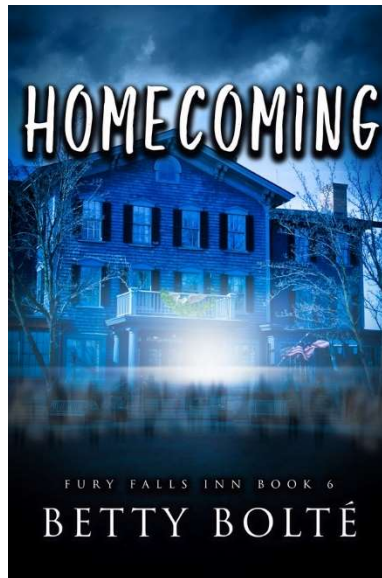


Excerpt of
Homecoming
Fury Falls Inn
Book 6
By
Betty Bolté



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About

Homecoming

Fury Falls Inn in 1821 Alabama. A place for ghosts, witches, and magic. A place of secrets and hidden dangers. A place Reginald Fairhope built to keep his family safe from vengeful witches.

The inn was supposed to be a haven, a place where Reggie's powerful magic would protect both his wife and daughter. He trusts a young innkeeper to care for them while he travels on urgent business. He returns exhausted, longing for peace and quiet along with a stiff drink, only to find his wife murdered and haunting the inn, a witch hunter on the loose, and his witch daughter, now engaged to the interim innkeeper, kidnapped. With his world falling apart, what must a fiercely powerful warlock do to find the peace he craves?

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

This story completes the series of six supernatural historical fiction stories set in 1821 northern Alabama.

I'd like to thank my beta readers—Sue, Alicia, Danielle, Crystal, Mandy, and Chris—who read a prepublication version of *Homecoming* 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 *Homecoming*.

Betty

Chapter One

Northern Alabama, October 1821

The familiar lane leading to the Fury Falls Inn finally came into view, welcoming and yet portentous. Reginald Fairhope trudged beside the lead pair of oxen, urging them with a goad stick as they hauled home the carefully wrapped, custom furniture in the battered wagons. He could have used his magic to transport everyone and everything but doing so would worsen the situation he'd soon confront. Caked in dried mud, the massive caravan lumbered onto the lane. After all he'd been through, he meant to insure the safe arrival of the goods as well as the people, his family, behind him. He eagerly anticipated his daughter's happy welcome. The journey home had proven far more arduous than even he'd thought possible. Through rain and mud and steep mountain passes they'd struggled and slowly made their way home. But he'd never seen a sight look so fine as the two-story roadside inn at the far end of the dirt lane stretching up toward the Appalachian foothills. He reached out with his senses and frowned. Many souls resided there, some from the beyond. Including his cherished wife, haunting the inn. He tightened his grip on the long stick and urged the oxen onward. A chill foreboding permeated him with each step toward home.

The home he'd constructed to protect his family as he built a new life for them. He knew every length of lumber, every spike and nail used to create a haven for his wife and daughter. The structure expanded upon the typical dog-trot style of home popular in the region. He'd chosen the layout for its familiar appearance but on a grander scale. The idea pleased him, of having two halves of a whole with a covered porch between to encourage air flow for cooling on hot summer days. On the left side he'd built the public inn with a large working kitchen and an even larger dining room complete with a beautiful bar and immense fireplace. A mahogany square piano stood on display in the front corner, payment from a talented young piano maker passing through on his way to Boston and fame. The upstairs boasted seven comfortable guest accommodations as well as a welcoming sitting area by a rear window. The specially crafted furniture secured in the wagons of the caravan would replace the plain beds, chairs, wardrobes,

and other small pieces to elevate the appearance to meet his vision before the esteemed senator's upcoming visit. He'd made it back just in time.

Zander Simmons rode his horse alongside Reggie, matching pace with the slower oxen. "How's it feel to be home again?"

Reggie nodded at Zander, recalling his surprise at the man's sudden arrival in Savannah. The young man had accompanied his father Sheridan, the inn's renowned cook, when the older man had learned his enslaved wife worked in Savannah where Reggie had finally found her. Apparently, nothing could prevent Sheridan from traveling to the coast to be reunited with her. The three of them had managed to raise the exorbitant amount the slave owner demanded to set her free.

