

Excerpt of
Under Lock and Key
(Fury Falls Inn Book 2)
By
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Chapter One

What on earth was locked up in her mother's private attic? That one question nibbled at Cassie's patience. Whether she sliced carrots for Sheridan at the scarred table in the kitchen. Or ripped out weeds from around corn stalks in her abundant garden. Or sang ditties to entertain the Fury Falls Inn dining guests. No matter how she tried to occupy her time, she couldn't shake it.

She marched into the large kitchen where Sheridan and the Marple sisters bustled about preparing all manner of delicious foods. The savory aroma of simmering meat and onions met her nose, making her mouth water in response. She dithered inside, holding the smooth wood door open as she surveyed the table in the center of the room. The older sister flashed a wary look at her, one that hastily changed to welcoming.

The gray-haired woman had every right to be concerned. What if it had been Mercy who'd suddenly appeared? Working in a haunted roadside inn wasn't something most people would want to do. Even in such a progressive and seemingly enlightened area as north Alabama

in 1821. Flint had convinced the sisters to return to work as scullery maids after her mother's death only because she'd been kind to them before and hoped her ghost wouldn't harm them. Not that Ma had been an easy person to work with by any account. But she'd never been physically threatening to them, so they'd somewhat reluctantly agreed to come back to earn their paycheck.

Meg, the younger of the two, grappled with a long paddle to stir the fragrant contents of an immense black cauldron hanging over the flickering cook fire. Leaning the paddle against the brick fireplace surround, she wiped her hands on a stained apron. "Hey, Cassie. How are you doing today? Feeling better?"

"The headache's finally gone. Thanks for asking." She'd suffered with a nagging pain at the front of her head for weeks after her mother died. Probably triggered by the grief and guilt swirling in her gut. Despite still feeling both emotions, the pain had finally gone away.

"You're looking like yourself again, too." A slight lift of Meg's mouth and brows accompanied the relief in her lilting voice.

"Good or bad?" Cassie chuckled and shook her head. "Just jesting with you, Meg. I'm fine."

"Glad to hear that." The tall dark-skinned cook, Sheridan, smiled at her, his golden eyes reflecting his pleasure at her presence. "Ready to help?"

Myrtle pursed her thin lips. "Are you sure you're up to it? It's only been a month since"

"I'm fine. I promise." Cassie held up a hand to stop the flow of words that would only surge her grief over her mother's death. She inhaled, a long slow breath and then eased it out to quash the inner wave of sorrow. She met Sheridan's frown with a smile. Sheridan had become even more important to her since her ma had passed. An advisor. A calm and stable friend. She released the door she'd been holding open to swing slowly closed. Cassie strode over to peer into the cauldron hanging over the fire. "What are you making?"

"I'm expecting a crowd this afternoon for dinner, so we're all working on increasing the quantity of stew." Sheridan's eyes twinkled as crow's feet appeared at the corners. "Gotta keep folks fat and sassy."

"Smells wonderful." She smiled across the room to Sheridan, standing on the other side of the table. "Squirrel or rabbit?"

"Rabbit." Sheridan gestured at the brace of dead rabbits on a large flat tray on the table, already skinned and boned, ready to be cut up. "Flint thought it would be a good idea. Most folks seem to like it."

Warmth washed her cheeks at the mention of the handsome interim inn manager. Flint Hamilton. "I'm sure he thinks he knows what's best."

Sheridan arched a brow. "I thought you liked him."

“That depends on what you mean by ‘like’ now doesn’t it.” Her cheeks warmed more at the suggestive tone in his voice as she turned to peer into the cauldron again. Avoiding the mirth evident in her friend’s expression.

“You know he’s been a good thing for the inn, don’t you?” Sheridan chuckled when Cassie refused to look at him. “Even if he can be bossy at times.”

She harbored conflicting feelings about Flint. On one hand, the young man had come to the inn at her father’s request so Pa could go take care of business in Georgia. An unwelcome surprise that became more welcome the longer Flint stayed. She liked his ways, his touch, his strong features. His steady management of the property led to improvements which increased business. Despite some rough patches at first, he’d proven to be a good addition. Attractive and kind, they’d grown fond of each other despite her mother’s objections. Maybe because of them, if she were honest.

“And those rabbits are free for the hunting, which means more profit for the business.” Sheridan eased his chin higher and then nodded once. “That’s good management, in my book.”

“The added benefit being fewer of the varmints to eat my garden.” She needed any distraction from the uncomfortable conversation about her attraction to Flint. She pressed her palms on the wood surface piled with fresh beans and tomatoes, waiting for Myrtle’s quick knife. “You can serve rabbit stew as often as you’d like.”

