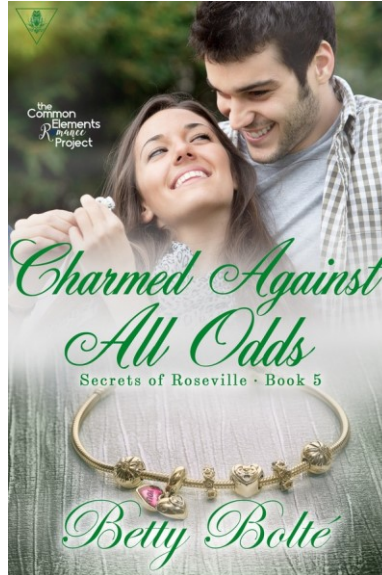


# Charmed Against All Odds

Secrets of Roseville

Book 5

Betty Bolté



## Chapter One

A mere flick of her wrist. A clear and intent thought. A snap of her fingers. Any would do. Roxie Golden tapped the cluttered counter with her red painted nails. But it wouldn't be the right thing to do. She couldn't live with herself if she gave in to the weakness of temptation and used her magic for personal gain or benefit. She'd seen the devastating aftermath of such a selfish act. She shuddered at the vivid memory. No, better to endure the day-by-day efforts to put on the perfect wedding for her sister, Beth, and her fiancé, Mitch.

"You should write it." Tara, Roxie's youngest sister, peered at Roxie with hopeful, hazel eyes. Her long, chestnut hair fell in a braided rope over one shoulder. "You're the best with stringing together words with flare. It's your gift."

"You gals seem to be doing fine." Roxie would have rattled off exactly what played in

her mind but didn't want to hurt her sisters' feelings.

Her animated and enthusiastic sisters had debated the wording for the wedding invitations for hours. Another wedding to plan. Yet for Roxie, a repeat of the old always-the-bridesmaid-never-the-bride syndrome. She mentally shrugged away the cynical inner voice. She didn't care if she never married since it couldn't be the man she had loved with all her heart. A once in a lifetime love. No amount of nagging and matchmaking by her sisters and cousins would change her mind let alone her devastated heart. She'd be glad when Beth married so she didn't have to suffer through another round of invitations, flowers, cakes, and all the other details. In the meantime, she'd grin and bear it. For the fourth and last time, now that her two cousins and her two sisters would all be safely wed.

"If you'd like, I can polish it after you're satisfied." She pressed her palm to the counter for a moment. "I'm sure you've laid down a strong start."

"Not good enough." Beth shook her head, making her shoulder-length, honey-blond ponytail sway. "Please, Roxie, give it your mystical touch. I'm running out of time."

The Golden Owl Books and Brews store, the family business, was blissfully quiet for the moment. Roxie had much to do before the next rush of customers arrived. Boxes of books and coffee mugs designed for readers waited to be unpacked and put out for sale. Dusting of the rows upon rows of bookshelves on the second floor. Readyng the stage for the evening's open mic night and the crowd that would descend on the store for wine and cheese as well as the poetry readings and musical performances. Ordering more donuts, pastries, and bagels for the coffee shop. She'd do whatever necessary to keep the shop running smoothly. Even tap into the customers' general feelings—though not their specific emotions which would be prying—when they browsed the offerings and then adapt the merchandise on hand to satisfy every need. Mother had passed on to a higher realm and left operations of the Golden Owl to her with her sisters' help.

Since Beth and Mitch would tie the knot in four weeks, Roxie counted the days until she could return to her normal, if humdrum, routine. If Beth's after-marriage attitude reflected Tara's after she'd wed Grant, then the bookstore management would fall squarely on Roxie's shoulders for the foreseeable future. Sure, her sisters showed up every day and puttered about. But both their minds were filled with thoughts about the wedding plans. Roxie shrugged mentally, acknowledging that Beth had every right to have the wedding of her dreams.

In the meantime, Roxie was forced to face the suggestive looks and unvoiced questions about her future. But only for another four weeks. Then everyone would carry on about their own business and forget her spinster status. The oldest sister unwed and even more unavailable.

Tara spun the sheet of notebook paper around, pushing aside a stack of bookmarks, a cup of mini red heart-capped pens, and a teetering stack of new release books on the jumbled counter, and handed the pencil to Roxie. "You're up."

"If you're sure..." Roxie glanced between their bobbing heads. The surge of inner joy and challenge made her heart pulse with a strong beat. She loved it when she was asked to help. "Fine. But go do something and let me think."

Everyone knew she possessed a unique way with language. Her spells had always been renowned among the Order for their flow and power. Her mother had said she was gifted with spell craft in addition to her innate powers. Not least of which was her ability to understand any language, including Mammal and Bird. She held her mother's compliment near and dear. But one thing she'd learned the hard way: better to let others lead and she would help from the background. Otherwise, they took affront.