"I cannot describe it." Reggie clicked his tongue. "Come up now, boys." Reggie kept the oxen moving with his abrupt command and a tap on the rump. No slacking off. He longed to see his daughter, but more so his wife. Despite knowing she'd died and now her ghost haunted the inn, he must see her. If only he could touch her one last time. Since that was unlikely, he'd settle for seeing her, speaking to her of his love. He'd set up a séance if need be. "Do you think they've spotted us yet?"

He squinted up the lane, hoping to see his daughter, to see Cassandra hurrying out to greet him. He probed for her but didn't detect her. Where was she? He saw only a myriad of other coaches, carriages, wagons, and men on horseback coming and going along the wide lane. At the far end, he noticed what looked like white stone on the ground in a circle around the entrance. Flint had been as busy as he'd been told.

"I bet they've heard us by now." Zander tapped his wide-brimmed hat more snugly on his brow. "We're not sneaking up on anyone."

Reggie glanced over his shoulder at the string of wagons pulled by horses and oxen, the enclosed coach-and-four where the women rode in relative comfort, and several men on horseback behind him. The rattle of harness, the squeak of leather, the stomp of hooves creating a low-lying cloud of dust announced their slow progress. He turned back to look up the lane, waiting to see a familiar face on the wide front porch. Only to be disappointed.

"I don't see anyone looking for us." He pulled his hat off and smacked it against his thigh to dislodge the layer of dust on the brim. Then he put it back in place as he continued easing closer to a cold ale and a comfortable chair.

He heard dogs barking and peered more closely. The household pack of dogs gathered in the circular carriageway, welcoming the new arrivals with sharp yaps and deep barks. “At least someone is glad to see us.”

He prodded the oxen again with another encouraging command, a spring in his stride he hadn't had moments before. He'd missed the Labradors and the Cocker Spaniel more than he'd realized. Their friendly overture would also alert the rest of the household of their arrival. Sure enough, young Flint Hamilton emerged onto the front porch and stood there, hand to brow to determine what the dogs were making a fuss about. He looked respectable in his dark trousers and matching vest, a white shirt glistening in the weak sunshine. A second later another young man joined Flint to watch the caravan's progress. Reggie lifted the goad stick in salute, receiving a wave in return.

Several minutes later they halted off to the left of the lane, near the stable and the paddocks where cattle, horses, and swine grazed and snuffled about. He'd maneuvered the caravan out of the way of the flow of guests while they sorted out where to store the furniture, boxes, crates, barrels, all strapped down and covered to protect everything from the fickle, hostile elements.

“Mr. Fairhope, welcome home.” Flint trotted across the drive toward him, his black leather shoes crunching on the stones. The other man hesitated on the porch before easing down the steps.

Reggie peered at the young man. He stood tall and dark blond, his bright blue eyes studying him with reserved curiosity. He displayed the physique of an active man, strong and supple in his movements. The stranger took a position next to Flint without saying a word.

Reggie addressed Flint and then shook hands with his substitute, noting the changes in his demeanor and appearance. The youth had matured into a fine young man. No wonder his daughter had fallen in love with him. Reggie had not anticipated the two young people would become attached when he'd invited Flint to oversee the operation during his absence. Cassie's letters had clearly indicated her growing desire to marry the man despite her mother's protests. Now he understood. “Mr. Hamilton, it's grand to see you again. I'm afraid I don't know your companion.”

“I'm glad you've returned as well. As to my companion...” Flint glanced to the other man. “This is your son, Silas.

Taken aback, Reggie peered closer at his son and noted the warm humor in those startling eyes. “Silas? Is that really you?”

“Yes, sir.” Silas nodded slowly and stuck out his hand. “How have you been?”

Reggie clasped the strong grip and then pulled his youngest son into an embrace. He held it for perhaps a second too long but his joy at seeing one of his son’s couldn’t be denied.

“Welcome. I’m glad to see you looking so fit and fine.”

Silas tightened his grip on Reggie’s hand and then eased back. “I’m glad to see you, too. I’m sure the others will be happy to reunite with you as well.”

Flint surveyed the line of vehicles behind Reggie’s wagon. “Everyone safe and sound?”

The others. His other sons were here. His joy ballooned in his chest but now wasn’t the time to rejoice. First he had to get everyone and everything unloaded and settled. Reggie followed Flint’s gaze, watching his brother Beck dismount and lead his horse toward him. “Tired and hungry, but in one piece, thank goodness. Where’s Cassandra?”

