

CHAPTER 1



1880 TEXAS

"Darcy Pendergrass, you should not ask such things!"
"Come on, Belle," Darcy pleaded with the petite brunette sitting beside her in the surrey. "We are supposed to be best friends, and best friends tell each other everything. I would tell you if a boy kissed me."

"Girls, what are you two chattering about?" Mr. Pendergrass asked from the front seat of the surrey.

"Why, Richard, the girls have been to a dance. I'm sure they have plenty to talk about that is none of our business."

"What our daughter does is *our* business."

"Richard, you know so little about girls."

"Oh, all right, you ladies share your secrets," Richard Pendergrass moaned.

"Thank you, Ma." Darcy leaned forward and kissed her mother's cheek then slid back in her seat.

"Well?" Darcy turned back to Belle.

Belle giggled, enjoying the look of desperation on her friend's face.

"All right," Belle leaned closer to her friend's ear, "yes, he kissed me."

"I knew it. I knew it." Darcy drummed her feet against the carriage floor. "Tell me everything!"

"Well," Belle took a deep breath, "first, he is a *man*, not a boy. And," she grasped Darcy's arm, "he's a ranger."

Darcy's jaw dropped. "You mean a Texas Ranger?"

Belle's head bobbed.

"Wow! A grown man. Oh, Belle, how did you get so lucky? Not only did you get your first kiss but with a grown man—a Texas Ranger." Darcy exhaled a dreamy sigh. "I should be jealous. But how could he resist you, especially with you wearing the blue dress your ma made. It practically sparkles. The only one after me was Joe Carter."

"Why, Darcy Pendergrass," Belle scolded, "Joe is a nice guy, and he likes you a lot. I saw him following you around like a lovesick pup."

Darcy shrugged. "He's still a boy, not a man like your ranger."

"Darcy, you know Joe is not a boy. He's twenty-one, and that's not a boy."

"He seems like one to me. Maybe I don't see him as a grown man since I've known him most of my life. But enough about Joe. I want details. What's it like to be kissed? How did it happen? I need details, Belle." The blonde ringlets of Darcy's hair bounced as she fidgeted with excitement.

"All right. We finished our dance, and he went to get us some punch. But I was so hot, I couldn't wait for the punch, so I went outside to cool off. I sat on the bench right outside the church hall, and then I heard this deep voice—

"What did he say?" Darcy jiggled in her seat.

"There you are, young lady," Belle lowered her voice to imitate a masculine tone.

"He called you a *lady*?" Darcy squealed.

"Yes." Belle giggled.

"Imagine," Darcy sighed, "being called a lady, like in one of those romantic books about a knight and his lady."

"Oh, Darcy, you are such a romantic."

"You are too, Belle Alston," Darcy chided. "Now go on; tell me the rest."

"Well, I turned and looked up, and he was standing next to the bench with a glass of punch in each hand."

Belle's mind drifted back to the dance, the memory of the evening playing in her mind.

"There you are young lady. What are you doing here all alone? I left for a moment to get us drinks and when I came back, you were gone."

"Thank you," Belle answered as she held out her hand for the drink.

"Oh." He handed her the drink and motioned for her to scoot down on the bench. He sat down next to her.

The warmth of his body near her, mixed with the scent of leather, soap and pure masculinity, made her tremble.

Even though he was sitting, Belle needed to tilt her head to meet his gaze. She realized he must be over six feet tall, almost a foot taller than her five-foot-five self.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I thought I might faint from the heat, it's so warm in there."

"You're not going to faint for real, are you?"

"No, no," she giggled at his alarm, "I'm fine."

"I'm glad you are fine, but you know you really shouldn't come out here alone. You should at least have let someone know you were out here," the young man lightly scolded.

"I turned eighteen last week, I'll have you know. I'm old enough to care for myself," Belle huffed.

"Feisty little thing, aren't you?"

Belle laughed at being called feisty; it was the last word she would use to describe herself.

"I'm sorry. I have a bit of a temper."