She’d put a halt to any further developments to a relationship with Flint until her pa came home. Whenever that might be. She was confused. She needed to know whether he agreed with her ma that Flint wasn’t the right man for her. Having only turned eighteen years of age, she wasn’t certain of her own mind and heart. Marrying the wrong man could be devastating given the rarity of divorce. If she married the wrong kind of man, she might well die, emotionally or worse physically, from the decision. Better to be sure. If that meant delaying, then delay she would. Only, she had to find a way to distract herself from the sudden curiosity invading her thoughts. She gave up feigning interest in the stew and pivoted to face Sheridan.

Sheridan wiped his hands on his apron. “You wouldn’t mind more venison either then?”

The suppressed humor in his voice brought a smile to her face. “That would be a resounding yes. Those hooved demons have no business invading my garden.” She didn’t need any more incidents like the last one.

The herd of deer living on their mountain had taken a fancy to the variety of plants she’d planted. All her hard work and attention was not for the benefit of the wild critters. The special fence kept them out as long as the gate remained closed. She grimaced at the memory of Flint inside, trying to shoo several deer out. His way of apology for the destruction of a third of her garden was to improve the gate so it swung shut and latched closed. Even that had been thwarted by young Teddy, an urchin who had been caught stealing vegetables.

“Where’s Teddy?” Cassie glanced at each of the people working in the kitchen. “Shouldn’t he be in here helping?”

“Fetching a bucket of water from the well.” Sheridan sliced the rabbit into chunks with a butcher knife and placed the pieces back on the tray. “With all the additions we’re preparing I needed more water, too.”

Her heart sank as he deftly cubed the meat. “Looks like you don’t need my help right now.”

“No, we’ve got this under control.” Sheridan waved the knife at her, shooing her out the door. “Run along and find something else to do.”

Which left her at loose ends. Time on her hands. Intrigue swelling in her mind. Gramercy. Could she actually resist the temptation?

“Fine. Yell if you need me.” She strolled out of the kitchen and paused in the large entrance hall of the inn.

The double doors stood open to allow the slight breeze into the building. The vase on the table beside the doorway held a mix of wilting pink and red roses. She should replace those soon. She squinted at the dining room. Perhaps she’d go play a few songs on the piano to entertain the few folks enjoying a cup of coffee or ale before heading on to their next destinations. But her thoughts strayed to the attic. Glancing about her, she didn’t see anyone who would try to stop her. No one who could give her a reason to not attempt to gain access to the forbidden room.

Stealthily, she crossed the dog trot to the residence side of the inn, a strong wind blowing through the tunnel-like porch. Through the family parlor, past the troubling doll’s house her father had sent for her eighteenth birthday, and up the stairs on the other side of the room. Perhaps when he returned she’d learn why on earth he’d sent her a child’s toy. Her mother’s hurtful explanation of him thinking of her as a child still rattled in her mind. Shaking her head, she eased down the short hall to her parents’ bedroom. Thunder rolled across the heavens, announcing the approach of a summer storm. Stopping at the closed door for a moment, she waited a beat and then slowly opened it. The scent of lavender wafted to her nostrils. She let out a relieved sigh. Everything had been put to rights after the attack on her mother.

She was grateful for the neighbor women lending a hand after the terrible way her mother had been killed. Now the silent bedroom her parents had shared for many years waited for Pa to finally come home. An event she longed for with her entire being. Everything would be fine once he was home and could hug her when she needed reassurance. She longed to have a heart-to-heart conversation with him about her mother’s concerns regarding Flint. Then she’d find it easier to decide whether to follow her heart as she longed to do. She searched the silent space, noting the pretty quilt on the bed, the looking glass on the dressing table by the window. She stared at the tempting circular staircase leading up to the attic. She searched the room again with a sweep of her gaze. No sign of her mother’s haunt. Good.

She quickly crossed to the metal stairs and silently placed each foot as she ascended to the locked door. Grabbing the door knob she twisted, or tried. The knob didn’t turn. Just like she’d feared.

She examined the door, searching for a way to gain entry. Any chink in the door. She ran her hand over the solid wood, no crevices or knots to exploit. She grabbed the door knob and shook it but it barely budged. Perhaps Sheridan could remove the barrier for her. The hinges were not visible, so the door would swing inward. Given the steep steps, that made perfect sense. But also the arrangement made it difficult to break it down. Blast. A cool breeze brushed her cheek as the heavens rumbled again.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh!” Cassie whirled around, clutching the cold metal railing with both hands to prevent her from tumbling down the steps. “Don’t do that. You nearly caused me to have an apoplexy.”

“Same to you.” Mercy hovered at eye level, hands on her hips, on the outside of the circular staircase. “You have no business trying to open that door.”

Cassie released the railing and stared at her mother’s ghost wearing the blue flowered dress she’d been buried in, her ash blonde hair hanging in a queue down her back. But her aqua eyes studied her with fear lurking in the shadows. Cassie surprisingly sensed a hint of panic forming in her mother. Or was she merely detecting it in her expression? “Why? What’s on the other side that you don’t want me to see?”