“She’s...safe.” Flint glanced away and then back to him. “Um... Mr. Fairhope, there’s something you should know.” Flint’s eyes glittered with worry.

Reggie peered at him, seeing that something deeply troubled him. Something he didn’t want to know. “Not yet, son. Let’s get everyone settled with something to eat and drink, then we can talk about whatever issues may be at hand.” Reggie didn’t have patience enough to deal with problems when he hadn’t even had the chance to sip a cold beverage. His grip on his volatile temper slipped a notch with each passing moment. He’d longed for home and now that he’d arrived, he simply wanted to enjoy his return. Knowing Cassie was safe meant he had a minute before he need worry about her. The dust lining his throat made it a chore to speak. “I want you to meet several people. Come with me.”

“But...”

Reggie leveled a glare at him. His patience evaporated, his fingers itching to silence the man with a flick and a wave. His expression must have warned Flint of his brush with a dangerous magical force. Reggie. Flint hesitated only a second, firmed his lips, then followed without another word. Slowly, Reggie allowed the growing surge of power to abate as he turned to face his brother.

“Hey, Beck, I’d like you to meet Flint Hamilton and my son Silas. Flint’s been managing the inn while I’ve been gone, and doing a fine job from what I hear.” Surprisingly so, if he were

honest. He hadn't expected for the young man to work so hard to make everything shine and welcome guests. Even the crushed stone carriageway proved innovative and useful. What else had Flint accomplished around the inn? The answer to that question would have to wait a spell. "This is my brother, Beck Fairhope."

Beck leveled a stern, understanding gaze at Reggie but wisely held his tongue. Reggie tamped down the remainder of the anger brewing inside. Reclaimed control of his temper with an act of will. Emotions ran high at the inn, triggering his instinctive reaction to the others. He wanted a drink before he had to handle any of the worries swirling around him. Was that too much to ask?

Flint extended a hand and firmly shook with the older man. "Welcome to Fury Falls Inn, sir."

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Uncle Beck." Silas clasped hands briefly with him.

"Just call me Beck. I expect we'll get to know each other quite well over the next few weeks." Beck's green eyes flashed with mischief. "My brother says there's some trouble we need to address."

"Yes, I was going to tell him about it..." Flint let whatever else he was going to say remain unsaid as Reggie glared at him again.

"I just got here, Flint. Give me a few minutes, all right?" Reggie dragged his hat off and raked a hand through his hair. He simply wanted to settle in after the weeks on the trail. He couldn't count the number of broken spokes, wheels, yokes, and straps they'd had to mend or replace. The stone bruised horses they'd had to replace with fresh horses. He tapped his hat on his head with an exhausted sigh. "Let's get everyone inside and then we'll catch up."

"Mr. Hamilton, how are you? It seems like a donkey's ear since I last seen you."

The deep voice drew Reggie's attention to the strong older man he'd called cook and friend for several years. Sheridan escorted his wife, Pansy, toward where the men waited. Reggie couldn't stop the blossom of happiness inside to see the couple walking together. He'd do anything for Sheridan. The man deserved all the happiness he could lay claim to in this life.

Although Sheridan was of medium height, Pansy's head barely reached his shoulder. That she'd made the entire trip without one complaint endeared her to Reggie all the more. The woman had endured so very much and yet didn't belabor her own misfortunes. Indeed, she'd been overjoyed to be reunited with her long-lost husband. Reggie strived to improve the lives of

those he employed, and he felt great satisfaction to have done so for Sheridan by bringing him together again with Pansy.

“It has been a long time, Sheridan. I’m pleased to see you well. And this must be your wife I’ve heard so much about.” Flint half-bowed to the petite woman. “I’m pleased to me you, Mrs. Drake.”

“Pansy is fine, young man.” She aimed a crooked, weary smile up at him. “My Sheridan tells me how much you’ve supported him despite some...differences of opinion along the way.”

“We figured out how to work together.” Flint grinned at her forthright comment, slanting a wink at Sheridan. “And this is Silas Fairhope, Reggie’s son.”

Silas nodded a greeting to the petite woman. “Nice to meet you.”

