Haunting of Fury Falls Inn

Fury Falls Inn – Book 1

By Betty Bolté



Chapter One

Cassandra Fairhope’s bubble of happiness evaporated from her heart like fog assaulted by the summer sun as Fury Falls Inn came into view. She faced her virtual prison with grim reluctance as the team of matched bay geldings dragged the bouncing coach closer to the circular carriageway, the harness jangling with each stride. For most folks, the elegant inn represented an escape from their daily drudge. To her mind it represented a beautiful yet elaborate prison.

“Sit up straight, Cassie. I’ll not have you slouching.” Her mother, Mercy, arranged her pale yellow poplin skirts over her knees with a practiced twitch of her hands. “It’s good to be home. I’ve missed your father more than I thought possible.”

“I’m sure he’ll be eager to greet you.” She stared glumly out the window of the closed coach at the welcoming, confining sight. “I guess it’s back to a normal routine again.”

Her pa, Reggie Fairhope, worked hard to run an efficient roadside inn where people could refresh themselves before continuing the difficult journey along the Winchester Road. Also for those who ventured out into the wilderness to soak in the hot mineral springs in search of relief from one ailment or another. Two two-story structures stood joined together by a dogtrot and wide front porch. The bigger side on the left housed the inn’s extensive dining room and guest bedrooms as well as an immense kitchen. The smaller structure to the right was for the exclusive

use of the family, with a private dining room, sitting area, and his office. The family bedrooms along with those for key employees were safely tucked upstairs for privacy. She'd grown up amongst strangers and supposed she'd die among them as well.

"I'd think you'd be glad to settle back to your usual chores." Mercy glanced at her with a question in her aqua eyes. "You've always said you enjoy working in the garden and helping Sheridan transform the produce into delicious meals."

"I do, Ma, but I relished the faster pace of Nashville." She gripped the edge of her seat to avoid bouncing off after a particularly nasty jolt. "I'll miss the boutiques and restaurants with all their variety. The excitement and energy."

Road improvements had been made to the lane leading to the inn. Including widening the winding trail to six feet, but weather often turned the dusty, hard-packed dirt road into a boot-swallowing, wheel-snaring quagmire. Add in the low mountains and difficult terrain where horses and oxen had difficulty traversing the roads between the town of Huntsville, Alabama, and the more established city of Winchester, Tennessee, to its northeast. Reggie had dragged the family away from Montgomery in central Alabama several years before statehood was granted. He wanted to take advantage of the prospective growth in the northern part of the territory and so they'd moved. But, oh, how she wished they'd stayed in the bigger city where she had friends and opportunities. Instead of being buried out in the wilds of the state for the past six years. Visiting the fancy boutiques and salons in Nashville only deepened her need to escape.

For years she'd searched her mind for viable means of leaving like her brothers. Finding some way which her parents would approve for her to provide for herself. Her pa's standing in the community meant she had few options. Indeed, her ma had informed her of the one and only acceptable answer. She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, turning away so her ma didn't see. She had no other choice for the time being but to slip back into the mindless repetition. She swiveled her head around to address her ma. "I'll be ready to pitch in after I take my purchases up to my room. Don't fret."

Mercy nodded as she looked past Cassie out the open window. Cassie also turned to stare out the window. Horses stood hitched and dozing, tails gently swishing, at the rail in front of the inn. The dogs lay curled under the shade trees. Chickens pecked in the dusty grass. Cows grazed in the distance. The air shimmered above the dusty carriageway, the summer beginning with another heat wave. How very pastoral. She sighed silently so as not to reveal even a hint of her

dissatisfaction to her ma.

Mercy gathered her purse from the seat between them. “I understand, but we must make the best of the situation. Pa will expect us to support his decisions whether we agree or not. I’ll not hear of any complaining, you hear me?”

“Yes’m.” Cassie retrieved her flower print reticule and clutched the soft fabric between both hands on her lap.

The driver, a silent and brooding middle-aged man with a thick beard and mustache, halted the carriage in front of the stone steps leading up to the immense porch jutting from the front of the inn.