Shifting her gaze sideways, Mercy crossed her arms over her chest. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“I think there is. I can’t stop thinking about what is hidden in your private little attic.” Indeed, the unusual and unbidden interest welling up inside consumed her thoughts day and night. A terrible need to see into the attic began a few weeks before, nibbling and gnawing at her until she thought she’d lose her mind.

Mercy speared her with a wide-eyed gaze, brows arched. “What do you mean? You can’t stop thinking about it?”

“What have you tucked away in there?” Cassie hunched her shoulders and started down the steps. She’d have to try again some other time. Some other way. “You’ve shared everything with me. Or at least I thought we didn’t have secrets from each other.”

“Secrets?” Mercy averted her eyes but kept level with Cassie as she descended to the bedroom floor. “I don’t have any secrets.”

Detecting the hesitancy in her mother’s words along with surprise, Cassie stared at her until she blinked several times and glanced away again. “Are you sure, Ma?”

“I’m more intrigued by your sudden curiosity. You haven’t seemed to worry about it until now. What’s changed?”

Cassie pursed her lips. “You’re changing the subject.”

“I think it’s interesting.” Mercy drifted away to gaze out the window for a moment, rain lashing the pane while lightning flashed, before turning to face Cassie. “Why the sudden curiosity?”

“What do you mean?” Cassie hedged, detecting resistance and yet interest from her ma.

Mercy’s voice quavered as she came closer to Cassie. “Tell me what’s piqued your curiosity about my little attic after all these years.”

She regarded her ma for a moment, a sense of concern flowing into her chest. “It’s probably just because I know Giles is on his way and will demand answers as to whether those men stole anything out of the attic. Which I can’t answer without going into the attic to see what’s in there.”

“Giles is coming? Good.” She nodded to herself, her eyes distant for a moment. Then Ma peered closely at her. “I can tell you that they did not steal a thing from the attic. Only the keys to the door and to what’s inside.”

Her mother’s words both assuaged her concern and made her curiosity flare brighter. A swarm of angry bees buzzed through her veins, propelling her toward discovery. “What’s inside that needs keys to unlock?”

Mercy worried her bottom lip. “Nothing you need. It’s just family heirlooms and old stuff. Don’t worry about it so.”

“Family heirlooms? From what family? My grandmama?” Cassie glared up the stairs. She longed to place a foot on the tread and climb up, but she stayed at the bottom. The door prevented her from seeing the hidden treasure she sensed lurking behind it. “And more importantly, exactly when did you get those heirlooms?”

“It’s not important. Not yet. I’ve said too much already.” Mercy pressed her lips into a flat line with a flash of distress in her eyes and then vanished.

A crack of thunder shook the house as the wind whipped the rain against the window. She jumped at the sound and the sight and then exhaled her jumpiness.

“Ma, come back here.” Cassie cast about hoping her mother’s ghost would reappear and answer her questions. One second she was there and the next, poof. The empty room met her hopeful search. She started for the door, pausing before closing it behind her to address the room. “I will find out. Just you wait and watch me.”

Giles urged his horse into a brisk trot, his long legs pressed firmly against the charcoal gray gelding. His companions rode close by, the darker skinned man’s bass voice entertaining them as they journeyed together. They’d been riding for days and their destination grew closer by the minute.

“What’s the hurry?” Zander Simmons stopped singing as he pulled up even with Giles, his brother Matt close behind on his chestnut horse.

His friends, once terribly abused slaves on a Louisiana plantation, had stuck with him through thick and thin. He’d first encountered them a couple of years before when delivering the planter’s order of goods from Barbados. He’d seen the man whipping two black backs, punishment for something they hadn’t done he later discovered. He couldn’t in good conscience allow them to be beaten by the overseer one more day. So he’d traded the goods for the men, foregoing any cash payment, then immediately freed them. In exchange, they’d promised to help him with building and managing his import business in Mobile. Their varied talents and skills proved invaluable time and again.

“I have a feeling I need to get there. Soon.” Giles glanced at Zander and then back at Matt.

Matt had managed to control his temper after he’d gained his freedom, but Zander still struggled to restrain the impulse to lash out, to fight back when challenged. By and large he succeeded but there were times when he could see revenge seething in his eyes. He’d become a strong and decent man despite the abuse. Pride and respect filled his chest as he met Zander’s questioning gaze.

“My friend, I can tell you’re anxious to see your sister.” Zander dipped his wide-brimmed hat as he nodded. “Pay your respects to your mama, too.”

“Very true.” Swallowing the discomfort of confronting his mother’s grave, he frowned as the sense of danger lurking at the edge of his consciousness increased. He inhaled the scent of Southern pine trees yet detected no apparent threats. Nonetheless, his unease remained high. An odd, disconcerting feeling. “I don’t know whether any of my brothers are going to come. Cassie didn’t say in her letter.”