Reggie had heard more than once how Sheridan and Flint had butted heads at first, Sheridan resented not being left in charge just like Mercy had when she’d gotten home from a shopping trip with Cassie to find her husband gone. But Reggie had not wanted to burden either of them with the day-to-day decisions and problems Flint must have faced. Sheridan’s talent remained his cooking ability, transforming everyday vegetables and meats into something delectable the guests relished. While Mercy had her own tasks and pastimes to occupy her days. She didn’t need worrying over where to purchase the best candle wax, or the finest oils, or even the softest linens. Besides, she had her hands full with Cassandra. As loving and dutiful as his daughter might be, she also balked at her mother’s heavy hand. A hand there to protect her from dire threats whether she had realized them or not.

“I heard you’ve been doing an excellent job in my absence.” Reggie studied Flint’s somber features, battling inside with his desire to be pleased with his need to have been missed, needed, or at least welcomed home by his daughter. “I’m back now so we’ll see how accurate that portrayal might be.”

“Yes, sir.” Flint lifted his chin as he stiffened his posture, indicating some level of affront at the implication behind the jibe. He gazed down the lane. “Who did you bring with you?”

Damn. His temper made him lash out for no good reason. The man had run the inn for him for four months and all Reggie could do was put him on defense. What was wrong with him? He thought he’d be missed, that things would suffer without him around which is why he’d asked John Baker to supervise for him. To visit the inn frequently and send him reports. Cassie had begged in her candid letters for him to return, implying she desperately needed him home.

Now that he'd shown up, everything seemed to be running smoothly. He shouldn't feel disappointed but somehow he did. *Get a handle on yourself, man.* Reggie shifted to see to whom Flint smiled a greeting. "Ah, Scarlet."

"Reggie, dear, you simply must introduce me to these bright young men." His sister, dressed in a long, tan dress with white sash, a floppy tan hat on her head, strutted up to join the group. "I've heard so much about Mr. Hamilton. How perfect he is and all. Which one is he?"

He adored Scarlet despite her flippant ways. Her attitude belied her forty-plus years. Still slender and sassy, she lit up the room when she strolled in. More impressive, at least to Reggie, were her magical abilities. She could flick a finger and enact her will as easily as smile. She'd begged him to stay in Savannah, to move the children there after his beloved wife lay buried out back of the inn. When he'd refused for that very reason, she did an about-face and announced she'd move to Alabama instead. To help him instruct his children on how to finesse their magic. Her smile, energy, and devotion filled him with pleasure beyond words.

"Now, sis, don't fluster the man." Reggie shook his head, but a slow smile spread on his lips. "Flint, this audacious miss is my sister Scarlet."

He nodded once at her. "Nice to meet you, Miss Fairhope."

"Oh, please, since you're about to be family..." Scarlet angled a glance at Reggie with an arched brow.

"That's likely true." Reggie had shared with the group Cassie's intention to marry. From what he already knew about Flint, along with the fine impression he made upon his greeting, Reggie saw no reason for denying his daughter the future she envisioned. A warmth spread through his chest as he considered calling Flint his son. "I'm sure of it."

"Then please, call me Scarlet." She held out her hand for Flint to take. "I'll call you Flint, yes?"

Flint clasped her hand gently. "As you'd like."

"And now who is this handsome gentleman?" Scarlet angled her head, her floppy hat brim shading half of her face.

"Silas Fairhope, ma'am." Silas half-bowed to her. "Your nephew."

"What a pleasure to finally meet you." Scarlet draped her hand in front of Silas, who took it gently in his own. "We shall get along famously, I'm sure."

The rattle and thud of an elegant coach-and-four cantering up the lane halted the conversation. Well, well. He'd anticipated seeking out John ere long. Here he appeared as if by magic. He suppressed a chuckle at his lame joke as he strode toward the advancing equipage.

The footman leaped from his post and yanked open the door. John quickly stepped down to the ground. As usual, he was dressed in fine attire befitting his elevated status in the community. He strode toward him, an anxious smile tugging his lips.

"Welcome back, Reggie." John halted with a quick nod to Flint and the others. His beaver top hat glistened in the morning sunshine. "I'm very glad you're home."

"Yes, finally. I'm glad to be back." Reggie searched John's hard expression, reached out to sense his emotions with a quick probe. Then stiffened and braced for the worst. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, old friend, to be the bearer of bad news upon your arrival. But you need to come with us to Riverwood." John shot a worried glance at Flint. "Immediately. Cassie informed me of your approach so I could collect you as quickly as possible."