Her fingers itched to reach for the ash wand she kept tucked in her waistband. Holding the slightly twisted wood helped to flow the magic through her body and mind. If only to assist with choosing the words to encourage family and friends to attend the joining of Beth and Mitch. They didn't know Mitch very well since he'd only arrived in town a few months before. But he'd quickly made himself a part of the family in spirit if not in fact. Once he and Beth married, they'd settle somewhere in Roseville and become more a part of the town. Folks just needed to give him a chance.

"We're going." Tara clasped Beth's upper arms and pushed her toward the back room. "We'll mosey on over to the laptop and start figuring out what flowers she wants in her bouquet."

"No roses, please." Beth grinned back at Roxie as she let Tara propel her into the work room where a mountain of boxes of books and merchandise waited to be put out on shelves and tables. "I want something unique and sturdy like me."

Roxie shooed away her laughing sister with a brief wave of one hand. "Very funny."

In fact, Beth embodied unique and sturdy after all her training she'd done over the past few months. Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, yoga, firearms, and even a few flying lessons. Her personal

skills had grown and transformed her into a woman with self-defense skills and the accompanying inner confidence.

“Thank you for appreciating my bit of humor.” Beth chuckled as she disappeared into the room with Tara close behind.

Alone, Roxie studied the awkward attempt they’d made at wording the invitation to the wedding which would be held at the Twin Oaks Plantation Bed and Breakfast Inn. With the inn’s ghosts laid to rest, thanks to the combined efforts of Roxie and her sisters as well as the inn’s owners, the setting couldn’t be lovelier for the ceremony and reception.

A distant flash of lightning outside the front window was followed seconds later by a low rumble announcing the approach of a storm. She glanced out to the busy street, noting with a vague sense of unease the dark gray clouds boiling above the low buildings of the typical southern town. She dropped her gaze back to the paper. After a couple of minutes, Roxie scribbled down a first draft of the invitation. She made several tweaks to the words and then tapped the pencil eraser against her lower lip. Other than the details of when and where, she wanted their friends and family to understand how Beth and Mitch felt about them.

“We invite you to witness our joyful union as the two people who fell in love and wish to spend the rest of our lives proving our love for one another. We hope all of our friends and family will agree to be part of our marriage and will join us in celebrating our new life together.”

She added a line or two regarding the reception and then laid down the pencil when the musical bell over the front door jangled with a distinctly different sound. A wash of resistance flowed through her, an odd sensation. The summoning tones drew Beth and Tara out of the work room, curiosity etched on their features. Roxie looked to the door, still pondering the negative energy she sensed, then spotted a young man with dripping black hair and piercing tawny eyes. He hesitated before closing the door with a smooth, forceful thud. He seemed familiar but she couldn’t place him. She squinted then blinked as she stared at him as his damp image clarified. Could it be? Shock ricocheted through her the longer she studied his stoic face. It couldn’t be. But it was.

Leo.

He’d come back. Joy flooded her heart. Without further thought or consideration, she shrieked and ran across the store to bear hug her childhood sweetheart before planting a solid kiss on his astonished mouth. The contact revived the electrical current she’d always experienced

when they'd kissed, a simmering sizzle flashing through veins. She pressed her lips to his, arms wrapped around his neck, for several seconds, relishing the taste of his mouth and the feel of his hard body beneath her hands.

She heard her sisters giggling behind her but didn't care.

Leo had come back. Finally.

She'd pushed his memory to the far reaches of her mind. The hurt when they'd broken off their engagement had lingered for years. A jolt of pain and longing went along with the many times she'd want to share a joke or insight with him. Wanted to share thoughts and impressions of her day. The visceral connection they once shared. His returning to Roseville dredged up the link from deep inside. An undeniable bond underlying every conversation, every activity, every moment they'd been together. Everyone, especially Roxie, had thought they made a perfect couple. Finally, she pushed back far enough to smile up into the familiar eyes.

"Leo. Welcome home." Roxie stared at him with delight which slowly wilted the longer she searched his surprised and defensive expression.

He'd changed since he'd left town. Taller and stronger, understandably since he'd been eighteen when he'd headed off to college six years ago. No longer the gangly youth but a fully developed man. Even without his superpowers, he'd become a muscular, powerful being. His gaze held hers with a hint of challenge lurking in their depths. Clean-shaven except for a light mustache, his tempting lips flattened into a straight line. So he hadn't changed so very much after all. He still didn't want her.

To be fair, she'd known he'd leave. He'd made no secret of his desire to move away to the big city. Something she'd resented at the time but eventually came to terms with. Despite loving him with her whole heart, she hadn't been enough. The memory poked the sore spot lingering in her heart as she built a protective shell around herself. He didn't look pleased to see her at all. More like he'd rather be anywhere else than stand in the bookstore.

Rolling thunder sounded above the store as the heavens opened and rain cascaded onto the passing cars and pedestrians hunched under umbrellas or raincoats as they hurried down the sidewalk. Roxie pitied the folks caught in the storm but only for a moment. Her attention jerked back to the seething man in front of her. She peered at her one-time fiancé with sorrow in her heart. He'd returned but not willingly.