Zander adjusted his reins with a slight movement, his horse’s head lifting from where it had dropped down. Saddle leather creaked as he settled his mount. “When was the last time you saw your family?”

“I was sixteen when I rode away from home for the last time.” His papa had made it clear he would need to support himself as soon as he reached an age to earn a living. What wasn’t so clear was the need behind his father’s conviction. “Papa said I was old enough to strike out on my own.”

“That’s harsh.” Zander’s reply held a hint of anger in the deep voice.

“I did all right.” What had happened that his mother wanted him to become self-sufficient at such an age? Maybe one day he would understand what it was or why she’d become so quick to anger. For the moment, his mission was to make sure his sister stayed safe and well provided for. “I’m a survivor.”

Still the question echoed in his mind as he rode down the peaceful lane, the dust hot and dry in his nose and throat. Would he see his brothers at the inn? His father? A shudder racked his

shoulders and he slowed his horse to a walk to calm the concern sloshing in his gut. Even his father had stifled his desires by denying Giles any attempt to become closer to him. Pushing him away firmly though with less urgency than his mother. Was it something he'd done but didn't realize that made his parents want nothing to do with him? He'd most likely never know, especially now that his mother had been killed. Not until his father arrived.

“I thought you were in a hurry.” Zander slowed to match Giles's pace as Matt kept trotting for several more strides. He lifted a brow at him, his eyes searching Giles's expression.

“I'm sorry.” Giles rested a hand on his thigh, the smooth leather reins gripped easily in his other hand. He stared ahead, down the gently winding dirt road snaking along the base of a series of low mountains. Matt dropped back to a walk and waited for them to catch up. “I feel like I must get there but at the same time I don't want to go.”

“Why wouldn't you want to see your family?” Zander moved with the horse's long rhythmic stride, his shoulders thrown back and head held high. “I'd do anything to be able to see my parents again.”

“I know. Since you were torn from them I can only imagine. And I have thought about coming home. For a visit only, of course. But not like this.”

“I'd never see my parents again. Pop died in a carriage accident and Mama—”

“I wish I could do something about your mother's situation.” Giles shook his head at Zander. “Seriously. If I could—”

“It's not your problem.” Zander's eyes darkened as he looked at his brother riding in front of them. “It would do him a lot of good if we could have our family back together. But I don't see that happening.”

“Do you know where your mother is?” At least he knew where his parents lived and worked. Or rather where his mother once lived. He imagined his papa would hurry back to the inn after hearing about her death. Surely he wouldn't ignore the events at home because of business. But then again, he was nothing if not a practical, and very stubborn, man. If the business wasn't completed to his satisfaction, he most likely wouldn't travel all the way home.

“Last I heard she was a seamstress to some plantation mistress outside of Charleston.” Zander slowed his horse as Matt dropped back to join the conversation. He shrugged at Giles. “But that was when I was a little boy so who knows now where she is.”

“Do you know how much farther we have to go?” Matt twisted in his saddle to look back at him as he rode closer. “I'm hungry. I keep picturing a juicy pork chop with brown gravy, and a nice fresh greens salad with a light dressing.” He smacked his lips and grinned.

“Another few miles, I think. You may have to fight the inn's cook to prepare your meal, I'd wager. Cassie says he rules the kitchen.” Giles smirked at his friend's crestfallen face. Matt's talent as a chef was well known in Mobile, and Giles enjoyed many a fine meal as a result. He

spotted a ponderous coach-and-four listing at the side of the road ahead. "Looks like they've broken a wheel."

Zander followed the direction of Giles's gaze. "Guess we're going to help, right?"

"May as well. Come on." Giles urged his horse into a trot and soon they reached the broken down vehicle.

A man, wearing clothes much too fine for hard labor, struggled to wrest the shattered wheel from the carriage. A woman stood off to one side in a ruffled burgundy gown with black trim and matching bonnet, holding a frilly black parasol to protect her head from the strong summer sun. She leveled a surprised look at the three men halting behind the vehicle.

"Can we help, sir?" Giles rested his hands on the horn of his saddle. "Or can you manage?"

From the looks of things, the man didn't have a clue how to change let alone replace a wheel. The man's fancy trousers and suit coat declared him a gentleman. The beaver-felt top hat resting on the step of the carriage added to the impression. Zander knew how to work with carriages and wheels as he'd learned to make and repair the wooden wheels wrapped with metal among other skills. A spare wheel hung underneath the coach but would be difficult to reach with the right rear wheel in pieces. What a strange setup. He'd have put the spare on the top, but perhaps having it underneath kept it out of the way until needed. There must be a better place to put it. Something to ponder another time.

The sweaty man looked up at the sound of Giles's voice. "I'd greatly appreciate any help offered."

Giles glanced at Zander. "Do you mind?"

"No, sir." Zander swung out of the saddle and handed the reins to Matt. "This will take a while."

"I can help if you want." Matt prepared to dismount, hesitating for a split second as he waited for his brother's response.