The four hunting dogs announced their arrival, trotting out from the shade and circling the dusty carriage, barking and sniffing. The snuffling and woofing brought a grin to her tense mouth. Two black retrievers, Beau and Pickles, cozied up to the horses. Red, a golden retriever, came to the side door to wag his tale at Cassie. Cocoa, the smaller tawny-and-white spaniel, stayed a few yards away from the creaking coach, tongue lolling and long silky ears alert. She couldn’t wait to be able to pet them again. She smiled at them and then let her gaze travel over the front of the building with its glass windows flanked by shutters and brick walls.

A pair of pinewood rocking chairs with dark green cushions flanked a round table to the left of the double doors leading into the inn, an inviting and cozy place to sit and watch the continuous foot and vehicle traffic flow past the inn. Or perhaps to sew. Or read as time permitted. A favorite, if rare, pastime.

The driver jumped to the dusty ground and opened the creaky door to hand the two ladies down out of the vehicle. The footman was a young clean-shaven fool who tipped the brim of his floppy hat and grinned at her at every turn. He dropped the several hat and dress boxes along with a number of string-tied parcels to the driver, who carried them on bowed legs to the porch and piled them up. She cringed, hoping her pa didn’t stumble over the collection. He’d berate the men for putting the coveted boxes where guests could trip over them. Cassie watched the two men finish their task and then cluck to the horses to urge them into a walk toward the stable.

“Would you look at that.” Mercy huffed out a frustrated blast of air through her nostrils. “I’ve told him to turn out the pigs to fend for themselves. Lazy, good-for-nothing boy.”

A half-dozen milk cows grazed in a post-and-rail-fenced paddock nestled between the back of the good-sized barn and the towering primeval forest surrounding the clearing. A pair of

milk goats kept the cows company. Next to the corral, a sturdy pig sty provided shelter for the herd of swine, the ones who usually roamed freely in search of food as well as mud to keep cool and protected from biting flies. A couple of men worked at replacing a wagon wheel within the shade of the carriage house. The boy in question, a thirteen-year-old tow-headed neighbor kid with a tendency to disappear when needed, poked his head out of the stable, blinked his eyes at the newly arrived coach, and then promptly ducked back inside.

Mercy muttered something under her breath. Shaking her head, she shooed Cassie toward the steps. "Go on in, girl, while I have a word with that idiot." Mercy gathered her skirts in one fist and marched toward the stable.

"Better him than me," Cassie muttered.

She snatched up a couple of parcels and sashayed through the open heavy wood and glass door into the cooler interior. Her pa likely kept busy in the inn side of the structure. He'd want to know they'd returned. She scanned the foyer, wiped her damp forehead with the back of her hand, all while noting with relief the glistening tables boasting lanterns with glass globes waiting to be lit at dusk. Cheery daffodils and jonquils greeted her in vases on either side of the foyer, adding a touch of floral scent to the air. Hannah, an often overly flirty server and all around helper, had thankfully taken on Cassie's chores while she'd been away picking and choosing new clothes. She stacked her boxes, filled with lovely dresses, flattering undergarments, and fashionable hats, at the right side of the foyer by the door leading to the family's side.

"Pa?" Cassie moved toward the dining room, where voices murmured over their noon meals.

She hesitated in the wide doorway, searching for Pa's short-cropped, black hair and salt-and-pepper beard. Several groups of men along with a family occupied various white-clothed square tables, applying spoons to large bowls of either soup or stew, depending on cook Sheridan Drake's mood and the available ingredients. But no sign of her father. She crossed to the kitchen and pushed open the swinging door to hurry inside.

The large room remained her favorite of all the spaces in the inn. She inhaled the mouth-watering aroma of baking bread and smiled with pleasure. Her pa had built the kitchen specially with stone floors and walls to reduce the chance of fire destroying the entire building. An immense cooking fireplace allowed for multiple hanging pots and kettles to simmer at the same time. A hinged spit had been cleverly hung to one side so that Sheridan could spit a piece of meat

and then hook it up to a device which slowly rotated near the heat of the fire, cooking the meat evenly on all sides as it spun beside the open flames. Bunches of dried herbs hung on strings stretching from the window to the corner of the room, waiting to be included in the cook's recipes.

Two older women, the Marple sisters, chopped and stirred at a table along the left wall, glancing at her with a nod of acknowledgement before turning back to their tasks. She spotted Sheridan laboring over a plucked chicken on a wooden board on the sturdy work table in the center of the room.

