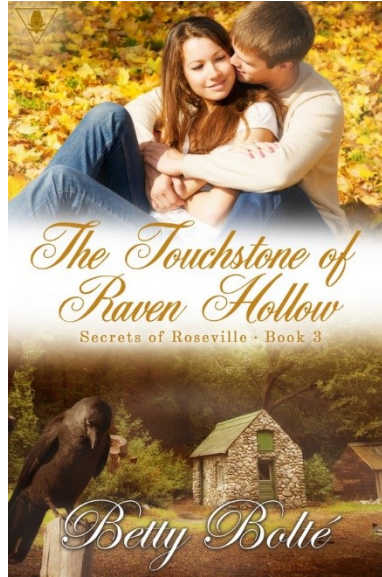


Excerpt from
The Touchstone of Raven Hollow

By Betty Bolté



Chapter 1

“Damn. I can’t do this.”

If pride caused one to fall, she had nothing to fear. She took no pride in her cooking nor her gift. Everything she tried turned out either mediocre or a dismal failure. She hid any hint of talent or ability. She preferred to get through her life without anyone unmasking her for who and what she was. And yet today loomed ahead as yet another opportunity for proving she couldn’t meet the expectations set before her.

Tara Golden stared out the kitchen door, frowning at the familiar scene for several frantic beats of her heart. Morning sunshine filtered through the waxy leaves of a tall magnolia, illuminating the covered fire pit and surrounding rustic chairs nestled in the far reaches of the

yard. The conversation corner in the backyard had witnessed many evenings of laughter and shared secrets. Quiet and private, she escaped to her favorite chair as often as possible. Perhaps she'd snatch a book and brave the November chill. Forget about the pressure to succeed, to pass the unspoken and unfair test, yet again filling her gut with trepidation. No matter how hard she tried.

She pressed her fingers to both temples, trying to quiet her mind as well as her rapid pulse. Her sisters hadn't emerged from their rooms yet, so she had a little time to indulge her whim. She turned away from the window, already mentally sifting through the titles on the shelf at the other end of the room. Just a few minutes would alleviate some of the stress in her soul. As she walked away from the door, her gaze landed on the empty bakery box on the countertop. She dropped her hands, fingers curling into fists, pushing against her legs.

"Double damn." She'd forgotten the buns warming in the oven. She inhaled as she brushed her hair away from her face, pulling it up into a ponytail that grazed her shoulders.

The sweet smell of hot cinnamon and sugar filled the kitchen with memories. Memories of her mother cooking and baking up a storm for family meals. Before she'd died so suddenly three years before. A tear fell on Tara's cheek, and she rubbed the moisture away. She'd cried enough. She surveyed the cozy room, aware of the lingering sense of intruding into a special place ricocheting in her heart. Almost as if she sensed her mother's presence. She hoped not. Although she missed her mother desperately, it helped to think that her mom had found peace. Perhaps one day Tara might also find inner peace. If she ever managed to tame the guilt monster who clawed inside every time she thought of how her mother died.

"Something smells yummy." Beth strode into the sunny room and headed straight for the coffee pot. She wore a forest green pullover sweater with cream corduroy jeans, emphasizing her

slim figure. Bunny slippers with floppy ears completed the outfit with a bit of whimsy. Cup in hand, Tara's older sister pivoted to peer at her. Her expression indicated she'd detected the hot sweet aroma. "Do I smell sticky buns?"

"Yeppers." Tara waved a hand toward the oven as she moved to stand by the center island. She braced a hand on the edge of the counter, noting Beth appeared pulled together as always. "They're best warm."

Tara had chosen khaki jeans, a black cable knit sweater, and black loafers, ready to head to the Golden Owl Books and Brews store right after she finished breakfast. A utilitarian uniform. Ugh. Compared to the trim outfit her next older sister wore, she probably looked dowdy at best. She didn't want to think about how others viewed her attire. She never seemed able to live up to expectations. Her own or her sisters.

"As if you made them yourself, right?" Beth chuckled and then sipped from the steaming mug. "You're not fooling anyone; you know that right?"

She knew it. Tara relived the memories of her mother, Peggy Golden, most every day. Recalled how smart, pretty, and competent she'd been. Envisioning her bustling about the small yet efficient kitchen, an apron covering her slacks and top, while she stirred or sautéed or whatever task necessary to make the most amazing meals. Repasts good for both body and soul. The elegant cakes and tarts, pies and puddings, also caused people to exclaim over them. Tara's kitchen magic was weak by comparison. Despite her best efforts, her meals ended up workmanlike and plain, much like her choice of attire, even if they did nourish the body. The soul was left to fend for itself.

