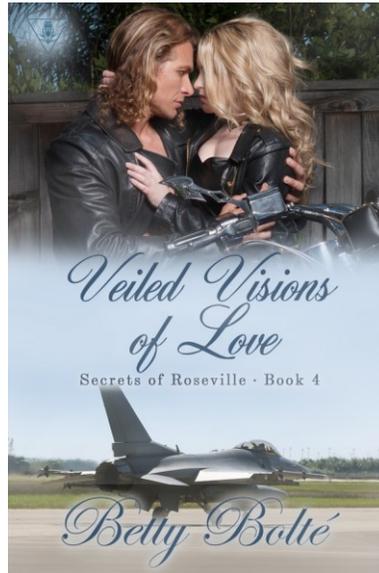


Excerpt from
Veiled Visions of Love

By **Betty Bolté**



Chapter 1

A wave of frustrated longing crashed and churned inside her chest. One day she'd make her fondest wish come true. But that wouldn't be today. Or this week. She huffed in disgust. Or this year. But one day.

Beth Golden flipped the page of the travel guide to peer at the pictures of pyramids and colorfully bedecked camels standing against a deep blue sky. Closing her eyes, she imagined the grit of the burning sand and gusts of a searing zephyr. The lurch of the animal as it carried her over dunes. A half smile formed as glimpses of an Indiana Jones type of pursuit using trucks racing across the desert played across her mind's eye. Or perhaps risking everything to rescue someone in trouble. Like in the latest romantic suspense novel she'd devoured. Living life to the

fullest, surrounded by strong, daring men and smart, sexy women. The perfect lifestyle.

“Beth! We need you down here.”

She sighed and forced her eyes open. Back to reality. Instead of a desert, she stood in the travel section of the Golden Owl Books and Brews bookstore she and her two sisters, Tara and Roxie, had run for the last several years without their mother. Beautiful and savvy, Peggy Golden had started the shop as a focal point in the small town of Roseville. She’d loved to keep up with their neighbors, treating them as family more than customers. Providing a uniquely welcoming experience in the store by including baked goods and coffee to enjoy while they browsed for their next great story. She’d taught her daughters how to suggest new books to people to help them find something of interest. If only Beth could find something interesting, she’d be far happier.

“On my way.” Her raised voice seemed small and insignificant in the open space. Much like she felt.

The upper floor of the Civil War era building housed the nonfiction selections. Everything from cookbooks to animal husbandry to psychology to witchcraft. The last a particular interest of the three sisters, especially since her mother had literally written a book on the subject. She laid the brochure on top of the stack on the table, nudging it into alignment with the others, and then turned away to trudge down the steps. She had work to do despite the fact her heart and mind journeyed about the world without her.

Her entire life had been lived within the boundaries of the county. A day trip to Nashville didn’t count as adventure. Far from it. While the atmosphere in the Music City was different from the small town vibe of her hometown, it still didn’t satisfy the need for something else. Despite the increased hum of activity, she wanted more. More surprises. But of course her gift of

vision meant she could tell what was about to happen to those around her, even if not her own future. She could still sense what was in store for others, whether she wanted to know or not. She'd learned to mute the ceaseless images so her emotions weren't overwhelmed, but the visions clamored for her attention.

Rounding the corner of the checkout counter, she cringed at the long line of customers waiting at the coffee bar. If she didn't know better, she'd think her neighbors came to the bookstore for their morning rush, either caffeine or sugar. In fact, much like Edna's Supermarket across town, the store served up local gossip as well. Usually purely curious exchanges about what was happening in the town which helped the three sisters keep their fingers on the town's pulse.

"Glad you found your way back to help." Roxie, dressed in the same khakis and black polo all three sisters wore, pulled the tap on the soda dispenser to fill a cup. Her chestnut hair pulled into a short ponytail, Roxie watched her with concern in her hazel eyes.

"Sorry. I got distracted." Beth didn't want her sisters worried about her. She could take care of that all by herself.

"Let me guess." Roxie splashed soda down the outside of the cup with a short exclamation of disgust. She grabbed a paper towel and dried off the cup before addressing Beth. "Daydreaming of faraway places?"

"I can't help it." She glanced at Tara, standing by the bakery counter. Her younger sister had blossomed since marrying Grant Markel earlier in the year. She'd done her hair in a chignon, a different look but attractive on the slender woman.

"You're not trapped here." Roxie tossed the crumpled paper towel into the trash. "You could take a trip."

Beth shrugged as she scooted behind her sisters. “What fun would it be to go by myself? Besides, how could I go and not feel guilty leaving you both shorthanded here?”

“We’d manage.” Tara folded a pastry box and then selected an assortment of muffins to nestle inside. “Or is that an excuse?”