Of medium height with strong, sinewy arms, the black man made her smile with pleasure. She often wondered where he came from but he kept his personal life strictly to himself. He constantly hummed or sang while he worked, some folksy tunes as well as spirituals, giving the kitchen a feeling of humor and happiness the rest of the inn missed out on.

"Sheridan, where's Pa?" She glanced around the bustling kitchen, the heart of the inn, where the freeman performed some kind of magic to produce the variety of meats and stews and desserts that drew customers from miles around.

"He's gone, miss." His golden eyes glanced at her and then focused on the fowl he was dressing for the spit. "Went off to Savannah or somewhere."

A chill swept through Cassie at the news. Her beloved father was a fixture of the inn, one of the supporting pillars. He wouldn't leave unless some emergency forced him to. "Why?"

Sheridan shrugged and continued seasoning the bird. "Can't say. He didn't entrust me with such im-por-tant information."

Cassie speared him with a pointed stare. His tone revealed hurt feelings. He rarely reacted to her father's actions and decisions but this one seemed to rankle. What had been happening during her absence?

She leaned closer, pressing her hands onto the edge of the table. "What's wrong?"

Sheridan shrugged again as he wrapped a string around the hen's legs to tie them together. Then he grabbed a curved metal hook and ran it through the bird. Turning in one fluid motion, he secured it to the spit and set it turning.

The door behind her swung open with the abrupt bang of a palm on the wood door. A shock arced through her frame upon seeing the tall, handsome man. Flint Hamilton, son of her father's best friend James Hamilton, marched in, studying a piece of paper in his hands. Only a

few years older than her seventeen years, Flint was good-looking and comfortable in his own skin. Her crush on him had lasted since she was a young girl, a secret she kept from everyone. Something about his easy smile, his loose-hipped stride, and focused attention when he spoke combined to make him irresistible. Still, she remained very much aware of the rumors surrounding him, ones whispered behind hands after he left the room.

“Sheridan, you simply must listen to reason. Adding poached quail eggs and green turtle soup will draw even more customers.” He lifted his head and she shivered the moment his bright green eyes spotted her staring at him. “Miss Fairhope. Welcome home.”

His auburn hair reflected the sunlight filtering into the bright room as he approached on long legs clad in khaki jeans with a white dress shirt beneath a chocolate brown vest. She’d rarely had the pleasure of seeing him, since he lived miles away in Huntsville. Her ma even more rarely allowed her to go into town for any reason. Unless his parents brought him out to visit, she didn’t have any chance to indulge her hope of one day marrying him. Her mother had made it clear that marriage to a good man was her only escape. So be it. As long as he, whoever he might be, took her far away from the stifling effect of her mother.

She gaped at him for a split second before snapping her mouth shut. Then opened it again. “What are you doing here?”

Sheridan huffed as he propped his fists on his hips. “He’s the new innkeeper.”

She glanced at Sheridan, blinking as his words sank in. “What?”

“Let me explain, Miss Fairhope.” Flint laid the paper on the corner of the work table. “Your father had to go to Savannah, Georgia, to oversee the building of the furniture he requested. Apparently, the joiners didn’t quite comprehend how to follow his instructions.”

“Pa went to Georgia? While Ma and I were away?”

Leaving Flint to share the same living quarters, the same rooms, the same air as her. The realization stole her breath. He’d be around all the time. Her chance of escape had finally come. Maybe. If she could make him notice her not as a girl but as a woman. His words finally broke through her happy fog.

“I’m afraid the matter arose rather urgently.” He shrugged lightly as a grin slipped onto his lips. “Your shopping trip lasted a little longer than he’d hoped.”

Cassie slowly shook her head and tilted it to one side. “But why are you here?”

“He asked my father if I could manage the inn for him while he’s away.” Flint rested his

fists on the table. “Mr. Fairhope wanted someone with experience, and since my father owns the best hotel in Huntsville, he asked for me to help him out. So here I am.”

“Never even asked me,” muttered Sheridan as he dropped his hands to start working on his next delectable masterpiece.

Flint shot him a glance and added a half smile. “Your expertise is in your culinary skills, Mr. Drake. Mine lies in ensuring you have what you need when you need it. Please don’t be offended.”

