

Redemption's Trail

Trails of the Heart ♥ Book Two

BETTY WOODS



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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-264-8

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-265-5

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Cover by Linda Fulkerson, www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

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To my wonderful savior, Jesus, who always holds my hand no matter how crazy or hard life can get.

To my amazing family who stands with me and beside me, never wavering in their love for me. Craig, Cherish, Jason, and Casey, I love you more than I can say. And as all of you know, I can say a lot!



1871, Outside San Antonio, Texas

No matter the small group of friends huddled around her husband's newly dug grave, Lily Johnson was alone. A cold gust of wind whipped her skirt around her trembling legs. The next blast grabbed her cape as if trying to rip it off. She gripped the garment around her. Fighting to hold on as the moaning February wind taunted her.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ...” David Shepherd, a neighboring rancher, quoted the familiar Bible verse.

Fear gnawed at her in spite of how hard she prayed. The valley David talked about was so deep, it threatened to swallow her up. *Why, God?*

She had no idea what she'd do without Harvey. How her small family would survive. She needed her husband *here*. Ella couldn't understand why her pa hadn't come home last night or the night before. A little girl and her unborn brother or sister shouldn't have to grow up without a father.

“For me to live is Christ. To die is gain.” David glanced

around the small group until his gaze stopped on Lily. Sadness clouded his kind blue eyes as his lips turned up in a wan smile. "All of us who knew Harvey, who saw how he lived, know he's with God now."

Unable to force any words from her tight throat, she nodded. Deep down inside, she knew gaining heaven was a blessing for Harvey. And God was still here with her, no matter how bleak things got. Yet the cold wind made her tear-soaked face feel as icy as her broken heart. *God, help me.*

David bowed his head, as did everyone else, including stubborn Mr. Toby Grimes. Lily closed her eyes, lest anyone catch her peeking. She and Harvey had prayed for his hardened boss for almost two years. Every time her husband had considered finding an easier man to work for, the Lord seemed to urge him to stay and keep praying for the troubled man.

When David finished talking, his wife, Charlotte, slipped her arm around Lily's shoulders. "We're so sorry."

David and Eduardo erected a wooden cross on the grave. David's dear trail cook had lovingly carved Harvey's name, birthdate, and date of death as a final tribute to the man he called his *bijo segundo*, his second son, after David.

Lily trembled as she leaned into Charlotte, her sorrow so heavy she wasn't sure if she could remain standing. Wrenching sobs welled up, threatening to choke off her air. The blackness overwhelmed her.

Voices coming from every direction tried to bring her back from the darkness. She recognized Charlotte's worried tones along with those of Eduardo's wife, Francisca. Words drifted in from a distance. Someone held her close, carrying her as easily as if she were a child. Breathing in the familiar, comforting scents of leather and horses, she rested her head against the muscled shoulder. A man bent his head toward hers, his hair gently touching her cheek as he cradled her.

"Harvey?" Her eyes flew open. Gasping, she looked up into Mr. Grimes's dark brown eyes.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Johnson." His tender voice sounded so unlike his usual gruff tone.

"Put her on her bed, Toby." Charlotte followed behind Mr. Grimes.

Still cradling Lily as if he held a delicate, fragile treasure, the rancher followed his sister's orders. He set Lily down as gently as she would have done with her little daughter. "Um, I'll leave the ladies to see to you." Straightening, he turned to Charlotte. "If she needs *anything*, you or Francisca come tell me. Whatever it is ... I'll see she gets it."

Unless Lily imagined it, the man's voice cracked. Mr. Grimes showing concern for her? She'd never witnessed such a thing in the time she'd known him. His usual display of emotion consisted of shouting in anger at whichever unfortunate cowboy had displeased him. Everyone kept a respectable distance once they got to know him.

"Uh, all right." Charlotte gave her brother a quizzical look as he hurried from the room.

Lily must not be the only one who noticed Mr. Grimes's unusually kind behavior. But she had too many other pressing problems to wonder about besides analyzing his actions. Trying to figure out what had become of a gruff rancher was the least of her worries for now.

"You gave us a bad scare, fainting dead away like that." Charlotte knelt, then took Lily's hand in hers.

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize." Charlotte rubbed Lily's hands, massaging each finger.

Sitting up, Lily sniffed away tears. "I'll be fine." Her trembling voice didn't sound the least bit all right. Her aching heart emphasized the intensity of her pain. "I need to get this cape off." She took her time standing.

Charlotte placed her hands on either side of Lily as if ready to catch her in case she fell.

"I stay night with her. ¿Sí, Señora Charlotte?" With Ella

chattering by her side, Francisca walked into the room as Lily removed her cape.

“Sí.” Charlotte grinned at her housekeeper and cook.