"Can't it wait until I have something cold to drink?" He'd thought of nothing but easing his thirst and relaxing his tired muscles. Reggie opened his senses to John's feelings and then relented. Cassie was in trouble. Reading his mixed emotions and concerns made it difficult to assess the level of threat, but the fact Cassie wasn't home pointed to a deep concern for her safety. He had no time to refresh himself. "No, I guess not. Very well. Flint, Silas, please see to the others' comfort and refreshment. I'll return as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir. That is what I was trying to tell you, that Mr. Baker would require your assistance immediately." Flint braced his fists on his hips. "I'd have handled the matter but only you can. I'll take care of everyone's needs here. But please, sir. Hurry back."

Flint's deep concern and fear flowed into Reggie, making his pulse beat in his ear. The man feared for his fiancé's life. He met Beck's probing gaze, sending a silent message. Beck clenched his jaw but kept his expression neutral. Having his warlock brother on hand meant Reggie could go retrieve his daughter without worrying about the others remaining at the inn.

"I will bring her home soon." Reggie indicated the coach his friend had arrived in with a wave of his hand. Despite his wishes, he had to ensure his daughter was safe. Bring her home where she belonged and where he could protect her with all of his considerable might. "All right, my friend, fill me in on the way. Let's go see what needs doing, shall we?"

The coach rolled away, leaving behind a cloud of dust and a lot of concern swirling in Flint's chest. Conflicting thoughts and accompanying emotions roiled inside him as the vehicle turned onto the highway and disappeared. What had Reggie meant? Had he disappointed him in some way? He'd done all he could think of to make his boss pleased with the job he'd done. Why did he have the feeling he'd let him down?

Silas attracted his attention with a shift of his position. "I'll go in and inform Matt of his parents' arrival and see that there's something cooking for their refreshments." He started for the steps without waiting for Flint's response.

"That's a fine idea. Thank you." Flint called after Silas as he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Flint, good to see you!" Zander strode up to clap him on the back in a half-hug. "You're looking well."

Flint greeted Zander with relief and pleasure in his heart. He had been impressed by the man, who'd managed to overcome so much adversity to focus on the positives in his life. Once a slave, Zander still carried harsh memories Flint could never fathom of his life on the Louisiana plantation. Cassie's oldest brother, Giles, had saved him and his brother Matt from further abuse and ensured their life going forward could only be a vast improvement. When Zander and Matt had accompanied Giles home at Cassie's request, they discovered Sheridan was their father. With Pansy's recent freedom, the four of them could be a true family again.

Flint returned the manly embrace and then stepped away, positioning himself next to Scarlet. "I see you survived the trek as well. I'm sure Giles will be glad to see you when he gets back."

"Where is he?" Zander surveyed the inn's bustling front yard as if he hoped to spot his close friend approaching. "I thought he'd be here."

"He's with Cassie. I'll explain later." He'd not reveal too many details standing out in the open where anyone might overhear. He suspected the very bushes had ears. Knowing Giles stayed at Cassie's side was the only reason Flint had not ridden over to Riverwood himself. He had other obligations to attend but his heart ached for his woman. He gazed at Beck's attentive expression and then at Zander. "Over a pint?"

“Sounds fine.” Zander looked at the tall man standing nearby. “Flint, have you met Beck?”

“We’ve been introduced.” The man matched Flint in height, his pale green eyes bright and curious. Muscular shoulders filled out his leather jacket and his stance suggested he was comfortable and confident. Flint assessed the weary faces gazing at him. “I’m glad you have arrived in one piece. It sounds like you had quite a journey.”

“Indeed we did. Reginald wouldn’t permit me to assist our travels or we’d have arrived weeks ago. He insisted we not draw attention to ourselves.” Scarlet tossed her head, her long ebony curls flirting with her shoulders. “He didn’t believe I could work my magic and no one would know the difference.”

The woman drew attention with the slightest movement so it was no wonder Reggie had insisted she try to keep to mundane modes of transportation. “He can be particular. Now that we’re all here, shall we go inside? I’ve asked my hostess, Mandy, to help you get settled in.”

“Oh, that would be nice.” Pansy glanced at Sheridan and then met Flint’s steady gaze. “What of our bags on the coach?”

Flint flicked a look at the coachman who had finished unloading the bags and boxes from the top of the coach. He nodded to the sturdy-looking fellow as he climbed the steps of the coach and took up the reins. The vehicle rattled and thumped past the group, interrupting their conversation.

“I’ll bring them in.” Zander waved them inside. “You go on.”