“Too late, I think.” Cassie pressed her lips together. “Ma’s not going to like it either.”

“Why would she be upset? I’m here to help her as well.” Flint lifted the paper and skimmed it. “Sheridan, think about my suggestion to expand the menu. The ingredients are fairly easy to lay hands on and the guests would feel like they’re eating in Boston or New York instead of...”

Sheridan grunted and continued his work with a large beef butt roast without further comment.

Cassie studied Flint—he was definitely pleasing to look at—and then sighed as she peered at him. “Come on, Mr. Hamilton. Let’s get this over with.”

“What?” Flint followed her through the swinging door and into the foyer. “What do you mean?”

“Telling my mother.” Cassie halted in the center of the space until her mother looked up from where she was arranging the boxes and parcels for distribution to the family side, the storeroom upstairs, and the pantry in the kitchen. Her long ash-blonde hair was secured in a neat bun at the back of her head. Her pert nose wrinkled as she sorted the packages. Her ankle-length linen dress showed the signs of their recent travels, dusty and spotted. Still, she stood regally, shoulders back and chin even although a slight frown settled onto her brows as she focused on Cassie instead of the boxes.

“Tell me what?” Mercy spotted Flint standing beside Cassie and eased a cautious smile into place. “Well, well. Flint Hamilton. What a nice surprise.”

“Mrs. Fairhope.” Flint touched his fingers to his forehead in greeting. “I trust you had a pleasant shopping trip to Nashville?”

“We did, thank you.” Mercy glanced between Cassie and Flint several times and then arched a brow. “So, what did you want to tell me?”

Cassie cleared her throat, delaying even though she'd been the one to initiate the revelation. Her mother considered herself equal partners with her father, even though her father never treated her as such. Perhaps her mother's way of putting on a brave front? She straightened her back. Nothing for it but to say what had to be said. "Pa had to go to Savannah on business so hired Flint to manage the inn while he's gone."

"Oh..." Mercy started to nod and smile but then suddenly froze, the smile wilting into a straight line. "He's gone to Georgia? Without so much as a by-your-leave?"

"It was an urgent summons, Mrs. Fairhope. He asked me to help you so you wouldn't be unduly burdened with the day-to-day decisions. He also asked me to tell you he'll write to you often."

Mercy spluttered, there was no other word for it. Then stood blinking at Flint as her color changed from alabaster white to pink in her lightly freckled cheeks. Cassie wondered if steam might escape from her mother's ears as her face slowly turned blood red and her brows sank between her eyes. She'd only seen her mother in such a fit of anger once before and dreaded the conclusion of the unfolding scene.

"Mrs. Fairhope, please. I promise to do my best to..."

"Young man, my husband should not have put you in such a spot. Feel free to pack and go home and I'll manage with my daughter's help. You're not needed here."

The light in Flint's expression dimmed as he shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but Mr. Fairhope made me promise to act on his behalf until his return. I'm a man of my word. I'll have to do as we agreed." Flint swallowed, his Adam's apple sliding quickly up and down in his throat. "As long as he wants me here, that's where I'll stay."

"Well, I never... You have no right to supervise my actions. Do you hear me? You'll wish you'd taken my advice and left." Mercy glared at him with glittering eyes before she hurried through the door onto the dogtrot and across the wooden porch to slam the door to the family's residence.

Cassie stared at the closed door then turned to assess Flint's reaction to her mother's explosive exit. He blinked for several seconds before meeting her gaze.

"I hadn't expected that." Flint rubbed a palm over his chin and then dropped his hand to his side. "I thought that would go more smoothly given your father's urgent request for my presence here."

“Hopefully, she’ll get over my pa’s lack of trust in her abilities.” Cassie tossed a look at the closed door and then shook her head. “But I wouldn’t count on it.”

The swish of the gingham dress brushing her ankles echoed in the quiet upstairs passageway. Cassie hesitated outside her closed bedroom door, listening for any sound from her mother’s room next door. Should she check on her? See if she needed anything? She took two steps and then halted. No, best to leave the sleeping bear lie for the moment. She pivoted and hurried downstairs, heading for the bustling kitchen.