"I'm not trying to." Tara shrugged off her sister's observation. Everyone knew she was not the baker of the family. Sure, she baked occasionally, but never anything fancy or difficult.

She couldn't compete with her sisters in the kitchen. Roxie, in particular, seemed capable of accomplishing anything she set out to do. Tara was not so fortunate. But ask her to make a salad, and she'd whip up the best combination of healthy vegetables and lean protein with a delicious, low-fat dressing any day. She preferred simple and easy to elaborate and difficult. "See? There's the box from the bakery in plain view for all to see."

Beth leaned forward to peruse the label, her golden locks falling around her cheeks to hang over the counter. "The new one over on Poplar Street?"

"The Sweet Serendipity has a nice variety of breakfast buns and bagels." She'd been tempted to buy more than she had but decided to limit the indulgence. Her thighs thanked her. "I imagine I'll be a regular customer."

"Where?" Roxie strolled in, pushing up the sleeves of her crimson Alabama sweatshirt to just below her elbows. Faded blue jeans and brown loafers completed her outfit. Sensible and neat described her perfectly. Roxie spotted the white paperboard box sitting open on the counter and nodded, making her brown and gold ponytail swing side to side. "I see."

"Tara..." Beth pointed toward the stove with a manicured finger. "I think you need to take them out."

"No, they need a few more minutes to be good and gooey warm." Tara pivoted to reassure herself after the note of warning in Beth's voice. "Oh!"

She raced to open the door only to cough as smoke poured into the room, triggering the smoke alarm on the ceiling to blare her embarrassment for all their neighbors to hear. She grabbed the hot pads and quickly pulled the flimsy aluminum pan from the hot interior, popping and smoking, and plopped it on top of the range. With a flick of her wrist, she snapped the dial to the left to turn off the heat. Spinning around, she covered her ears to dampen the blaring of the

obnoxious alarm. Beth had opened the outside door while Roxie used the bakery box to fan the smoke away from the noise maker. After several minutes, the shrieking stopped and Tara forced her shoulders into their normal position. What had she expected?

“You used to know your way around the kitchen, Tara.” Roxie tossed the box onto the counter and then retrieved a mug from the rack by the coffee maker. Pouring the dark liquid into the cup, she glanced at Tara. “You need to get over it.”

“I’m not sure I can.” Tara wouldn’t even pretend not to catch her sister’s allusion so casually tossed in her direction.

She’d been busy in the kitchen the day her mother died. Baking a lemon cake for her birthday as a surprise. Decorating the layers with chocolate frosting and then writing in yellow buttercream icing had taken forever but she’d managed to finish it with time to spare. Pride had swelled her chest for a change. Not only had she managed to make the two layers the same size without sloping one direction or the other. The writing even ended up legible. Her mother would have been very pleased with how neatly she’d written with the recalcitrant icing.

Only the surprise had been on Tara when she had gone into her mother’s bedroom where she’d gone for a nap. She’d felt tired and had a slight ache in her jaw and head. Tara had offered to ease her discomfort, but her mother had insisted it wasn’t necessary. A little rest and she’d be good as new. Tara eased up to the side of the bed, and whispered to her. No response, no shift, no eyes opening. Tara gently shook her mother’s shoulder and then froze. Her mother had died in her sleep. Alone. Tara had so much she wanted to share with her mother. Then to never have the opportunity, or even the chance to say goodbye. Tears had flowed until she thought she’d choke on them. But arrangements had to be made and people informed of her passing. The following days remained a foggy blur of condolences and sadness. The whole town turned out for her

mother's funeral. Since Peggy ran the only bookstore in the area around Roseville, Tennessee, everyone knew and adored her.

"It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's." Roxie crossed to Tara's side and peered at her. "You need to put all that behind you and move forward. It's what Mom would have wanted."

How could anyone know what their mother would have asked of them had she lived? People say that they know, but do they really? Peggy Golden had been the sun the three sisters revolved around. They had lived together in the historic home for as long as Tara could remember. Longer, since she was the youngest. She barely remembered her father, Roscoe Golden, as a big man with a big laugh. He'd died before she started kindergarten, leaving her mother to raise the three girls by herself. A cohesive unit until the sun burned out and left the planets to drift apart on their own. Somehow she had to find her way without the pull of a central force.