Lily shook her head. “No need for that. I’ll be fine. I’ve already spent the last two nights alone.”

“Is need. I see to your *chiquita*. You rest.” Francisca placed her hands on Lily’s shoulders and gently urged her back onto the bed.

“I’ll prop myself up with pillows and sit on top of the quilt. Going to bed before supper would be ridiculous.” To placate her concerned friends, Lily remained on the edge of the bed.

“Not accepting help from people who love you is ridiculous.” Charlotte fluffed the pillows before setting them against the iron headboard. “Please rest. You have Ella to think about too.”

“All right.” Lily surrendered and allowed Charlotte to unbutton her shoes before stretching out to lean against the pillows.

“Ma.” Ella raised her little hands toward Lily.

Francisca lifted the girl onto Lily’s lap.

Hugging Ella close, Lily kissed her hair until the little one started squirming. “Be a good girl for Mrs. Rodriguez.” She set her daughter on the floor.

Francisca guided Ella out of the room. Charlotte followed and shut the door.

Silence engulfed Lily as if someone had covered her with a heavy blanket on a stifling-hot summer day. Her well-meaning friends had no idea how she dreaded being alone in this room. But she had to find a way to sleep here instead of fleeing to the settee in their small parlor as she’d done the last two nights.

The empty cradle in the far corner caught her attention. Her daughter and unborn child needed their mother. She had to be strong for them. Taking in deep breaths, she sat up straight and surveyed the room full of reminders of Harvey.

Her gaze rested on their Bible sitting on the simple

nightstand her husband had made. When she reached for the precious book, her fingers brushed the wooden frame holding the photograph made on her and Harvey's wedding day. The only likeness she had of him. Grabbing the portrait, she squeezed both hands around the frame and pressed it to her heart.

With Harvey gone, who would be strong for her? "Dear Lord, help." She had nowhere to run. No one else to run to.

TOBY TOOK his front porch steps two at a time. Fighting for every breath as if he were the one about to faint, he yanked on the doorknob. The quicker he got inside, the better. The last time he'd been around so many people for so long had been during the war. He had to get away from everyone. Back to his solitude of his quiet house. The only kind of life that gave him any sort of peace.

Shoving the door closed, he slumped against it, gulping in air. The past few minutes. The whole afternoon. The last two days. If only he could close his eyes and blot them out the way he'd handled bad things as a boy.

But no amount of whiskey had taken away the sight of that bronco tossing Harvey in the air like a child's rag doll. Every night since that horrible accident, he'd heard the clock on the fireplace mantle strike every hour. Every half hour.

Moments ago, Lily Johnson's wide blue eyes staring up at him had haunted him just as badly. He could still feel her head on his chest as if the stray piece of her soft, light blonde hair still tickled his neck. Feel her slight body in his arms.

He wasn't sure what the flower she was named for looked like, but the pale woman he'd held was as delicate as anything blooming he did know something about. The frightening urge, the *need* to protect her at any cost, had been crushing. So overwhelming he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

Marching to the kitchen, he stopped in front of his late mother's pie safe. She'd be appalled he'd chosen it to hide his whiskey. He reached for the glass and the half-empty bottle he'd left there last night.

"Boss, that won't solve whatever's eating at you. But God will. If you let Him."

Harvey's too familiar words echoed so loudly through his mind he'd swear the man was standing beside him. But if God cared, Harvey would still be here. An innocent woman would still have the husband she loved and needed.

More reasons not to waste time praying. The so-called God of love had deserted him during the war, and now He'd deserted Mrs. Johnson and left her a young widow with a small child.

And once again, God had deserted Toby by taking away someone he'd depended on, even cared about. Harvey, whether he knew it or not, had become Toby's shield from the world. From everyone he hated to deal with.

People went back on their word. Let a man down when he needed them the most. Harvey had gone to town for him. He'd hired the cowboys to do a cattle drive to Kansas. Leaving Toby to handle the cows and horses. Longhorns and mustangs didn't talk back or ask questions he didn't want to answer.

His hand shook too much for him to fill the glass. He needed a drink so badly he could already taste the fiery liquid. Burning all the way as it went down his throat. Maybe it would burn Lily Johnson's clear blue eyes from his mind. She was another man's wife—had been another man's wife.

Still should be. The wife of the man who'd been the closest thing to a friend he'd had in years. The way Lily's need for help affected him spooked him. Steadying his hand enough to fill the glass, he downed the drink in one gulp.

"Boss, that won't help."

As Harvey's voice again echoed through his mind, he set the bottle and glass back on the shelf. *Get hold of yourself, man.*

An insistent knock on his front door made him jump.

"Toby?" Charlotte's voice drifted inside.