"All right." Zander strode over to the man's side but didn't look him in the eyes. "I'm Zander, and this man is my brother, Matt."

"And I'm Giles Fairhope." Giles noticed the lack of last names as well as the reflexively averted eyes but kept his own peace. But he'd make one thing perfectly clear. He'd discovered it made a difference in how his dark-skinned friends were treated. "These two men are my friends and fellow workers. Not my servants."

The man blinked several times then nodded, understanding dawning in his narrowed eyes. "I'm John Baker."

"Nice to meet you, sir." Zander tipped his hat to the woman without meeting her gaze. "Mrs. Baker."

She angled her parasol to shade her face more as she addressed the group. "I'm glad you've come along. We almost made it home to Riverwood." She gestured toward a lane a little way down the road.

Zander grinned at her words. "That being the case, we can help you home and out of the heat."

Matt tied the reins in his hands to a tree alongside the road, then stalked back to stand beside his brother. Giles sat his horse, waiting for the two experienced men to assess the situation and solve the issue. He relied upon their skills and knowledge every single day in one way or another. He'd been very fortunate to find them and have them agree to work with him. Their abilities had made his business even more successful than he'd imagined. Combined, they had a wide array of skills and abilities they'd developed over the ensuing years the three men had worked together.

"First we need to get this spare one off the bottom." Zander bent down to peer at the hung wheel.

"Can you remove it?" Matt pushed his hat back on his head, rubbing his arm across his glistening brow.

"It's pinned by the coach. We're gonna have to lift the coach up and then drop this here wheel." Zander straightened and shook his head. "It's not gonna be easy."

"You two lift the coach and I'll get the wheel. Ready?" John positioned himself near the spare and waited for the other two to move to the other side of the vehicle.

Zander grabbed hold of the bottom of the coach, Matt lending a hand beside him. Muscles strained as the two men grappled with the coach. John fumbled with the dried leather straps holding the wheel in place. Matt tried to shift his hands on the heavy frame, one hand coming away and then grabbing for a handhold. Giles tensed as his pulse raced. He dropped the reins across his horse's withers.

"It's slipping!" Matt grunted as he struggled to keep a grip on the varnished wood.

John pulled the last of the straps off and dragged the wheel away from the coach just as Matt's hands slipped off and he fell backward, the full weight of the coach crashing down, pinning him beneath it.

Damn. Giles leapt from the saddle and sprinted to help, his horse shying to one side in a clatter of hooves and creaking leather. Zander scrambled to help but, strong as he was, could only lift the coach an inch off of Matt. Not far enough for the groaning man to pull his left leg out from under it. Giles raced to a sliding halt at Zander's side and grabbed hold of the coach and lifted with all his strength. The massive vehicle lurched two feet up off the ground.

"Get him out of there. Quick." Surprised relief flooded through Giles but he didn't know how long he could hold the vehicle. His muscles worked to steady the heavy coach, his lungs burning from the effort.

Zander quickly dragged Matt to safety while Giles held the coach by himself. Shocked at his ability to maintain his hold, he darted a glance at John's stunned gaze. With Matt safe, Giles lowered the coach to the ground and dusted off his hands.

“How’d you do that?” John cautiously approached Giles, a wary look in his narrowed eyes.

“I don’t know, but I’m glad I could.” He’d always been strong, but he’d never experienced anything like what had just happened. Perhaps the fear of his friend being permanently injured or even killed had spurred him to such strength. The buzz of energy flowed through his veins as he rotated his hands, inspecting them for any visual changes.

“Me, too.” Matt slowly stood, favoring the leg with a gash seeping red. “It’s not too bad, thank goodness. But man, that was incredible. Thank you.”

Giles indicated the coach with a tilt of his head. “We still need to get the wheel on that thing.”

Matt limped over to the wheel laying on the ground. He set it up on its edge to roll it around to hand off to Zander. He looked at Giles, brows arched over wide, twinkling eyes. With a sigh of combined relief and confusion, Giles walked over to appraise the situation. Rubbing his hands together, then flexing his fingers, he bent down to take hold of the thing again. With a grunt, he heaved and lifted the coach.

“That’s incredible.” John crossed his arms and shook his head slowly.

“Hurry up, Zan.” Giles strained to steady the coach while the other man wiggled the hub onto the axle.

“Got it.” Zander held onto the wheel while Matt secured it in place over the next several minutes.

Time enough for Giles to marvel at how strong he’d become in a moment of panic. But how? He hadn’t changed his routines or tried to build more muscle. He’d never needed to worry about being able to handle whatever came his way. But this? This was new.

“Done.” Matt stepped back, indicating to Giles he could release his grip.

He let go and rubbed his hands on his pant legs to wipe off the dirt from the underside of the coach. Zander led the gray over to Giles and handed him the reins. He nodded a thank you to his friend and then addressed the plantation owner. “There you go, Mr. Baker.”