“I’ll know when the time is right. Which isn’t now.” Beth donned a lightweight apron with the Golden Owl logo—a Great Horned owl holding two crossed branches inside an inverted triangle—emblazoned in the center and quickly washed her hands.

She stepped up to the bakery display to take the next order from Sue Grimwood. Mother of three and grandmother of one, her trim frame proved a woman could live a full and happy life without looking old and worn out. In fact, she continued to be Max Chandler’s legal secretary at the law firm down the street. He ended up marrying Meredith Reed, the sisters’ new-found cousin. Family ties had grown rather knotty in Roseville upon the discovery that Meredith and her sister Paulette were indeed related to the three Golden sisters. Sue made it a habit to stop in for her daily breakfast purchase on her way to work. Giving everyone the perfect opportunity to stay in the know about doings in the town.

“Good morning, Sue. How may I help you this morning?” Beth rested her fists on top of the glass case, a smile aimed at the spry older woman.

Sue brushed a stray wisp of chin-length brown hair off her cheek and then pointed to the bagel shelf. “I’d like one of the poppy seed bagels, please. Oh, and a decaf coffee.”

“Do you want cream cheese?” Tara pulled a piece of waxed paper and grabbed the bagel, slipping it into a white paper bag. At Sue’s nod, she added a tube of cream cheese and then lifted a brow at Sue. “Have you tried the eclairs?” She motioned to where the custard-filled, chocolate-iced pastries were lined up beside bear claws and glazed donuts. “The best I’ve ever tasted.”

“You’re such a temptress, my dear.” Sue grimaced, deep curved dimples on either side of her mouth, and slowly shook her head. “I’m sure they’re delicious but not for me. Too rich for my taste.”

“I know you love chocolate.” Tara folded the bag closed and then spun away to snap up a cup and fill it with hot coffee. She handed both the bag and cup to Sue. “Do you have plans for the Memorial Day weekend?”

The town excelled at celebrating every holiday, big or small. Some stemming from the town’s history, like Founder’s Day and Strawberry Festival. Memorial Day brought picnics and outdoor concerts, car and tractor shows, and yard sales on every street. The town square stood festooned in red, white, and blue decorations on every light pole and strung across the streets. Everybody anticipated the fun and frolic of the weekend events planned months in advance.

“Yes, I do. I’m taking my grandson, Jeremy, out to the new airfield for his first flying lesson.” Sue scrounged in her voluminous purse for her wallet. “He’s wanted to try flying for months and I finally figured it would be better to let him try, get it out of his system.”

“That sounds like fun.” Tara took the plastic card from Sue and rang up her order.

What an idea. To be able to fly off wherever and whenever. A tantalizing prospect she’d never considered. But how much did it cost? When would she ever have the time to do such a thing? She mentally shrugged off the slight hope that had lifted her spirits for a fraction of a second. No, she was pretty much stuck in sleepy Roseville.

“I bought him a lesson for his eighteenth birthday last week and it’s scheduled for this afternoon.” Sue tucked her card away and hung her purse on her shoulder. “It may be his one and only, or he may fall in love with the thrill of flying.”

“If it makes him happy to do something like that, I say go for it.” Beth wiped her hands

on her apron. “A bit of excitement never hurt anybody.”

Sue grinned at Beth. “Sounds like you’re envious. Would you like to go with us? See what it’s like to fly?”

“Thanks, but I have to work.” She glanced at her oldest sister, Roxie, who had just popped out of the back room with a box of recent arrivals to shelve.

Roxie cocked her head, studied her for several seconds, and then plopped the box of books on a table and sauntered toward the bakery. What had she noticed that made her come over? Beth hadn’t done anything, hadn’t sent any secret messages her way to ask her to stop what she was doing and intervene. Nothing needed her attention.

Beth shrugged off the questions rattling in her brain and addressed Sue. “I’d like to, just to do something different. But we have a bookstore to run.”

“Surely you could slip away for a little while.” Sue waved a hand at Tara and Roxie and then gripped her purchases. “There are three of you, after all.”

“I appreciate the offer, but we each have our tasks to complete to keep everything running smoothly.” Just another cog in the wheel. She usually enjoyed her work, but lately she couldn’t stop thinking about having an adventure of her own.

Roxie stopped beside Sue with a nod of greeting. “Hello, Sue. How are you this fine Saturday morning?”

“I was hoping Beth would go to the new airport with me this afternoon. Keep me company while my grandson takes a flying lesson. She might even find she’d like to try it herself. Could you spare her for a few hours?”

Roxie tilted her head, crossing her arms as she considered the question. She aimed her hazel eyes at Beth and then smiled. “I don’t see why not. Go have fun.”

“Are you sure?” A surge of excited energy sizzled through Beth at the idea.