"Not to worry. Anyway, I didn't come out here to argue with you." He smiled, and Belle felt a warmth growing inside herself.

She studied his face.

Wisps of dark hair rested on his forehead. His green eyes sparkled against his tanned skin. They were kind eyes, but she imagined a hidden flame ignited from within if a dangerous situation arose or his temper flared. Beyond his warm smile was his strong jawline, covered with a shade of dark stubble that would make other men look unkempt, but it made him all the more attractive.

He is the handsomest man I have ever seen.

"Why, thank you. I can't recall anyone ever calling me handsome."

Belle's face turned crimson. "Oh my gosh, I said that out loud, didn't I?"

He smiled and nodded.

"I'm sorry." She clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Why are you doing that?" He chuckled as he removed her hand from her face. "I think it's charming that you say what you think."

"I do it when I'm nervous." Belle shuffled in her seat. "It's embarrassing. I mean, I just met you and I don't even know your name, then I go and say something like that. I'm mortified. She looked at her lap.

The light touch of his fingertips gently raised her face, and she was captured in his mossy, green eyes.

"I have to admit, meeting you makes me a bit nervous too."

"It does?"

"Yes, so don't feel mortified, and the name's Travis—Ranger Travis Parker. And just who might you be?"

"Belle," she said, her voice quivering.

"Belle," he repeated, "how appropriate. 'Belle,' I believe that means beautiful in French, and you, Belle, are uniquely beautiful. I don't think I have ever seen eyes like yours. They are not quite blue, are they? They're almost violet."

"Huh?" Belle blushed and tried to swallow but found her mouth was dry. "I don't know, I suppose. I mean, that's what I'm told, about my eyes. Oh, and umm... my name, I'm named Belle because of this birthmark."

Belle showed him the birthmark on her arm. "See, it's shaped like a bell. Oh, Belle, stop talking," she admonished herself. "I'm sorry I'm rambling."

"No, you're not, sweetheart."

His endearment shot like a flaming arrow, igniting something inside her.

"Tell me about yourself, Belle."

"Well, um, my father is Judge Alston. He was a lawman before he became a judge and—

"Belle, honey."

"Yes?"

"No disrespect to your father, but I want to know about you."

"Um, well, there is nothing to tell." She shrugged. "I'm Belle Alston. I'm eighteen. I've lived in Faulkner all my life and probably will live here till I die."

"Come on, Belle, what do you like to do?"

Belle replied, "I don't know. Well, I like animals and books. I can't think of anything else. I'm boring Belle, that's all."

"Aw, darling, you are anything but boring. You are beautiful and charming and witty, and," he smiled, "I believe you have a bit of a temper."

Belle blushed. How can he tell so much about me; he doesn't know me.

"I can tell you how; I'm a Texas Ranger, and it's part of the job."

Belle's eyes widened, "Oh no, I did it again. I said that out loud too, didn't I?"

Travis nodded with a chuckle.

"That's it," Belle held her hand up, "I am going to stop talking. You can tell me about you for a while. I'm going to keep my treacherous, damn mouth shut!"

"Belle!"

She flinched at the sternness of his tone. His soft eyes flashed with a hint of disapproval.

"What?" Her voice weakened.

"Don't curse. You are far too pretty and sweet for such words to cross your precious lips."

"Oh," she muttered, "I'm sorry. I mean, I don't usually curse, you know. I'm a bit flustered."

"You're forgiven." He smiled and tapped her nose. "Now, let's get to more pleasant conversation."

"I don't know what to talk about. I already told you about me. What about you? You're a ranger? I bet it's exciting, chasing bad men."

"I doubt I know everything about you, Belle, but I will someday, I'm sure. And chasing 'bad men' is not all excitement. Most of the time, you're too cold or too hot and hungry, but the worst part is the loneliness." His voice dipped as Belle witnessed a sadness cross his face. "And, not to mention, it's dangerous, but I do get to help people and protect them from harm. I tend to be the protective type, so it suits me, at least for now."

"I think it would be so exciting."

Travis laughed at her innocence.