“That was indeed amazing. Thank you for fixing the wheel.” John sauntered over to Giles. “Where you heading?”

“Fury Falls Inn.” The mere name of the place sent a tremor through his shoulders. He squared them to still the unfamiliar sensation.

“You’re nearly there.” John motioned down the road, a dip of his brows hinting at his feelings about the place. “It’s two miles from Riverwood to the inn.”

“So you know it?” Just how neighborly were the Bakers to his family? Giles surreptitiously studied the couple, the silent communication flowing between them with each long look and tightened lips.

“Sure do. Reggie and I are business partners.” John pulled a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and mopped his brow. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the young man he hired to run the inn in his absence.”

“Why?” First his father decided to up and go so far from home without even waiting for his wife to return home. Then he hired someone to take his place but obviously didn’t trust him. Otherwise, why have someone keeping watch over his performance? The sense of urgency ratcheted up in his gut. Could Cassie be in danger from the unknown manager? What kind of danger?

John folded his handkerchief and tucked it back into his pocket. “He’s a real particular idea of what he wanted. He said Flint Hamilton would do a fine job since he’s worked at his father’s hotel downtown for years. And he wasn’t wrong.”

“So you’ve been in touch with my father?”

John raised his brows as he nodded. “You’re one of Reggie’s boys?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Welcome home.” John offered his hand to shake.

Giles accepted the handshake, surprised at the firm grip. “I’m just visiting. My sister asked me to come help out for a spell.”

John flinched as his brows dipped into a concerned frown. “What do you mean?”

Strange reaction. Giles blinked as he peered at the man. “Well, with Papa away and Mama murdered, she feels vulnerable. So I decided to come see the situation for myself and do whatever I can to make her feel more secure.”

Mrs. Baker sauntered closer and caught Giles’s attention with a slight wave of her fingers. “Did I hear correctly that you’re Reggie and Mercy’s son? Giles, is it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Giles tipped his simple felt hat to her.

“I’m Tabitha Baker, an acquaintance of Mercy’s.” Tabitha clutched the handle of her parasol with her gloved hands. She sounded friendly and yet a thread of something ran through the tone of her greeting. “I was so sorry about your mother’s death. I did what I could to help your sister through it. Such a tragedy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He still had his own reservations as to whether his mother’s death was a tragedy or not, but Cassie loved her and had been devastated at her death. Why else would she have written to him pleading for him to come to her? His protective instincts flared with the memory of her entreaty. “Now that we have the carriage serviceable, we’ll need to be on our way. Cassie is waiting for me.”

“Surely you’d enjoy a rest and some refreshments before you continue?” Tabitha smiled up at him, inviting him to agree with her suggestion. “Your sister would understand.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I must decline.” Something in the woman’s expression gave him pause. A particular glint of humor or insight reflected in their depths. As if she knew something about him he didn’t. But how could that be when they’d never met before? “Shall I send your regards to Cassie?”

“Please. Let her know we’ll come for dinner soon.” Tabitha glanced at John. “Right, dear?”

“Yes. I make it a point to visit several times a week.” John glanced at the two men preparing to remount their horses and then he looked up at Giles. “I like to keep an eye on the neighborhood, make sure everything and everyone is safe and sound. You know what I mean?”

John, too, had a hidden meaning lurking in his eyes as he studied Giles for several seconds. As Giles gathered his reins to mount, those protective instincts he’d first experienced earlier intensified the longer he looked into those shining eyes. “Yes, sir. I do.”

Flint’s shoulders burned through his cotton shirt under the brutal August sun. He dragged his shirtsleeve across his sweaty brow. Despite the heat, he must fix the roofing. With a sigh, he hammered the shingle into place. Rain threatened. He smelled its approach with each breath.

Pausing after the last tap of the hammer, he glanced at Teddy clinging to the ladder propped against the porch roof. “Hand me the next one.”

“Yes, sir.” Teddy reached into the bucket hanging from a hook on the side of the wooden ladder and pulled out another oak shake shingle. He held it up in a trembling hand.

“You won’t fall as long as you keep a hand on the ladder.” The scrawny boy was still in single digit years. His mop of dark brown hair and soulful brown eyes made him appear more urchin than child. Flint couldn’t quite fathom what the child’s home life must have been like before landing at the inn. From what he’d seen, the boy enjoyed the step up. “Trust me?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Flint took it quickly and then surveyed the remaining damage. Three shingles had come loose and fallen to the ground several days before during a sudden squall. Fortunately, nobody had been injured. Despite the clear blue skies above he knew within a day rain would arrive and a hole in the roof would threaten the interior of the inn. He couldn’t have that. A leaky roof didn’t make for a place people wanted to stay, which would lead to them not wanting to return and a decline in business. Thus, Flint had braved the heat of the midafternoon to fix it.

“Will that be all, sir?” Teddy clung to the two rails of the ladder, pleading with wide eyes.