The new Roseville Regional Airport had been advertised as a modern facility that would enable the further growth of the economic and government sectors of the region. Having a place for the big wigs to fly in and out of town made it possible for increased access as well as easier development and management of businesses. To introduce the services available to the general public, the owner had arranged for a small airshow. The flyer hanging in the front window advertised the vendors and planes waiting for people to come out and see. Maybe going outside of town for a little while would scratch the travel itch consuming her head to toe.

“I think it’s just the thing for you.” Roxie folded her arms over her chest. “You deserve to have an afternoon off to do something fun.”

Sue nodded, her short hair floating around her chin with the movement. “We’ll have fun. I’ll make sure of it.”

The sparkle of Sue’s eyes reminded her of the time when Beth was a mere slip of a girl and her mother took the three sisters to the circus. Mom had promised them they’d have a good time and she carried out that promise. Only not the way she’d foreseen. During the acrobatic demonstration involving a pony, one of the acrobats fell off when the horse shied sideways at the entrance to the ring. The lithe girl landed in a moaning heap near where they sat in the front row. Tara leapt up and ran to lay hands on her, using her secret healing powers to restore the girl before even the first responders could reach her. Roxie calmly chanted a protective spell for the woman, a shield to see her through the rest of the performance. Beth sensed the woman would be fine and envisioned her continuing in her acrobatics. Their mother, eyes glittering with tears of pride, couldn’t have been more pleased at the sisters working together on the stranger’s behalf. Beth remembered the entire episode as the most fun she’d had.

“I may as well go see if there’s anything interesting out there.” Beth untied her apron strings and hung it up. “What have I got to lose?”

* * *

The signature throaty rumble of the Harley died away, consumed by the louder whine of plane engines and the whirl of propellers. Mitch Sawyer removed his helmet and smoothed his hair back from his face. Tired and grumpy from the long ride on the bike, he took a moment to absorb the layout of the airport. He’d bought the comfortably outfitted bike for long-distance travel, particularly its cushioned seat and compartments for his gear. Spending days on the road made such a luxury a necessity.

His contact had sent him to the insignificant airshow to do a job. Otherwise, he’d never have known about—let alone attended—the paltry affair. He perused the nearly empty tarmac with a variety of planes parked along either side. A smattering of people of all ages visited the handful of exhibits, children breaking free from parents’ restraints to run across the fields edging the airstrip. Several hangars huddled at the end of the open space with a handful of small buildings on either side, presumably offices of one kind or another. He inhaled, sampling the combination of sharp scents. Home again.

Not that he actually thought of any town as home. Instead, airports had been his surrogate home ever since he’d first joined the Air Force fifteen years ago. He’d thrilled to the speed and daring associated with fighter jets and excelled at every aspect of flying and maintaining his aircraft. He even fought his way through a master’s degree in aeronautical engineering and earned the designation of Distinguished Graduate at the Squadron Officer School, which enabled him to qualify for the top job in his field: Executive for the Operations Group. He’d beaten out all of his peers for the coveted position. Which didn’t make him any friends. Even cost him a

few. But he'd enjoyed his time in the OG.

After fifteen years of active duty service, he'd started contemplating his future. He'd grown weary of the constant moving from base to base. Stability tempted him far more than repeatedly changing stations. So after months of considering his options, he switched to the reserves while taking on some freelance gigs with chartered flights and even a stint as an instructor for a local flight school. His training and education eventually led him to being recommended for the most dangerous job he'd ever taken: repossessing planes from deadbeat owners for the finance company. Essentially stealing them back but with legal paperwork to back him up.

Repossessing a plane required both stealth and confidence. Taking a plane wasn't as easy as towing away a car. Each job posed unique obstacles and situations. Not always friendly situations. He had to find a way to ensure the plane was airworthy without being seen and then fire it up and fly it away without being caught. Fortunately, he'd only faced irate gun-toting owners a handful of times, but more than enough for his liking.

One case in point was the job he'd just wrapped up. The setup had felt off from the start. Too easy up until the angry delinquent owner sent not only Dobermans—four of them—but also a handful of gun-toting men. He'd barely escaped with the plane let alone his life. His contact had assured him that situation was an anomaly and wouldn't likely happen again. Mitch didn't quite believe him and so had begun searching for another source of employment. Something with flying but no more guns. He'd had enough of facing the wrong end of a weapon.

Strolling casually down one side of the planes on exhibit, he scoured each aircraft for the one he needed to find. The sugary scent of cotton candy assaulted him from one of two food trucks. Breathing out, he hurried past the kid holding a paper cone of the pale pink spun treat,

taking several strides before drawing in another breath. Better. He skirted groups of children and their parents to avoid clashing with conflicting smells. He needed to keep his wits about him, not end up sidelined with a perfume-induced headache.