The conversation paused and the silence made Belle uncomfortable. She gazed up at the clear night sky.

"I love looking at the stars."

"So do I, and it's a perfect night for stargazing."

"Do you know much about stars?"

"Well, I know that's the big dipper." Travis pointed at the group of stars.

"Oh, yes, I see it. My father taught me the constellations when I was younger. Oh, look, Travis," her finger jutted toward the sky, "it's a falling star. Travis?"

"What is it, honey? You look worried."

"I know it's silly, but I heard seeing a falling star means something bad will happen."

"I don't think so." He smiled at her. "I think they are lucky."

"How are they lucky?"

"I feel like I'm lucky tonight."

"You do?"

Travis leaned his face closer to hers, and she fought the urge to scoot away.

"Yes, I found you tonight."

Belle felt the soft touch of his rough hands as he cupped her face. Her heart hammered in her chest as he drew closer. She closed her eyes and felt the tender, warm caress of his lips on hers.

"Belle? Belle, honey, open your eyes."

"W-what?" She floated in a dream of bliss.

"Open your eyes, darlin'!"

Belle fluttered her eyes open, to see Travis smiling at her.

Oh, I'm such an idiot. He's going to think I'm such a little girl, mooning over her first kiss. Or maybe he will think I'm a loose woman, letting him kiss me; after all, we just met.

"First kiss. I'm honored." Travis gently traced his thumb across her jaw, stopping to tuck a stray lock of her chestnut hair behind her ear. "And you could never be a loose woman."

"I did it again, didn't I? I said that out loud," she murmured, but this time she felt no embarrassment as she gazed into his warm eyes.

"Please," Belle whispered, "do that again."

"Gladly," Travis said as he leaned toward her.

The church hall door flung open. The twanging sounds of banjos, mixed with the whines of a fiddle and the nasal voice of the dance caller, spilled out into the night, ruining Belle's romantic moment.

"Belle!" The booming voice of Mr. Pendergrass made Belle jump and Travis retreat to his side of the bench.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Pendergrass, I'm out here."

She gave Travis an apologetic glance as she stood.

"Oh, Belle, here you are." Mr. Pendergrass stood with his wife and daughter in tow. "It's time to go home, Belle. Come along."

The trio walked past Belle and Travis. Darcy smiled at Belle.

With a weak smile and gentle wave, Belle said goodbye to Travis and turned to walk away.

Travis jumped to his feet and reached out, grabbing her arm. "Please, Belle, may I see you again?"

"Yes, please do," she replied, beaming. "My father is Judge Alston, and we live outside of town. Ask anyone. They will tell you how to get to the Alston place."

"Good, honey." He placed a quick kiss on her forehead and released her arm. "You can expect me soon, Miss Alston."



"BELLE, BELLE," Darcy's voice broke through Belle's reminiscing. Well, how was it, the kiss? Oh, Belle?"

"Y-yes...the kiss...it was..." She sighed and let her shoulders drop. "...wonderful."

"Oh, oh, Mr. Pendergrass." Belle suddenly realized they were near her home. "Please drop me at the path to our house. I can walk the rest of the way."

"I don't think I should, Belle. I need to see you safely to your home."

Belle did not want an abrupt end to her night. She craved time alone to think about Travis and to moon over her first kiss.

"I'll be safe, Mr. Pendergrass. It's not that far, and besides, Mama's been sick. You know that's why they couldn't take me to the dance, and, oh, I am so grateful you took me, but, Mr. Pendergrass, we could wake Mama with the sound of the carriage."

"Well," he croaked, "I suppose you are right, but you hurry along home."

"Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Pendergrass."

Darcy grabbed Belle's arm as she stepped off the carriage. "I want more details next time I see you, Belle Alston."

"I promise," Belle said.

Darcy released her grip and Belle waved and turned up the well-worn path to her home.



BELLE TWIRLED her way down the path to her home as her parents lay dying in the parlor.

The best night of my life. Travis and my first kiss. I will remember tonight for the rest of my life.

