

East Texas, Late February 1879

Chapter One

A rain-sleet mixture pelted the grime-coated window of the train car, leaving a trail of muddy streaks puddled at the bottom. Beulah Mae Lockhart considered this less-than-auspicious welcome to Texas a good omen. Start bad end well was her philosophy. At least, she tried to make it so.

She pulled the oft folded piece of paper from her handbag and smoothed it over her lap. A newly awakened sense of strength bolstered her spirits, and her body vibrated with new life as she reread it. *I, Frank Barker, owner of Bakersville General Store, Bakersville, Texas, do hereby sell said business, building, and all contents to B.M. Lockhart of New York City. Sale includes the inventory listed below, the house located behind the store, and any items left behind.*

Bea scanned the list already committed to memory, which was nothing like the items stocked by her father's upscale mercantile in New York. Basic frontier supplies: farm tools, flour, sugar, lard, seed. No silk or satin. No crystal or silver service. Nothing extravagant. Nothing special.

But it was hers. And one day, it would be special.

She returned the treasured document to her bag and shivered as frigid air seeped around the edge of the window. The heavy wool coat was no match for the deep chill ingrained into the wooden floor that leached into her feet despite her leather boots and thick stockings. *Only another hour or so. I can stand it that long.*

A woman seated across the aisle ducked her head when Bea caught her staring at the jagged scar on her right cheek. Bea didn't bother to adjust the hat's veil to cover it. She refused

to hide anymore. People would accept her as is, disfigurement and all, or they could go to, well, they could go away and leave her be.

Bea sat up straighter and addressed the woman. "Are you from Bakersville?"

Startled, the woman flinched and looked at the scar again rather than meeting Bea's gaze. "Um, yes. We live in town." She shifted in the seat, eyes finally making contact. "I've not seen you around before."

"I recently purchased some property there."

The woman's eyes lit up. "I'm Eunice Martin. My Jeb runs the post office and telegraph. The only thing I know for sale around here is the mercantile, but I heard someone named B.M. Lockhart from New York bought it. Is that your husband?"

Bea countered the question with one of her own. "How long have you lived there?"

The look of disappointment on her companion's face was so acute, Bea almost felt sorry for her.

"About six years." The woman cocked her head to one side. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"New York."

Mrs. Martin's eyes lingered over the scar, and Bea struggled to stifle the angry retort hovering on the tip of her tongue. She refused to explain it to anyone, especially someone so noticeably rude. "I understand there is a rather nice hotel in town."

"There is." She blustered and sat up straighter, gloved hands clasped over an expansive waistline. One bushy brow arched upward. "If you don't mind associating with...well, her kind."

Bea's protective instinct kicked in with a vengeance. A victim of unwarranted bias because of the scar, she had no tolerance for discrimination or prejudice. "And just what kind is that, Mrs. Martin?" She made no effort to temper the iciness in her voice.

Seemingly unaware of Bea's disapproval, the woman's face became infused with what appeared to be misguided happiness.

"She's not married." She leaned forward, and her voice dropped though no other passengers were close enough to hear. "And has a child." She straightened and sucked in a self-righteous breath. "And you know what that means."

It took Bea a moment to regain her composure. "No, I don't know." Before the nasty woman could say more, she cut her off. "And neither do you."

Mrs. Martin sputtered and sat back in the seat, blinking rapidly. "I'm merely trying to help."

"Are you now? By implying the owner of the hotel is somehow unworthy of my patronage simply because she has a child?"

"She doesn't have a husband," snapped Mrs. Martin, "and no one knows why."

"Meaning *you* don't know, and for that reason alone, you supposed the worst-case scenario." Bea sat up straighter. "I do not listen to gossip and prefer to evaluate people based on how they treat me. And others." With that stiff reprimand, she turned and looked out the window, effectively ending the conversation.

Unfairly shunned by her family and society as well, Bea quickly related to the unknown woman's plight. Ever since the accident when Bea was thirteen, she stoically endured her mother's declaration that the scar somehow made her unworthy of love or even affection. Tutors and other household staff tried to fill the emotional void caused by her parents' coldness.

But, thanks to her grandmother's steadfast love and support, Bea managed to grow up relatively well-adjusted but painfully shy. Her sudden death eight years ago left Bea inconsolable for weeks.

Until that surprise visit from Granny's lawyer. The sizeable and unexpected inheritance provided a much-needed boost of self-confidence and initiated a series of long-overdue changes. The first one being her refusal to relinquish control of the money to her father, who believed women in general, were ill-suited for such things.