“Want some help?” Cassie paused at the end of the large, square worktable to marvel at the surety with which Sheridan peeled apples. The trees had only recently started to yield usable fruit and her mouth watered at the thought of apple butter on cornbread or a fried apple pie. The sweet smell of fresh apples scented the room. “What are you making?”

“I’m always pleased to have your help, Cassie.” Sheridan cast a grin her way and then used his paring knife to strip the skin off another apple. Deftly he cored it and sliced it into a large glass dish on the table. “This’ll be somethin’ called apple snow.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” She leaned closer to peer at the apples nestled in a ceramic pot. “What’s in it?”

A new recipe meant as much to her as a new dress. And like a dress, recipes could be used again and again. Maybe with an addition here or there, like adding a festive scarf or pretty pin, to make the old outfit look new. Dabbling in the kitchen with Sheridan remained one of her favorite pastimes because the nature of cooking satisfied an inner craving to create.

“After I get these in the dish, we’ll give them a goodly quantity of powdered white sugar on top, and then I’ll beat up eggs to a froth to pour over it and beat the whole again to make a truly delightful dessert-dish for supper this evening.”

“Sounds delicious.” Cassie reached for an apron where it hung with several others on a wood peg by the door. “What can I do?”

Sheridan nodded toward the basket of brown chicken eggs. “You can separate the eggs for me. That’ll save me time.”

She skirted around the table to snare a pair of small bowls from the stack on the sideboard. Then joyfully cracked open an egg, separating the white into one bowl and the yolk

into another.

Sheridan eyed her silently as he stripped the skins off the apples, then cored and sliced them into the dish. “So what do you think of Mr. Hamilton as the new innkeeper?”

Cassie gave him a sideways glance as she hefted the shell halves to drop the white into the bowl, then dump the yolk in with the other. “He’s manager more than innkeeper. Pa will be home before too long, I dare say.”

“Maybe.” Sheridan worked for several moments before catching her eye. “Not my place to try to understand your daddy’s reasoning, Miss.”

“What do you mean by that?” Cassie paused in the act of picking up the next egg, the cool brown shell smooth between her fingers.

He shrugged and slid her a glance. “He told Mr. Hamilton to stay put until he returned but it could be months before he gets back here. Something about needing to directly oversee the construction of the furniture he wants for the inn.”

Months? Cassie froze in mid crack of the egg. The white dribbled down the outside until she jerked it over the bowl. Finishing separating the egg, she wiped her hands on the apron. How could her pa have left them under Flint’s care for so long? Her ma would be even more difficult to live with if it were to take her pa so long away from home.

Her mother’s reputation for a hot temper had forced the woman’s sons to flee as soon as they reached an age where they could find work elsewhere. Cassie received an occasional letter from each of them, her oldest brother Giles mostly. The others kept their distance. She didn’t blame them for not tolerating their mother’s anger over the tiniest offense. She *did* blame them for abandoning her to suffer it alone. Now even her pa had left her to manage her ma’s emotional state, which he’d made worse with his silent departure.

“I wish he’d waited until we returned to make such a long journey.” She slid the bowl of egg whites closer to Sheridan’s side of the table. “It wouldn’t have been necessary to have Flint here at all that way.”

“I could have handled things.” Sheridan’s lower lip pushed out as he grabbed up a wooden spoon and began to beat the egg whites until they formed a frothy confection in the bowl. “If he’d asked.”

Without a doubt, the cook sounded like he’d hoped for a promotion. Her pa must have his reasons for not giving him the chance. Not that Cassie knew what they might be. She loved the

sturdy, singing black man with her whole heart as a friend and her sounding board. He could do anything, to her mind. Still, Flint's comment made sense. A cook didn't necessarily know how to manage everything that happened at the inn. Far more to consider than the pantry and larder after all. The laundry, the repairs to the inn, the stable, even the property and vehicles ready for guests to rent out for a day's excursion. Not to mention the livestock. Yet, it wasn't right for Sheridan to feel unappreciated.

"I'm sure my pa wanted to give you free rein to satisfy the hungry customers with your delicious offerings." She aimed a smile at him as she wiped her hands on the apron. "Mr. Hamilton will take the pressure off of you in that regard."

"I don't much like him trying to tell me what to do." He huffed and beat the egg whites harder.