As she continued to dance, her blue satin dress shimmered in the twilight, giving her an angelic appearance. The joy of the night and her bright future filled her heart, then she heard a horse whinny. *Strange?*

Belle's dance came to a stumbling stop. *A horse? I'm too far from the barn to hear the horses. Papa's never careless with the team. It couldn't be one of them*

Careful steps led her to the sound. There, off the main path, she spied the dark outline of two horses. *Who do they belong too? Belle cringed. Oh, come on, Belle; they are probably someone's lost horses. I need to go tell Papa.*

Her eyes darted left, then right, as she crept to her house. The cringe in her stomach tightened as her home came into view. *Something's wrong.*

Her throat thickened. The lamp Mama lit in the foyer burned its usual warm glow, but upstairs, an eerie light shone. Not a light from someone's nightstand, but from a lamp someone held. Belle's heart thudded as the lamp moved from room to room, casting odd shadows and, at times, the outline of a person.

The night air, crisp and clean just moments ago, became hot and thin. Belle struggled to take a breath. *I must go in. I must find Mama and Papa.* Belle found her way to the back porch. She removed her shoes and opened the door, careful not to allow a creak. The kitchen was dark, except for a shaft of light from the foyer. Belle heard the creaking groan of footsteps above her.

She froze. Were they her parent's footsteps she heard or someone else's? Then she heard a pained whimper.

With gentle footsteps, she made her way to the parlor where she believed the sound originated. A sense of foreboding washed over her as her chest cinched tighter with every step. An odd copper scent drifted in the air; Belle refused to accept the smell of blood.

The parlor also benefited from the foyer light. Her eyes strug-

gled to accustom themselves to the dim lighting. Shapes formed then outlines of objects, tables and chairs, but something lay on the floor; she could not make it out. The feeble sound of gasping breaths coaxed her to what lay near her feet, but icy trepidation fought to pull her back.

"Belle," she heard a weak whisper of her name.

"Papa?"

The voice confirmed her fear.

Her body shuddered as she drew close.

"Papa!" Her heart wanted to scream his name, but she spoke in a terrified whisper. She crouched by her father.

"Belle, run." Her father's voice trembled.

"Papa, you're hurt, Where's Mama?"

She scanned the dark room. There, a little way from, her lay another form, and she knew it was her mother. She dragged herself to the lifeless body.

"No, Belle," she heard her father's weak protest.

"Wake up." Belle gently shook her mother's body. "Please, Mama, wake up." She touched the side of her mother's face, only to draw back when a sticky substance covered her hand.

"Belle," her father's voice reached her, "she's gone, and I will be soon. Don't look at her. Remember her life, Belle, not her death." Belle's father struggled to talk, his breathing growing shallower as the seconds ticked by.

She crawled back to him and cradled his head in her lap.

"Belle, run...live."

"Papa, I can't leave you and Mama."

Belle heard the clunking of heavy boots making their way down the stairs.

"Belle." Judge Alston racked his body to gain a gasp of air. "Go now, Belle...remember us as we were," he wheezed, "don't let this moment define your life...live, Belle, be happy."

Belle wiped a tear from his eye and leaned her head down against his. "Don't leave me," she whispered.

Judge Alston's hand shook as he raised it to cup his daughter's face. "Run." His hand dropped with a thud.

"I'm not leaving you or Mama. I'll save you, Papa." Denial flooded her heart as she refused the reality in front of her. She got to her feet and made her way through the kitchen. She edged her way through the foyer, hugging the wall with her back.

One of the intruders whistled a tune as she slid into the stairwell closet. Belle shrank into the back of the closet, her back pressed against the wall. She slid down, crouching in the solitude of a dark corner.

Her frenzied mind hindered her ability to focus and think. Rubbing her temples with her fingertips, she attempted to clear her mind, but to no avail. She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees, hugging herself. Desperate to do something but helpless, she remained in the darkness and trembled.

What do I do? What if they find me?

Small bands of light leaked through the louvers of the closet door, casting eerie shadows. Belle's eyes darted in the dim light searching, searching...