“You sure you don’t want to come on up here with me?” Flint gestured at the shimmering heat rising from the wood shingles and on to the surrounding hills. “You can see for miles.”

Teddy’s knuckles turned white as he shook his head. “I’m not one for high places.”

Flint took pity on the kid. He didn’t know he was afraid of heights. “Go on with you. But stay at the bottom until I come down, hear?”

Flint waited for the boy’s nod and then resumed hammering the last shingle into place. Teddy demonstrated amazing bravery for a nine-year-old. He’d climbed up and down the ladder several times without verbal complaint, just the worry etched on his young face. He tapped the last fastener in place and then surveyed the activity below him. Late afternoon meant only a few customers coming and going. Give it another couple of hours and the supper rush and overnights would arrive. Time enough to manage a few small tasks before then.

Grasping the hammer in one hand, he moved to climb down the ladder. Teddy stood looking up at him. “Hold the bottom.”

The boy followed Flint’s direction and then Flint started down the rungs. He’d almost reached the bottom when he heard forceful footsteps echo on the porch floor. Now what?

Dropping the last couple of feet to the crushed stone carriageway that circled in front of the building, he handed the hammer to Teddy. “Can you manage the tools, son? Looks like I’ve got another fire to put out.”

“Fire?” Teddy glanced frantically around, eyes wide.

Flint chuckled at the shocked expression before patting the boy lightly on the head. “Just a saying. Go on.”

“Yes, sir.” Teddy snatched up the bucket of tools and lugged them across the drive to the tool shed to put them away.

Flint caught a whiff of cornbread baking, his mouth watering at the scent, as he greeted a pair of merchants on their way past him and up the steps to the inn. A couple of the dogs loped across the carriageway and disappeared into the barn. He glanced at the clear blue sky with traces of white clouds. Cassie hurried toward him. He climbed up the few steps to wait for her.

“Flint, I need your help.” Cassie rushed up to him, her ankle-length calico skirts swirling to a halt.

He wiped his hands on his pants as he noted her flushed cheeks and fetching sparkling eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you break into Mother’s attic?” She propped her fists on her slim hips, her eyes searching his.

“Maybe. Why?” Her tone suggested a resolve reflected in the tense stance she’d assumed.

“I can’t stand not knowing.” She hugged her waist as she chewed her bottom lip. “There is something important inside. I can feel it.”

Her words quavered with intensity. “Can you be more specific?” He arched a brow and shifted his weight to stand squarely.

She huffed, letting out a long frustrated sigh. “I know with all my being that my mother is hiding something important in that room.”

Mercy likely hid a lot of things from Cassie. From everyone. She was a very reserved woman when it came to sharing. In fact, he didn’t know much about her at all. Other than the very clear fact of her dislike of his person. As far as she was concerned, he could do nothing right. But if she had mementoes filled with meaning and memories, he wouldn’t blame her for locking them away. With so many people in and out, it was wise.

“I doubt she would have locked the door otherwise.” He shrugged one shoulder. “When your father comes back, then he can open it.”

“You don’t understand.” Cassie twirled away and flung her arms out as she turned back to face him. “I don’t want to wait that long. Ma has been no help, either.”

Although he’d encountered ghosts on more than one occasion, he still didn’t enjoy the experience. He swallowed back the discomfort welling in his throat. “You spoke to her again?”

“Briefly. Long enough for her to tell me to stay out of the room and then disappear without answering any of my questions.”

“Then that’s what you should do. Stay out of the room.” He shrugged lightly.

Her parents must have secreted personal belongings in the attic, away from prying eyes and hands. Most parents would keep their private belongings away from the little ones. Not that the attractive woman pleading with him was a child. Far from it. On the other hand, what if the supposed fictional treasure were in fact a reality, hidden behind a locked door?

Still, whatever was in the room really didn’t belong to Cassie. “I’m certain your father will answer your questions when he gets back.”

“That’s months from now and you well know it.” Cassie stomped a foot on the wooden floor, raising a puff of dust to settle back onto the boards.

Her petulance surprised him. Since she’d turned eighteen last month, she’d acted more mature, more grown up. The death of her mother must have undermined her new sense of confidence to some degree, but at least she had seen her mother’s ghost and was able to speak with her. Whether that proved good or bad was left up for debate.

He peered at her with what he hoped was a supportive expression. “I understand your”

“No, you don’t. Don’t even think you do!” She glared at him, folding her arms across her stomach. “I can’t explain it but I have this feeling I must get into that attic and find out what’s in there. I have to.”

He couldn't agree to help her. He'd been hired to manage the inn, not break into his employer's private rooms. But the plea shining in those beautiful eyes melted his determination into a puddle of acceptance. "I'll see what I can do, but I still think you should wait."

"Thank you, Flint. I mean that." Cassie dropped her arms to her sides as she aimed her brightest smile at him. "I think it will help to solve the mystery as to who murdered my mother."