He needed to see the benefit of having Flint around. Flint could be good for the inn's business if he proved as decent as his father at the hostelry trade. His father's success at the Hunt's Spring Hotel paved the way for other establishments in the surrounding area, like the Fury Falls Inn, because of the attraction of so many migrants from Georgia and the Carolinas to the rich, fertile soil of the state. A flood of wealthy Virginians arrived to establish cotton plantations, increasing the economy of the entire region. And of course, there remained one other reason why his presence brought a smile to her face.

"I don't mind Mr. Hamilton being here as he's quite handsome." She smirked at Sheridan with a quick lift of one brow. "I think he's a fine addition to the inn."

Sheridan stopped in his whipping of the egg whites to shake his dark head at her, his golden eyes glowing beneath furrowed brows. "Now don't be getting any ideas about Mr. Hamilton, hear? Your daddy told him outright not to be dabbling with your fancy. No way, no how."

Her elation drooped. Why would Pa think about the idea of Flint's attentions? Not that she'd ever even hinted at liking the young man. But Pa didn't know how she felt, how she dreamed of spending time with Flint. Holding his work calloused hand while they took a leisurely stroll up to the falls. Dreaming together and planning their future.

Besides, her pa wasn't in a position to dictate. Especially when he was currently hundreds of miles away. What could a little harmless flirting hurt? Hannah enjoyed dallying with the young men who stopped in for a meal or ale. She had fun and nobody took offense. Cassie would

follow her lead.

“But he’s such a catch in many ways. Come on, Sheridan, think about what pleasure he and I could have.” She batted her eyelashes at him and then chortled at the horrified expression he aimed her way. “He’s not all that bad.”

Sheridan lowered his voice and leaned closer to her. “I’ve heard the boy thinks he can see and even communicate with...haints.” The last word slipped through his taut lips as a mere whisper. “I’m not wanting to hear of haints around these parts. No, thank you.”

Cassie chuckled at his discomfort with the topic of spirits. “I don’t think we need worry about any ghosts around the inn, my friend.”

For one thing, she didn’t believe for one second the man could in fact converse with ghosts. Given ghosts and goblins only existed in fairy tales or myths told to scare people. Children mostly. She’d never fallen for the spooky stories. She had more sense.

The swinging door opened and Hannah bustled into the kitchen. Short and plump, she proved both efficient and friendly. Her nut brown hair was pulled back into a loose bun on top of her head. Her bright blue eyes smiled at the world. Pa had hired her when he first built the inn back in 1815 and she’d made herself indispensable to him over the six years since. Cassie regarded the other woman for a moment and then grinned at her. She’d pay close attention, make some mental notes of how Hannah drew the appreciative looks from the men, and then imitate her.

“I need three bowls of stew, Mr. Drake.” Hannah pulled three pretty porcelain bowls from a stack on a sideboard and set them on the work table. “And some hot rolls if you have them.”

“Just a moment.” Sheridan spun away and grabbed a thick towel to open the bread oven door. The smell of fresh hot baked bread wafted through the room. He peered inside and sniffed, then reached for the flat paddle to slip under the pan of rolls. Setting the hot pan on the heavily scarred work table, he dropped the towel and quickly scooped several rolls into another bowl. “There you go. Fresh out of the oven, too.”

“The stew?” Hannah shifted her weight to rest on one hip, and tilted her head a bit to the side. “Pretty please?”

Sheridan chuckled as he grabbed first one and then the next bowls and ladled stew into each. He placed them on a large tray in front of Cassie, the aroma of lamb, onion, potatoes,

carrots, and early peas making her anxious for lunch.

Hannah set the bowl of bread on the large tray and then lifted it with a wry grin, backing through the swinging door and disappearing from view.

“That woman...” Cassie shook her head as she pivoted to face Sheridan once more. “She sure is something.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sheridan regarded Cassie with furrowed brows. “Hannah’s very popular.”

Cassie bobbed her head and pressed her palms onto the table. “I know and that’s why I’m going to pay attention to how she does that.”

“You’re too young to be acting like Hannah. She’s a widow and knows what she’s about.” Sheridan aimed a wooden spoon at Cassie, shaking it to emphasize his words. “Back to what we were talking about, Cassandra. You keep your mind on your work and not on that boy. You hear me? It’s for your own good.”