“I’ll give you a hand.” Beck followed him the several yards back to the pile of luggage.

“Then let’s get you ladies inside.” Having two more strong men added to the number already in residence calmed some of Flint’s concern. Knowing Beck possessed magical abilities also comforted him. The more the better as far as he was concerned. He wished yet again for some magical power to add to the mix. A futile wish. All he could do for the moment was what he’d been tasked with. “Right this way.”

Flint ushered Scarlet and Pansy, still holding Sheridan’s hand, across the carriageway and up the steps into the public side of the inn.

“Sheridan, you and Pansy can go on up to your old room.” Flint motioned toward the door to the right that led across the covered passage to the family side of the structure. “It’s all ready for you both.”

“If Pansy don’t mind, I’d like to see what all you’ve been up to while I was gone.” Sheridan arched a brow at him. “Y’know, check on your work.”

“Not that you’d have any real say in the matter.” Flint leveled a stern look at the man, then let it melt into a grin. Just like old times with Sheridan pushing his own ideas to challenge and improve upon Flint’s. Man, having him home was mighty fine. “But I’ll show you if you’ll keep your unwanted opinions to yourself.”

Sheridan chuckled. “If you insist.”

Flint led them down the short hall into the new addition, perusing the nearly finished rooms with pride. They’d almost succeeded in having the additional space ready and waiting for their arrival. Only a few more finishing touches to put the project to bed. If there were a bed. Those were on the wagons waiting outside to be unloaded. The furniture had better live up to the long wait.

The rooms stood ready to accept the wardrobes, tables, and beds. Curtains hung at the windows. Pretty and serviceable carpets on the wood floors. That thought reminded him of the fine carpet he’d ordered for the family’s parlor, which should arrive in a matter of days. One last detail he intended to complete before any discussion arose of his future at the inn. So many details had occupied his mind in the course of defining and building the new rooms. If only he had a quality carpenter to handle the final little flourishes he envisioned. Unfortunately, they were all engaged and he’d have to wait weeks until any could see to those final touches. But the rooms were finished well enough to receive guests once the new furniture had been placed.

“What lovely accommodations.” Scarlet brushed past him to waltz into the first room where Flint had stopped. She spun slowly in place and then grinned at him. “All it needs to be a comfortable retreat is some of the beautiful furniture we hauled all the way here.”

“Indeed. I will see to that as quickly as possible.” Flint half-bowed to her as Mandy sidled up next to him in her uniform of white blouse and dark blue skirt. “In the meantime, Mandy here will show you where you can freshen up. Then come to the dining room, the one we passed on our way here, and I’ll have tea waiting for you. Luncheon won’t be for another couple of hours.”

“Mandy, is it?” Scarlet squinted at the young woman, appraising her attire and expression with a proprietary air. “I see we have some work to do, my dear, but never fear. I will be happy to assist you.”

Mandy blinked several times as a slight frown pulled down her brows. "Excuse me?"

Scarlet waved a hand to and fro. "It can wait for now. Please show me where I can remove this layer of dust from my person."

Flint shrugged at Mandy, silently advising her to be polite. The young woman stared at him for a second and then drew in a breath before pasting a smile on her face.

"Miss Fairhope, if you'll follow me?" Mandy gestured toward the open door.

"I'd be happy to." Scarlet wriggled her fingers at Flint as she passed him, trailing after Mandy.

Sheridan smirked from where he stood with his wife in the hallway. "Never a moment without some kind of drama when she's around."

"Was it like that the entire trip?" Imagine dealing with such self-assurance from the woman all the way across country. At Sheridan's knowing grin, Flint shook his head. "No wonder Reggie is relieved to have finished the journey."

"Father, you're back." Matt strode purposefully down the hall toward where Flint stood with his parents.

Sheridan accepted his son's handshake and then pulled Pansy forward. "Matthew, this is your mother."

Matt grinned at Pansy, searching her shining eyes with interest. "Mother."

The loving expression in the young man's eyes as he perused Pansy's entire being in one swift glance brought a lump to Flint's throat. The two hadn't seen each other in many years, since Matt was separated from his parents when a boy. The plethora of feelings Pansy experienced crossed her face as she smiled at her son.

"Son." Pansy extended a hand, palm up. "You've grown into a fine young man."