"How is that?"

"I don't know. Not until you open the door at least." She tugged on his arm, trying to pull him toward the open front doors. "Let's go."

"Now?" He pulled back, bringing them both to a halt. He glanced at the slowly setting sun, the trio of riders approaching, and then to the stack of boxes near the door, waiting to be carried inside and dispersed. "Surely it can wait until tomorrow."

"Please? I don't want to wait any longer." She pulled on his arm again, her eyes wide and hopeful.

"And I don't want to have to fix the door, too, so let me think about how we might get inside without having to break it off its hinges or whatever."

"But—" She pouted up at him, blinking rapidly.

The sound of hooves on the carriageway drew his attention from the anxious features of the girl he suspected he had fallen in love with despite the freeze she'd put on expressing his affection. As he stepped closer to the edge of the porch, he mused about their relationship. He'd agreed to give her time and space for her benefit, not his. Though the fact that she'd hesitated gave him some doubts as well. He shaded his eyes with a hand as he walked down the steps. Three men on horseback rode toward the inn at a steady trot. He admired the horses, all sleek and fit, obviously well cared for.

"Who is that?" Flint didn't wait for an answer but strode farther away from the porch.

"Who?" Cassie caught up to him and raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. Then squealed before running across the open space to meet the white man on his charcoal gray horse. "You came!"

The burly man swung lithely from the saddle and grabbed Cassie up into a bear hug, holding her close. Flint strode out to join the group as the two black men dismounted from their chestnut horses, delight on their faces at the happy reunion. Given her shout, she'd been expecting whoever the man might prove to be. So, logically, it must be one of her brothers. He didn't know which one but he'd soon find out.

The man released Cassie to place her gently on the ground, as though he didn't want to break her. "I got here as soon as I could."

"I'm so glad you're here. Let me introduce you." She linked her arm in his and turned to face Flint. "Giles Fairhope, this is Flint Hamilton, the inn keeper while Pa is away."

Giles extended his hand and Flint clasped it. When he pulled his hand free, his fingers ached from the suppressed strength in the large man. He rubbed his hand down his thigh and surveyed the other two men.

“Nice to meet you. Who do you have with you?” Flint included the other men with his smile of welcome.

“Zander and Matt Simmons, my compatriots and friends.” Giles tapped Cassie’s hand where it rested on his arm. “Do you have room for us to stay here?”

“We’ll make room, won’t we?” She addressed Flint with her last question, glee plain on her face.

“Of course.” He’d do anything to keep her smiling at him with such joy in her expression. “I’ll have one of the girls freshen rooms for you. How many will you need?”

Giles glanced at his companions and a silent exchange passed between them. “One should suffice if you’ve some bunk beds. Two, if not. Now, Cassie, tell me what happened to Mama.”

Teddy strolled across the carriageway to join the group. His shirt stretched across his chest and his pant legs didn’t quite cover his bare ankles. Flint tapped a finger on his thigh, assessing the boy. Cassie might be capable of making him new clothes. He’d need new shoes before long, too, which would mean a trip to the cobbler. Flint welcomed him with a slight nod.

“It’s a long story. But the short version is three men mistakenly thought she had a treasure in her room and when she couldn’t give it to them they killed her.” She shook her head as tears glistened in her eyes. “And took her special keys.”

Giles stared at her for a beat and then frowned. “Keys? Why?”

“We’re not sure why, but they open Mother’s secret attic door for one thing.” She swished her long skirts about her legs with jerky movements. “Can you help us find the men and keys? It’s important.”

“One of the reasons I came was to find those men and bring them to justice, one way or another. I’ll stay long enough to do that much.” Giles shot a frown at Flint who nodded in agreement. “But tell me first what’s in the attic?”

“Possibly other family heirlooms, from what Ma told me earlier today.” Cassie grabbed his arm, pulling him close. “You’ve got to help me.”

Teddy opened his mouth, then snapped it shut as her words registered. His eyes widened. He shifted his weight, ready to spin around to go back from where he came.

Giles startled as the two black men took a step back in surprise. He peered at his sister, brows arched. “You spoke to our mother? Today?” He glanced at Flint for confirmation.

Flint didn’t fault Giles for not believing his sister. Maybe even considered she’d lost her reason. “Let’s talk about this inside.” He pointed toward the steps leading onto the porch.

“Cassie, why don’t you show them into the parlor while I have someone take care of their horses.”

“I’ll do it.” Teddy was quick to grasp the reins of the three horses and hurry them away toward the stable.

Flint huffed as the kid scurried away. He’d avoid the uncomfortable conversation, too, if at all possible. “Hey, Teddy! Bring in their saddlebags and stuff when you’re done, you hear?”

“Yes, sir!” The boy practically ran with the three horses across the busy carriageway and into the shadowy barn.

Flint pivoted to follow the small group inside for a discussion he really didn’t want to have.