"They're not too black if you want one." Tara motioned to the pan of sticky buns and then refilled her coffee cup. She'd not apologize for knowing her limitations. An envelope Roxie apparently liked to push farther and farther. At some point, the barrier would break and then she'd fail resplendently. She didn't want to contemplate such a dismal event. "You're braver than I am to wear that to work."

"Do you think folks will mind here in Volunteer territory?" Roxie dipped her head to glance at the stylized white A on the front of the sweatshirt and then grinned at Tara. "I'm not wearing it to the store. I have some errands to run this morning so thought I'd risk it about town. You know, to get a reaction."

One thing the oldest sister could count on was eliciting a reaction from others. Her personality and her attitude seemed to poke and prod people into a strong retort. Always had.

Both positive and negative responses seemed to come with an added measure of punch. As if the very air around Roxie intoxicated her audience, reducing their ability to suppress their emotions much like the effect of alcohol.

“I’m sure you will. This small town has a tendency to think small as well.” Beth shook her head in mock disapproval, her long hair brushing her shoulders. She studied Roxie’s attire for several moments. “You’ll surely get noticed. For better or worse.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.” Roxie burst out laughing, her shoulders shaking as she slapped a hand over her mouth. She moved to the other side of the island, still chuckling. After she regained control, she winked at Beth. “I know I shouldn’t do it. Some folks think it’s mean. But I love to push buttons.”

“You’re good at it, too.” Tara sipped her coffee before setting the cup on the counter. The sound of Roxie’s laughter reminded Tara of her father’s, a faint echo of memory decades old.

Beth’s dig at the people of Roseville hinted at a growing dissatisfaction with small town life. Not that Beth had said as much, but the increase in the number of snarky observations sparked suspicions of her intent, whether she was aware of them or not. Tara cradled the mug in both hands as she shifted her attention to her oldest sister. She seemed different on this fall morning. The longer she contemplated Roxie, the more certain she became of a change in the air. Not just the clearing of the burned sugar smell, either. Better to find out up front than to leave the lingering sensation to tickle her conscious for hours or days. Been there, done that.

Tara cleared her throat, fingers wrapped around her cold cup. “Speaking of buttons being pushed, you look like you’ve got a surprise up your sleeve. What’s with the grin?”

Roxie aimed hazel eyes at Tara and placed her hands on the island, leaning on the surface to support her torso. “You’ve always been able to read my moods. That’s part of your gift.

You're right. I do have a surprise. Can you guess?"

Her sisters accepted her special abilities because they possessed their own gifts. Ones they employed with extreme caution so others wouldn't suspect. Or at least that was her goal. Roxie tended to hide her proclivities in plain sight, her gift centered in the language of spells and incantations. Beth's gift also was easy to hide. Visions of the future could only be seen in her mind, after all. But Tara's proved impossible to hide completely. She'd tried over the years, but had only mastered subtlety as a smokescreen. Her talent lay in detecting the health and wellbeing of a person and then her touch would set matters aright. But first, she had to determine what was amiss. All of which could require the laying on of hands, literally, which could be tricky to do without raising questions.

She had first discovered her powers when a little girl. Playing at the school with her classmates. One classmate had climbed onto the jungle gym on a sunny, late August day despite the teacher warning the children away from the hot metal. Tara had gravitated toward her, sensing danger and a looming need. But nobody else reacted to the strange sight, the pulsating energy, so she kept mum. Waited with mounting fear for someone else to step in and stop the imminent accident. When the small hand wrapped around first one and then the next bar of the metal playground apparatus, Tara jerked in sympathy. After only a few swings from one to the next, the girl had screamed and dropped to the ground near where Tara watched in horror. The air between them vibrated and pulsed, shimmering and glowing in a terrifying way.

A compulsion overcame her paralysis at the sight of the crying girl and forced her to run to her side and grab both of her raw palms in her own. Tingling in Tara's fingers cooled her palms until the heat in the other girl's hands dissipated like fog before the sun. When she'd removed her hands, Tara was shocked to see the girl's palms healed as if never injured. The girl

had looked at Tara with a grateful yet fearful expression and then jumped up and ran away to surround herself with her friends. Leaving Tara alone and scared with no one to turn to for an explanation of what had occurred.

The looks from her classmates warned Tara something weird and unexplained had happened. Something frightening to everyone around her, including herself. After school recessed for the day, she'd confided to her mother the events of the morning while sitting in the conversation corner. Away from eavesdropping or nosy neighbors. Away from the prying eyes of passersby. Her mother's revelations as to the sisters' true nature proved eye-opening. She'd learned very quickly to keep her ability hidden to avoid being ostracized by others.