Matt ignored the hand and rushed in to give her a long hug. His quiet voice emerged muffled and choked with his own feelings at embracing his mother. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

The emotion displayed on their faces, tears streaming down Pansy's face while Matt closed his eyes against her neck, choked Flint. He hadn't seen his own mother now in weeks, but that was no time at all compared to the many years this mother and son had been separated. Not knowing what had become of the other. All the wondering, hoping, worrying. When he compared his own worry over Cassie being gone merely a day, he realized how fortunate he was.

He knew where she was, that she was being protected. Pansy had no such reassurance for far too long. A lump clogged his throat the longer the two clung together, Sheridan watching in bemused silence.

Matt eased from the tight embrace, his hand lingering in his mother's as he smiled at her. "I'm going to fix you all a feast to welcome you home. Let Flint here settle you in and then come to the dining room back yonder. I'll fix you up fine."

"I'd offered them tea."

"Tea? This calls for a celebration." Matt glared at Flint, challenging him to deny him the pleasure of preparing a special repast for his mother.

Flint shrugged with a grin. "Have it your way."

Sheridan clapped Matt on the back, drawing him into a short embrace. "That sounds fine, Matt. We'll be there shortly."

Matt nodded his head vigorously as he glanced between them. "Right. I'll go get busy." He spun on the ball of one foot and hurried away, whistling.

"He's such a sweet young man." Pansy gazed after her son, a soft smile lighting her eyes. "Oh, Sheridan, I'm glad to see him looking so well."

"He's as fine a cook as Sheridan, too." Flint winked at Sheridan. The comparison should raise a cockle or two. "Isn't he?"

"Not even close." Sheridan braced his hands on his hips. "I guess I'll need to whip my kitchen back into shape again, now I'm home."

"Your kitchen? I thought you said you and Matt tied in your last cooking contest." Beck came up beside Flint, carrying a bag under each arm and in each hand. He didn't give Sheridan the chance to respond before addressing Flint. "Where do these go?"

Zander sidled around Beck and nodded at the collection of matching luggage in his hands. "These are Scarlet's."

"She's in there." Flint pointed to the room nearby. "She's off with Mandy at the moment, but I expect her imminent return."

"I'm sure we'll know when she's on her way." Zander slipped into the room. The thud of several bags hitting the carpeted floor followed before he popped back into the hallway. "Beck has Sheridan and Pansy's things."

"Here, let me take those." Sheridan held out his hands, but Beck backed away.

“I’ve got ’em. Just show me where you want ’em.” Beck juggled one bag to a more comfortable grip. “Lead the way.”

Sheridan crooked his arm for Pansy to take hold. “Thank you, sir. Come, Pansy, I’ll show you where we’ll rest.”

“As long as it’s with you, I’ll be fine.” Pansy squeezed his elbow and let him escort her down the passage toward the entrance hall.

One day soon Flint and Cassie would walk together in just such a fashion. Despite having been apart for so many years, Sheridan and Pansy’s love for each other was evident and inspiring.

“Would you look at them?” Zander gazed after the couple. Then he cleared his throat as he faced Flint. “Am I still bunking with Matt?”

“Yes, that’s your bedchamber.” At the moment, that’s where he’d stay but Flint would follow up with him to see if he wanted to change things around. “As long as you want it to be.”

“Then I’ll go with them.” Zander tipped his fingers to his brow. “See you for that pint in a few minutes.”

The party strode away, Beck bringing up the rear. The Drake family reunited. The Fairhope family slowly pulling together. But his bride-to-be still kept from him. He’d give anything to have his woman at his side. Surely, Reggie would bring her home safely. But man, how he wanted to ride to her, to ensure she returned home where she belonged. He couldn’t protect her when she wasn’t near to him. Hell, he worried he couldn’t protect her when she was. But one thing he knew: he’d do all in his power to keep her safe.

The blasted coven continues to grow, to expand and accept ever more witches and warlocks. The string of wagons and coaches, of mounted men, of wicked women, all announced the arrival of more creatures. I could no longer put off the inevitable. I must end this. Witches and warlocks showed their true stripes to me ages ago. They wreak hell and havoc on mortals with every breath they take. They lie and they connive. They cannot be trusted.

I know John Baker has betrayed me. He’s chosen his side in the fight of good versus evil. He’ll pay for his actions right alongside the young witch. Look at all of them, even a new witch and warlock to threaten me and mine. Once I locate the young witch, then my men will act. I’ll see to their demise. It is time for the finale of the Fairhope coven.

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