

# Love's Twisting Trail

Trails of the Heart ♥ Book One



BETTY WOODS



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*To Jesus, my loving Lord and Savior, who gave me the ability to write  
and found the perfect home for this book.*

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*1869 Outside San Antonio, Texas*

Charlotte Grimes slid her cleaned revolver into the holster lying on the kitchen table, determined to keep her promise to Pa. She had hoped and prayed four-legged varmints or snakes were the only reasons to need a gun, but from what she'd overheard from others, a body had best be prepared for meeting anything or anyone on a cattle drive. Especially a woman intending to go up the trail disguised as a fourteen-year-old boy.

Slinging her gun belt over her shoulder, she grabbed her tied bedroll off the chair. Toby should be back from town soon, so she needed to sneak her things into the barn before her brother returned. So far, God hadn't given her any idea how to tell Toby she'd be going with him no matter how much he didn't want her along.

A welcome spring breeze brushed her cheeks while a mockingbird sang nearby. How could everything around here be the same when her world had turned so topsy turvy? If only Pa hadn't died. If only she could trust her brother again. If only ...

Fretting over what she couldn't change was a waste of time.

A wagon loaded down with a young couple and their goods kicked up dust not far behind Toby. Must be the people he had found to help her watch the ranch while he was gone. Hopefully, they knew enough about ranching to take care of everything on their own.

“What are you doing?” Her brother growled down at her as he reined in his horse a few feet from the barn. His angry brown eyes took in everything from her bedroll to her holstered revolver.

“Getting ready to leave with you.” She met his glare head-on. *Well, Lord, I'd hoped for a better way to tell him.*

“What?” Toby jumped to the ground as the wagon pulled into the yard. “My sister and I need to talk. Y'all can have a look around in the house. We'll unload your things later.”

Her brother scowled at her in silence until the man and woman with their young child went inside. She frowned back.

“You're not going.” He slapped the reins across his gloved hand.

She flinched. In the few weeks since Pa died, they'd had so many arguments. She leaned her bedroll and gun against the weathered barn then turned back to face her brother. Looking him in the eyes was the best way to deal with him, or he'd think she was fixin' to give in.

“Pa left me half this ranch. I'm going.” Even with the afternoon sun in her eyes, she could see him wince.

“No woman has any business on a cattle drive.”

“You still need a wrangler to care for the horses. Your kid brother can do that.”

His jaw dropped. “We haven't had a kid brother since Pete died while I was gone.” His voice cracked. At least something could still touch Toby's hardened heart.

“I'm about the same size as Pete. The new men you hired for the drive have no idea you don't have a younger brother named Charlie.”

His jaw clenched so tight she could see the muscles

twitching. Every seasoned hand they'd had refused to work for Toby because of his temper. Except Eduardo. The cook stayed only out of loyalty to Pa's memory and to watch out for her. Something else best not to mention to Toby.

Ignoring her pounding heart, Charlotte drew herself up ramrod straight. She'd stand her ground. Stand up to her brother. Going with him was the only way she knew to keep the vow she'd made to Pa.

"Eduardo promised not to tell anyone the truth about me. He says my idea should work since I ride and rope as good or better than most men he knows."

" 'Cept you're no man, and a cattle drive is no place for a lady."

A brittle-sounding laugh slipped out despite how his words riled her. He'd often taunted her about looking more like a skinny version of Pete than a woman of almost twenty-three.

"Me, a lady? You're the one who started calling me Charlie and making fun of me for working the ranch in men's clothes."

"Just 'cause you can dress like a man don't mean you can work like a man."

She stomped her foot before thinking about it. Acting like a child wouldn't help win this argument. She couldn't let him get the best of her and prove him right. This was his first cattle drive too. He'd even agreed to join with another small herd led by a man who'd gone up the trail last year.

But she wouldn't remind such a prideful man of those things. More important to win the present battle.

"I haven't seen any new hand who looks like a wrangler. I can handle the horses, but you won't admit that or a lot of other things."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"How much did you really sell those mustangs for a while back?"

Instead of answering her, Toby kicked a rock so hard it

bounced off the barn. The sharp sound echoed across the yard like a gunshot.

“That’s why I’m going with you.” She grabbed her gear. “I don’t have to hide these now, so I’ll take them back to the house.” With both hands full, her dress hem swished in the dust.

“That long braid bouncing down your back won’t have any man thinking you’re a boy. Your fire-red hair shows up for at least a mile.” Toby’s taunt chased after her.

“My hair will be secured under my hat.” She continued on, not giving him the satisfaction of so much as looking back over her shoulder.

“Unless you decide to flirt with one of the men.”

“What?” Whirling to face him, she hissed through gritted teeth. “How dare you say such a thing?”

“The foreman of the other herd’s not married. He’s a couple of years older than me and turned more than one woman’s head while we walked the streets in San Antonio.”

Decent men didn’t flirt with the kind of woman who dared wear a man’s trousers and take on a man’s work. He had to know how ridiculous he sounded. She glared back at him. “I have no intentions of throwing myself at any cowboy, and you know it.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know a lot of things about you anymore.”

“Then we’re even. You don’t trust me. I don’t trust you. I’m going on this drive.”

Leaving him standing with his mouth open, she turned her back to him again and marched away.

She’d won. For now. If only she were as sure of the next couple of months as she’d sounded.