As she'd grown older, she'd learned when and how to use her talents. She'd chosen to become an official healer in the form of a licensed midwife in order to provide cover for her healing touch. Brief touches over a short period proved as effective as a longer contact. When she was with her sisters, though, she could employ her gift. Together in their own house, they were safe.

Tara tilted her head to one side and studied her oldest sister for several moments. She sensed Roxie had made a decision, one involving her and Beth. "What have you settled on that we may not approve of?"

"Oh, you're good! I'm sure you'll never guess, so I'll have to tell you." Roxie put her hands on her hips, bracing to reveal her bombshell as a wide smile split her face. She tossed her head, her ponytail whipping over one shoulder. "Paulette called, and she mentioned Grant Markel arrived out at the plantation yesterday unannounced to share Thanksgiving with his brother and her since their parents elected to go on a world cruise over the holidays. She and Zak have tickets tonight for a dinner theater with Meredith and Max, and she was worried about

Grant being left all alone.”

Grant? Tara’s heart raced at the thought of the handsome man she’d tried so hard to forget. She’d secretly helped him the month before when he’d accompanied Zak to town in search of some alchemical solution to his desperate medical condition. Several presses of her fingers to his temples were all she needed to save him. Then he’d gone home, and she’d strived to push him out of her mind. Away from her heart.

Yet how could she forget his dove gray eyes smiling at her as they danced? Or the way his thick brown hair with red and gold highlights caught the light from the disco ball on the ceiling? His muscular shoulders swaying to the beat of the energetic tune? The zing of electricity flowing through her fingers when she touched his temples? He was a gorgeous sight, but there was one huge problem. She had no intention of leaving Roseville, her home, or her sisters. When he’d returned to Michigan and his home and work after his week’s visit, she had moved on. Well, tried to move forward.

Roxie lifted a charred but still gooey bun from the pan, picking off the black edges with pincer fingers. Taking a bite, she moaned with delight as she chewed and swallowed. At least the buns still tasted good. A plus in Tara’s favor.

“He’s such a hunk of man. I would love to get to know him better.” Beth tapped a finger on the red-and-white checked tablecloth, leaning back in her chair, one brow quirked and lips slightly parted.

Beth’s comment sparked a bolt of jealousy, one Tara quickly suppressed. Beth could have him if she wanted him. Tara shot a glance at Roxie, noting the laughter in her eyes as she finished her bun in several quick bites. When Roxie turned her gaze to Tara, her heart sank.

“What have you done?”

“I told her we’d be happy to help keep him busy.” Roxie cleaned her fingers on a paper napkin then tossed it into the trash. “He’ll come over this evening for dinner.”

“Tonight? It’s taco night.” Tara shook her head, her ponytail whipping her cheeks. Each sister took turns with the cooking so as to share the task or the fun, as the case may be. Today was Tara’s day to handle the onerous chore. “I don’t want to be responsible for making dinner for him. Let Beth do it instead.”

“Why?” Roxie swiveled her head to frown at Tara. “It’s the perfect night since he can pick and choose what he wants. It’ll be fine.”

“Come on, Tara, don’t be a wimp.” Beth pushed out her chair and stood, bracing one hand on a hip. “Tacos are the easiest thing to make. Even you can’t mess them up.”

“We’ll see.” Tara dragged in a breath and let it out with a huff. She’d never had a problem before, so perhaps her sister was right. “Fine. But don’t blame me if it all goes wrong.”

Roxie sidled over to hug Tara with one arm, her free hand resting on Tara’s upper arm, giving her a brief squeeze. “Relax. We’ve got your back. Besides, it’s just Grant, and he’s family now.”

“Extended family. Through marriage.” Tara managed to squash the desire to roll her eyes at the idea of the brawny geologist as close family. “His brother, Zak, married our cousin, Paulette, so that makes Grant, what?”

“A cousin-in-law?” Beth chuckled as she lifted her keys from the hook and headed for the back door. “I’ve got to get to the bookstore. See you all later.”

“I’ve got to run, too.” Roxie dropped her arms to pivot on one foot, snatch her purse from the shelf by the key rack, and follow Beth through the door. The jingle of keys cut off when the door bumped closed.

Alone, Tara surveyed the mess in the kitchen and tossed a quick prayer to the patron saints of cooking, whoever they may be, to give her guidance. Pushing up her sweater sleeves to the elbow, she picked up the blackened foil pan and tossed it into the garbage. Best to keep busy and not dwell on her shortcomings. The day had to get better. *Triple damn.* Had she just jinxed herself?