The plane he searched for was a sweet ride. Not a fighter jet, but definitely a comfortable way to travel. The Beechcraft Bonanza G36 had become one of the most popular of the single-engine, fixed-landing gear aircraft. Given the price tag approached a million dollars, the bank had every right to reclaim it for nonpayment. He scanned the planes as he sauntered past, searching for the distinctive windowed cabin and front propeller with low wing set along with the flashy striping the owner had insisted on adding. Probably out of a misguided boastful pride at flying such a nice plane which he didn't actually own.

Reaching the end of the first row of planes, he paused to get his bearings, to look back over the planes he'd already passed to make sure he hadn't missed the one he sought. Then headed toward the far side of the tarmac to start down the other row. A glance at the sky confirmed a front approached, the shelf of white roiling clouds pushing closer with each passing minute. He picked up the pace, not wanting to seek out both the plane and then housing in the rain. On a motorcycle.

As he approached the first plane—a nice if older Piper Saratoga—a vaguely familiar dark skinned man turned to approach him. Where did he know him from? A wide smile greeted him and then he knew, as the man quickly closed the distance between them. The smile belonged to his once-close Air Force buddy. Keith Merryman had left the service two years before Mitch had joined the reserves.

Rumors had circulated as to the reasons why Keith resigned his commission so abruptly. Mitch had his own suspicions but he'd never confirmed them. The two men had attended the

Squadron Officer School together, and had grown competitive as a result of their individual drive to excel. Despite their friendly competition, they became fast friends. At least until Mitch earned the DG and ended up promoted ahead of him. Keith had stopped pushing for promotion and instead started talking about getting out and building his own airfield. Where he would always be in control? Could that be why? Still, Keith's laughing tawny eyes and extended hand welcomed Mitch.

"You son of a gun, what are you doing out here?" Keith clapped a hand to Mitch's shoulder and then dropped his hands to his sides. "I thought I'd gotten rid of your sorry face years ago."

"No such luck." Mitch swept the airfield with his gaze. He squinted as he spotted an RV with the Bonanza at the other end, surrounded by curious kids and adults. Its distinctive red striping confirmed he'd found his target. He regarded Keith again, searching for changes in his good-natured open expression. "So you did it?"

Keith nodded as his grin widened. "Yep. It's all mine. Along with its challenges."

"It's a nice layout. Lots of people here to enjoy the show, too." A flash of some undefined emotion clouded Keith's eyes for such a brief moment Mitch may have imagined it. "Was it your idea? Or did someone talk you into it?"

"My idea to try and raise awareness of the services I provide." Keith glanced at his watch and then raised his brows at Mitch. "A good turnout, thank goodness. I worried about how much interest there'd be in airplanes so far out in the country. At least my hunch looks like it'll pay off."

"Yeah, if the weather holds." He zipped his leather jacket halfway up.

A gust of chilly air announced the arrival of the cold front, bringing rain and cooler

temperatures behind it. Flying would become more difficult in the wind and rain, if not stopped altogether. With the building clouds and increasing wind speed, the show might be grounded in a few short hours.

“Say, how long are you in town?” Keith shifted his weight to the other foot, his gaze flicking away to scan the groups of people moving among the planes and tents.

“I’m not sure. A few days. Why?” As long as it took to figure out a scheme for getting that plane back, that’s how long he’d stay. His paycheck from delivering the repo’d plane would pay off the last of his debt and let him put some aside for a down payment on a new house. Somewhere.

“Have you a place to stay?” Keith shoved his hands into his back jeans pockets.

“Not yet. Is there a hotel?”

“No, just B&Bs. But I have a spare room at my place in town, if you don’t mind dogs.”

“Wow, you really did settle in.” Envy flashed in Mitch’s chest, burning a hole before subsiding. “It’d be great to catch up. Can I buy you dinner as a thanks?”

“Sure you can. I never turn down free food.”

“Great. Just tell me where to go.” Too late he realized the huge opening he’d left his friend to fill. If he chose to.

Keith shook his head, a grin lifting one corner of his mouth as his eyes reflected the temptation to take him up on the opening but resisted. “But there’s more. I have a favor to ask.”

Mitch splayed his hands, palms up, relieved. “Anything.”

“I have a boy coming out to take an intro flying lesson for his birthday in a little while. Could you teach him the basics while I take care of an issue?” Keith grinned wider and winked. “For an old buddy?”

“As long as I’m here, sure.”

“Cool. I’ll hang around and introduce you and then I’ll have to go to resolve the snafu at the cargo terminal.”

“Sounds like a plan.” And the perfect cover story for being at the show and getting to know the ins and outs, who to avoid as well as trust, in order to make a certain plane disappear. Coincidence? Fate? Dumb luck? Didn’t matter, he’d take it. “Where and when?”