Spoken like a parent who wants to deny their children from having any fun. He didn’t use her full given name unless he needed her to pay attention. Was Sheridan a parent? He never spoke of children let alone a wife. She’d always taken him as he presented himself, ever since her pa had paid to free him from the plantation owner who had migrated from Georgia with him several years before. On one condition: Sheridan had to continue working for the inn with his culinary talents for at least two years. Which he’d done and then some.

“What do you have against Flint anyway?” She pondered the lowering frown on the man’s face. “Not the ghost thing again. Or is it?”

“Folks shouldn’t oughta poke their nose into dark magic. They’re sure to find trouble if they do.” Sheridan dove the spoon back into the stew kettle and gave it a hard stir. “Mark my words.”

Cassie brushed off his superstitious mutterings as she took over beating the apple snow. As she whipped the frothy mixture, she pondered her mother’s reaction to Flint’s presence. It didn’t bode well for any romantic ideas Cassie held toward him. But finding a husband was the only certain way she could have a life of her own. She’d contemplated many other options, but always came back around to finding a man.

Other women might be permitted to find gainful work to support themselves. Not Cassie. Ma would never allow her to venture down a path likely to lead to spinsterhood. A proper

marriage to a decent man, who led a sober and godly life, was her future according to her ma. With at least half a dozen children to raise. Ma had expressed her disappointment that she'd only given birth to five, and four of them boys. She'd so wanted to have several girls to help around the house, or inn as the case may be. Not that her ma had ever desired to live in a public roadhouse. Clearly. Probably why she'd turned so hateful over the last several years, which led to her sons finding work in distant states. Abandoning Cassie to her fate.

She finished whipping the dish and glanced at Sheridan as her resolve firmed along with the egg whites. Whether anyone liked it or not, Flint was her best option.

Mercy sat at her vanity table, peering into the beautiful looking glass her son had given her years ago. Staring at the frown she couldn't remove from her expression. Reggie shouldn't have done it. Shouldn't have gone around her, tapping the young upstart boy to run the place. She blinked slowly at herself and then lifted the short note she'd found pinned to her pillow upon her return. A few short, hurried lines trying to explain his sudden actions.

My heart,

I know you'll be upset with me but I have to hurry to Savannah to deal with an impending disaster regarding my order. I know you'll understand and will ultimately see my decision to have Mr. Flint Hamilton manage the inn in my absence is in your best interest as well as the inn's as I may be away for several months.

I will write once I arrive in that city and let you know I'm safe and sound.

Your loving husband,

Reggie

He knew and yet refused to wait a few days, just days, until she could arrive back home. She dragged in a deep breath as she laid the paper on the table. Her dismay, perhaps even a simmering anger, stemmed from knowing he didn't trust her. After all she'd sacrificed for his dream, he didn't see her as a partner but a helper. Someone incapable of serving alongside him.

She didn't question his love. He had proved a doting husband, surprising her with a posy of wildflowers now and again, or a special bar of chocolate, or some other such treat. They

shared a passion for each other which expressed itself in their five children. Could she help it if the same fiery passion fueled her emotions in other arenas of her life?

Her gaze drifted of its own accord up to the painting of a house nestled among flowering bushes and towering oaks and elms. A deep blue sky with an explosion of white clouds rising up to the heavens provided a dramatic backdrop. The details of the leaves on the oaks, in particular, encouraged a tiny smile of appreciation. She'd worked especially closely to replicate the delicate nature of the curvy shapes and yet in such a way as to convey the overall fuzzy appearance to the groupings. Her home outside Montgomery hung on the wall, an everlasting reminder. She closed her eyes to blot out the image.

At least he'd left her a note, an attempt to explain and mollify her reaction to his sudden departure. A sign of the depth of understanding he held for her sensibilities. But how would she survive without him for months? The very idea sent a shaft of pain into her midriff, forcing her eyes open. She wrapped her arms around her waist to try to ease the sudden discomfort. Since their marriage twenty-eight years ago, they'd rarely been separated for more than a couple of weeks when one had to travel to another city for supplies or clothing. Facing the harsh reality of months without him to share a conversation, or a joke, or their bed brought tears to her eyes. Could she survive, emotionally as well as physically, without him? She brushed at the stream of tears and sobbed.