Thanks to the guidance and support of her late grandmother's lawyer and banker, Bea discovered she possessed a shrewd head for business. Using her beloved grandmother as inspiration, Bea began to consider a future away from New York and her parents.

Still, after years of being told she was somehow defective, it took time to gain the confidence to not only venture outside the home but convince her father to teach her how to run his fashionable mercantile, albeit from the back rooms. The only reason he relented was her mother's declaration that since Bea was completely unmarriageable, "She may as well make herself useful." Under Bea's leadership, Lockhart's quickly became *the* place for the social elite to purchase whatever the most current rage happened to be.

Until disaster struck in the form of one Edmund Wilshire Abernathy III. Surprised and flattered by the handsome aristocrat's attention, Bea fell hard and fast. Three months later, they became engaged.

Even now, her face burned with shame as she recalled the debacle. *One would think a woman thirty years of age would be smart enough to see past the smooth-talking Englishman to the scoundrel lurking beneath the surface.*

Thankfully, Bea ignored her mother's insistence she grant Edmond control of her finances before they married. Otherwise, he would have likely squandered it all on his worthless schemes before his real character became known. Some of her parents' friends and her father were not so lucky.

Image was everything to her parents, and the subsequent scandal rocked their world. They placed full blame on Bea for the debacle, despite the fact it was her father who brought Edmond into their home and encouraged their relationship and subsequent engagement.

That disastrous event set her feet on the path she now trod.

She wasn't surprised when her parents' first concern upon hearing of her plan to leave was if she intended to replace the money Edmond swindled from them.

She suffered no qualms in refusing their request.

The screech of the train's whistle interrupted her musings. She stiffened her back and inhaled. *The past is gone. My future starts today.*

The steam engine's dirty window and swirling smoke obscured her view as the train rolled to a stop.

She allowed herself only a moment's hesitation before rising to meet her future.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Bea turned to the gruff voice behind the counter to her right.

An older gentleman, reed thin and slightly stooped, squinted at her with faded blue eyes. A thick wool overcoat hung on his wiry frame, and a scraggly beard covered a weathered face.

"I'm looking for the station manager or someone who can assist me."

"Well, depending on what you need, I reckon that'd be me."

She took a step toward him and deliberately let the veil slip to show the scar.

His gaze never wavered.

“Name’s Silas Upton, ma’am. How can I help you?”

She stepped closer and turned her head to inspect the small space. “Mr. Upton, I wonder if I might temporarily store my things here. Or is there someplace else I should take them?”

“How much stuff you talking about?”

“A couple of large trunks and some boxes.”

“How long is temporary?” His toothy grin was charming.

She returned the smile. “Just until I get set up in town. Shouldn’t be more than a couple of days.”

His finger made a raspy sound as it raked against his bearded cheek. “I reckon that’d be all right.”

“Perhaps you could see that the smaller trunk is taken to the hotel.” She paused, and one gloved finger tapped her chin. “Or maybe I should check to see if they have a room first.”

“Miss Lizzie will have room. Ain’t nothing going on this time of year. I’ll get it sent over for you. What name do I give her?”

“Bea Lockhart, please. And thank you for your assistance, Mr. Upton.” She turned for the door and stopped. “Oh, can you direct me to the general store, please?”

“Turn right and go down past Doc Morton’s office. The store will be on the other side of the road across from The Hanging Tree.”

“The Hanging Tree?”

He nodded. “The big oak in the middle of the road. Used to be for hangin’s, but we ain’t had one of them in years.”

It took a moment to mask her surprise before Bea thanked him again and stepped out on the rough plank walkway. The rain and sleet were gone, but an icy wind remained. Though cold, it was nothing like winter in New York, and the heavy wool traveling coat protected against the chill. However, she doubted her feet would ever be warm again.

She straightened her shoulders and looked around. The train station marked the southern edge of town. Across the street stood an empty wood-frame building, its weathered exterior badly in need of repair. Next to it was a wooden barbershop and bathhouse, its faded sign boasting a hot bath and shave for twenty-five cents. A narrow alley separated that establishment from the two-story Broken Spur Saloon that covered the block. An outside staircase led upstairs, and a simple balcony wrapped around the three sides visible from her vantage point. Movement from an open door drew her eye, and she watched as a cowboy exited one of the rooms, a scantily clad young woman hanging on his arm.

Face flaming, Bea jerked her gaze away and continued to survey her new home.