A weapon...a weapon. I need a weapon! Mama's sewing basket. Yes... scissors in there...I could...I could stab one of them. If I had to.

She rose on wobbling legs and rummaged the shelves, searching for her mother's sewing basket

Bam!

Belle's body jolted at the sound of the gunshot, and fear drove her back to her hiding place.

Bam! Bam!

The murmur of voices reached her ears. Her limbs wobbled and shook as she crawled to the door. She needed to hear them.

"What ya go and do that for? They's dead already."

"Just making sure."

"Come on; let's finish and get outta here."

A shudder of grief racked her small body and agony seared her

heart. As hot, bitter tears washed her face, she clasped both hands over her mouth to stifle a scream. With rapid, shallow gasps, she breathed in the rank air and felt sick.

Hideous laughter broke into the darkness.

Belle shoved her small body under the lowest shelf and curled her legs up to her chest like a baby in its mother's womb. But unlike a babe in the womb, there was no sense of safety, only terror.

A spider crawled on her hand. Belle swallowed hard as it proceeded to crawl up her forearm. Sweat gathered on her brow as she saw the red violin and realized it was a black widow. Not able to move, she watched as the spider crawled off her arm and onto the floor. It then walked past her face and into a hole in the wall. Taking a deep breath, Belle rolled out from under the shelf. She sat in her dark corner and listened as her parents' murderers destroyed her home.

Between the sounds of furniture being overturned and precious objects being smashed, she heard the melodious whistling of one of the intruders. She thought the foreboding tune would drive her mad as she heard it over and over. But the maddening sound was driven from her mind when she heard footsteps approaching her hiding place. Fear should have kept her crouching in the darkness, but she spied a broken slat on the bottom of the louvered door. Desperate to see if she could spot anything that would identify the murderers, Belle pushed through her fear and crawled to the door.

She rubbed her eyes in a feeble attempt to sharpen her vision, and she could see red boots in front of the door. Belle's heart pounded in her throat and sweat ran down the curves of her face.

Dear Lord, she silently prayed, please let him pass by.

"I wonder what they keep in here?"

Belle's breathing slowed as she heard the voice of the man who had just shot her parents. Her eyes centered on the door-knob as it began to turn. The sound of her heartbeat hammered in her ears, and the lump in her throat became a burning desert. Belle's eyes widened, watching the knob turn. Left. Right. Left.

Right. The door jiggled, and a cold numbness washed over her body, sinking to her core. Her breathing became mere puffs of air as she waited for the one turn leading to her discovery. She trembled at the thought of what they would do to her if she were found.

"Damn door is stuck."

He yanked on the door.

After a few more attempts, Belle knew the door would open.

"Hey, lookie here!" the whistling man shouted out to his partner.

The man with the red boots released the doorknob.

Belle crumbled to the floor.

"What?" he shouted.

"Come here and take a look. I think we hit the jackpot."

Belle heard footsteps walking away from the door, but she received no sense of relief.

She had no idea what they'd found. Maybe it was the money her father hid in his desk or her mother's jewelry; she didn't care. She could hear them talking in the foyer.

"Let's get out of here; we done what we wanted and got this to boot."

"All right, but there is one last thing I want to do. I want to burn down this fine house. I don't want nuttin of that judge's life left standing. Let's start it in the old judge's study. There's plenty of paper and books in there. I'll toss this lamp to start it going; should burn in no time."

Belle heard the commotion from her father's office, her father's precious books thudding as they hit the floor, furniture upended and the smashing of glass, followed by a pause then laughter.

"Let's get the hell out of here; this place will be an inferno in a few minutes."

The sound of a few quick footsteps and Belle knew they were gone.

She sat paralyzed by fear, unable to move, even when she smelled the smoke. *Fire! They set the house on fire!* For a moment,

Belle accepted her fate, willing to sit in the closet until the smoke overtook her.