"I don't live in this town any longer, thank goodness." Leo swiped a hand through his

hair, showering raindrops onto the floor. Then shoved his hands into his front jeans pockets and took a step away from her. "I'm not staying, either."

Ouch. "What are you doing here?" Besides opening old wounds. She hardened the shell, ready to deflect any barbs he might shoot her way. After all, they hadn't split up on the best of terms.

"My father died last month."

"I'm sorry. I hadn't heard he'd passed." Roxie glanced at her sisters where they worked behind the bakery counter, but obviously eavesdropped. They shook their heads at her to confirm they hadn't been informed of the highly respected man's passing either. Leo's bland expression told her a lot about his attitude, mainly he didn't want to engage with her. Then why had he strode through the door like he belonged? "What does that have to do with us?"

Leo reached into his windbreaker pocket. "He left a note saying to bring this to your mother. That she'd know what to do with it." A silver heart-shaped box lay on his palm with a folded gold paper taped to the top of the lid.

"Mom died three years ago." A surge of remembered grief at the sudden loss of her mother clogged her throat.

Her mother would have known exactly why Homer King had sent the box to her. They'd served together for decades as the Supreme Priest and Priestess of the Order of Witchery Lore, otherwise known as OWL. Her mother's collection of witchery lore proved legendary and was housed at the OWL headquarters outside of town. After her mother died, Roxie and her sisters had no further contact with the Order. Roxie, in particular, had put the large circle out of her mind because they reminded her of when she'd first met Leo, and she really didn't want to relive those wonderful memories when her heart ached for him. So she'd shut the door and locked it, then thrown away the key to those recollections.

Now he stood before her without even a kind word or hello. Her defenses rose higher.

Leo offered the box to Roxie but she shook her head. "I don't know what that is."

"Read the note." He pulled the note from the lid and handed it to her.

"Perhaps with your renowned prodigious understanding of language you'll glean more from it than I did."

She frowned at the sarcasm in his tone but studied the paper in her hand. Dated five years earlier. Before her mother had passed. Since it was indeed addressed to her mother, Homer must

have forgotten about the box's existence. Otherwise, wouldn't he have changed the directions to Leo after Peggy's death? Homer had attended the funeral for her mother, so he knew Peggy had died. Yet the note remained addressed to her mother. An unsolvable mystery. The note read pretty much as Leo had summarized. "My dear son, in the event of my death, take this box, unopened, to Peggy Golden at the Golden Owl Books and Brews. She will know what to do. Love always. Dad."

Folding the note, she handed it back to Leo. "That wasn't much help. What do you mean to do next?"

"The sole reason I'm here is to give you this box." He plunked it down on the glass display case by the register, knocking a stack of postcards advertising the open mic night across the surface. "Done. I'm out of here."

Wait, she wanted to cry out as he glanced at her and then away. He couldn't leave. She had questions only he could answer. If he'd stay long enough to hear them. He pivoted on one heel and marched toward the door.

"Stop." She hurried to pick up the silver box and then hurried after him, holding it with both trembling hands. She caught up to him and momentarily laid a hand on his arm to detain his rapid departure, sensed the deep agitation inside him even as the familiar sizzle flowed through her. She stifled a gasp. He glanced at her hand and then met her eyes with a steady look. Releasing his arm, she gripped the box with both hands. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

The box vibrated in her hands and then a lyrical click sounded as the lid popped open. What had unlocked the box? She blinked at it, angling it one way and another to search for a release or some other catch she might have brushed. Nothing. Tara and Beth came around the counter and stood to one side, peeking at the tiny box. Magic must have been infused in the object, sensitive to her touch. But only after she'd touched Leo. Before then, it had remained firmly secured. She stared at the box as if it held a secret she didn't want to know.

"Open it all the way." Beth stretched a hand toward the box but hesitated to make contact with it. "What's inside?"

"No idea. Not sure I want to but... Here goes." Roxie slowly lifted the lid to reveal another gold folded note under a chunky golden bracelet. A single charm—an open book—was attached to it.

Odd to have only one charm on a charm bracelet. She lifted the chain to inspect the little

book. On the back of the gold charm the number thirty-three had been engraved. Frowning, she looked up into Leo's carefully schooled expression of disinterest.

"What on earth does it mean?" Roxie studied his strong, perhaps even beautiful, features, recalling how years before he'd been far more animated and attentive. Not only had he changed physically over the years, he'd grown distant and judgmental. "Do you have any idea?"

"Why would I know?" He shoved his hands into his black jeans again. "I didn't even know there was a box until a few days ago."

His posture and attitude screamed he didn't care, but the flash of curiosity in his eyes belied his act. Did he know more than he was willing to say? Or being honest and as lost as she was? She reached out with her mind but only sensed his strong desire to walk out the door coupled with a growing amount of intrigue. Nothing to suggest he withheld information or answers.

Roxie tossed a glance at each of her sisters but received only perplexed shrugs in reply. "Then who the heck knows?"