Further down, she saw the oak Mr. Upton mentioned. Squarely in the middle of the muddy boulevard, it towered at least fifty feet in the air. Gnarled, massive branches, barren of leaves, stretched over the road on either side. Easily three feet in diameter, the trunk was surrounded by twisted roots and patchy dead grass.

One could easily imagine it providing shade during the hot summer months for buildings in its shadow, one of which was the general store. *Mother would have a heart attack if I told her shade came from The Hanging Tree.* Thoughts of her mother dampened Bea’s rising euphoria. She would no doubt have little good to say about any of it.

Shaking off the encroaching melancholy, Bea looked around. Worlds apart from New York, Bakersville sported an eclectic mix of structures. A brick-and-mortar bank sat next to a wooden apothecary. The hotel boasted a white stone façade and a large oak door, its glass heavily etched with an intricate design she could not determine at this distance and accented by dark blue trim. Another building was connected to the hotel, its bright yellow exterior shining in the drab, grey morning. Horses waited at scattered hitching posts, and an assortment of the town's inhabitants hurried about their business, no doubt anxious to get out of the weather.

On this side of the street, the telegraph office sat next to the station. A small alley on either side separated the blacksmith shop and livery stable from other buildings in the block. A sign hanging from the roof indicated the jail was up ahead, though she could see no further details from this angle.

She took a breath and headed in the direction of her new venture. At the end of the boardwalk, she stifled a groan. There was no walkway again until she got past the blacksmith shop.

She sighed and debated options. *Walking through the muck in the alley will ruin my shoes and my skirt.* She looked around, expecting to see a coach for hire. She sighed deeply and reminded herself she was no longer in the big city where carriages were the norm.

“Something wrong, ma’am?”

The deep voice came from a bear of a man standing in front of the smithy.

By his attire, a long leather apron and gloves, she assumed he was the proprietor and quickly pasted on a polite smile. “I don’t suppose there is a carriage or something I could rent to get me to the general store?”

When he didn’t reply right away, she wondered if he heard her question.

His slow, patronizing smile said he did. “No point in hitching up a carriage just to go there.”

His voice, low-pitched and clear, held the faintest accent. French maybe? And more than a hint of disdain.

Miffed, Bea fixed him with her coldest glare. “I see. Well, thank you anyway.” She bunched up her skirts and prepared to step into the muck.

“Hold up.” He tossed his gloves onto a shelf behind him and walked toward her.

When he stopped at the foot of the single step, she found herself transfixed by sky-blue eyes framed by long, sooty lashes. The shadow of a beard on sun-bronzed skin added a rakish aura. Ebony hair was secured at the nape by a strip of leather while one wayward curl fell casually across his forehead, and masculine wisps coiled against the open V of his homespun shirt. Despite the cold air, perspiration hovered above full, sensual lips. She was acutely conscious of a broad, muscular chest and shoulders that appeared a yard wide. A quick inhale brought heady traces of sweat, leather, manure, and something she couldn’t identify. It was rude to stare, but she couldn’t help it.

He was the most handsome man she had ever seen in her life.

“Je vous donne une semaine, jolie dame.”

Thanks to a determined nanny, Bea spoke fluent French and taught herself German as well. His French was smooth, refined, and totally out of place with his surroundings, so it took a

moment for her surprised brain to translate the slight. Spine rigid, she looked down at him. “You give me a week for what, sir?”

Eyes wide, his head tilted back. “You speak French.” The terse statement carried no hint of apology.

“Oui Monsieur. Couramment.”

The sexy smile appeared slowly, and she sucked in a breath only to have it lodge in her throat when he scooped her up in his arms as though she weighed nothing and started across the street.

“What are you doing? Put me down this instant!” Even as she protested, she grabbed his apron for balance with one hand while the other remained pinned against a rock-solid chest.

He didn’t stop. “You really want to walk in this muck?”

She jerked her head around, saw they were in the middle of the road, and bit her lip. “No. I don’t.”

They reached the other side in silence, and he set her feet on the boardwalk past the saloon. Face burning, she forced herself to meet his gaze. “Thank you.”

He tipped his head slightly, murmured, “*Mon plaisir, Madame,*” and turned back to his shop.

Heart racing, she watched until he picked up his gloves and disappeared into the smithy.

Just then, Bea noticed Mrs. Martin gaping at her from the doorway of the telegraph office. The firm set of her mouth said the smithy was someone else of whom she disapproved.