Knowing her parents were dead stole her desire to live without them. Her eyelids drooped closed. She waited. But there in the darkness as she awaited death to overcome her, a thought came to her. *What if they are still alive? What are you thinking? They were shot multiple times, but what if?* The thought nagged at her, and her eyes popped open. *I must go to them.*

A light stream of smoke leaked into the closet. Springing to her feet, she tried with all her strength to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. Stuck, maybe from the heat, she didn't know but she did know she must get out. Fear tried to take her over once more, but something inside of her changed and she did not give in to the fear. Belle plopped down on the rough wood floor and began kicking the door. Over and over, she kicked, pounding the door with all the strength she could muster, burning the bottom of her feet and sending jagged shockwaves of pain up her legs, but still, it wouldn't budge.

"Come on, Belle," she ordered herself, "you can't give up. You can't let Mama and Papa down."

She sucked in a deep breath then harnessed all her fear and anger into one decisive last blow. *Crack*, wood splinters flew, and the door flung open.

A light haze of smoke drifted in the foyer. Belle began to cough. She tore a piece of her dress and tied it around her face, using it to cover her nose and mouth. The fire began to crawl from the study to the foyer. Belle could feel the heat on her skin, and a part of her wanted to quit, but determination pushed her forward as she crawled on her hands and knees to find her parents.

Come on, Belle, come on, she repeated to herself, *you can do this; you have to do this for Mama and Papa, keep moving.*

She reached the parlor. Even though she could feel the heat growing behind her, Belle continued to crawl. The smoke grew

thick and clouded her vision. She bumped into something—her mother.

"*Mama! Mama!*" she cried but heard no response. Belle placed her head gently on her mother's chest and cried from the root of her heart.

"Papa!" Her eyes searched through the smoke. Then she spotted a dark figure. She crawled over to find the dead body of her father.

Her petite body shuddered as grief wrenched at her soul again. Tenderly, she kissed her father's face.

Uncertain if her own will to live spurred her on or her father's last wish that she live. Whichever it was did not matter; Belle was going to get out.

The smoke thickened as the heat grew unbearable. Belle needed to get her bearings. She tried to gauge where the fire spread. As far as she could figure, the flames crossed the foyer and now were licking their way to the parlor. Precious time ticked away, demanding she find a way out. Her burning eyes darted around, trying to discern an escape. She found herself disoriented, lost in the thickening smoke. Belle could not fathom which way to go, and even with her face covered, she could feel the smoke burning the back of her throat, trying to choke the life out of her.

"I'm sorry, Papa, I know you want me to live, but I don't know the way to go. I am lost, Papa."

A childlike instinct for security spurred her to reach for her father's hand. Her fingers began to wrap around his but were hindered by an object still clutched in his grasp. She slid her hand down the smooth metal. It took a moment for her to identify the fireplace poker. Did he try to use it as a weapon? Running her hand down the length of the poker, she reached the end and a sense of hope washed over her as she realized it rested on the edge of the fireplace.

Hope jumped in her heart. She found a guide to help her find her way in the smoke. *If this is the fireplace, then Papa's chair is only a*

few feet away. She grabbed the poker and stabbed the air, and after a few attempts, she hit something solid.

Reaching out, she touched the soft leather of her father's chair, a landmark to the route of her escape. She crawled from landmark to landmark. The farther Belle moved from the fire, the thinner the smoke became, making her path to the door clear. When she reached the kitchen, she stood and stumbled her way to the door and flung it open. Clean air hit her face. Belle removed the protective cloth and drew in a breath but dropped to her knees in a coughing fit. The coughing subsided and she pulled herself to her feet. She stumbled along on flimsy legs until she reached the old oak tree on the hill behind the house. She crumpled to her knees at the sight of her blazing home. Belle buried her face in her hands and wept. When she could weep no more, she raised her head, and gazing down at the palms of her hands, she saw traces of her parents' blood mingled with the dampness of her own tears. She turned her eyes up at the flames consuming her home and her parents.

The searing pain of grief ripped through her, burying deep within her being all the qualities that defined Belle. A coldness grew inside of her as the flames reflected in her eyes. At that moment, Belle died with her parents, and only Fury remained.