"It's not locked." He carefully closed the pie safe to keep from jostling the uncorked bottle and made it back to the parlor just as Charlotte stepped inside, holding her son. David came in behind his wife. Both made obvious glances past him toward the kitchen. They probably suspected why he'd gone in there.

He braced himself for a sermon. Neither of them had said anything about his drinking in a while. But after everything that had happened lately, they might think this was a good time to try and set him straight.

"Francisca and I think she should stay the night with Lily. Since you're as busy getting ready for roundup as we are, I'll be by sometime tomorrow to bring Francisca home."

Charlotte kept her eyes fixed on him. Maybe she was already checking for signs he'd had too much to drink. No doubt David was, judging by the serious way he studied Toby.

"Sounds good. Mrs. Johnson probably shouldn't be alone. Maybe Francisca should stay more than one night."

"Really?" Her eyes widened as if he'd suggested she could grow wings and fly all the way to Mexico.

"I meant every word about seeing to what Lily needs." *Mrs. Johnson*. He'd never called her by her first name. Today was not a good day to start. "She can stay in the house as long as she wants. I'll pay for her stage ticket to wherever she'd like to go. I'll freight her goods there too."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate your thoughtfulness, but things won't be that easy to decide." Charlotte sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"Lily has nowhere to go."

His sister's pronouncement slammed into his chest as if a huge fist had knocked the breath out of him. A kind woman like Lily should be welcomed by anyone, anywhere. "I don't understand." He forced the words from his tight throat.

Charlotte seated herself on his couch. David sat next to her, lifting Jeremiah onto his lap. He pulled his watch from his waistcoat pocket and let the baby play with the chain. If they intended to make themselves comfortable for a while, his sister's explanation must be longer than he cared to hear. She and David didn't usually stay long before going over to visit with the Johnsons.

"Her family disowned her when she married Harvey." Charlotte continued staring straight at him.

"That's crazy. Harvey's one of the best men any of us ever knew." *Was. Until he got killed working for me.* Toby sank into the chair across from the couch, far enough away to keep them from smelling the whiskey on his breath.

"Her German family voted against secession. Her older brother died fighting for the Yankees." David looked away from his son for a moment. "They wouldn't hear to her marrying a former Johnny Reb."

Anger toward Lily's hard-hearted family threatened to choke him. "Then she can stay till she decides what she and Ella will do. I still need a housekeeper."

The longer Mrs. Johnson stayed, the longer he could keep the last piece of his shield in place. Put off dealing with someone to replace her. Someone like Mrs. Johnson and Harvey, who had sense enough to never ask about why he worked so hard to keep to himself.

"Except people would talk about a pretty young widow keeping house for a young unmarried man." The horrible truth of David's words contrasted with his kind tone.

"She'd be staying in the house Harvey and I built for them."

David shook his head. "That wouldn't matter."

"What people say hasn't bothered me for years. You know that." Toby clenched his hands into fists.

"What about Lily and her reputation?" His sister speared him with one of her no nonsense looks she was so good at, especially with him.

Her question made his blood boil. Everyone around knew he liked his solitary life. None of their business why. Yet some people couldn't resist blathering about others. Good thing he wasn't sitting close to the end table that also held one of his mother's favorite vases. He might have flung it onto the floor.

"There's one more thing you need to know that Lily won't feel comfortable telling you." Charlotte looked toward her husband. He nodded as if urging her to continue. "She's in the family way. She'd intended to tell Harvey at supper the day he died."

"I'll be hanged before some gossip ruins that woman. Like I said, I'll see to whatever she needs." His simple plan for caring for Lily ... Mrs. Johnson ... had become much too complicated.

His sister's eyebrows rose. Jeremiah started fussing. Maybe the baby sensed the frustration Toby could feel hanging in the air.

"We'd better go see to chores. Charlotte will be by to get Francisca in a couple of days since you think Lily might need her a little longer." David stood.

Toby nodded. Careful to keep enough distance that they couldn't smell his breath, he walked with them to the door. He still had manners and wasn't as bad as everyone thought. Today, for some unexplained reason, he felt like proving it.

The instant he closed the door, he turned and marched toward his whiskey. He shook his head as he stared at the uncorked bottle. How drunk would he have to be to not think? To sleep?

Not tonight. Not now. He shoved the cork in. The pie safe doors rattled as he slammed them shut. He had to have a clear head to think about what to do for a fragile, blonde woman with huge, light-blue eyes. He'd never have guessed she was in such dire straits and had no idea what to do about it. But he'd meant it when he'd said he'd do whatever Lily needed.

Why, puzzled him as much as it probably did everyone else around him. The only thing he was sure of was he wanted her to

stay for his own selfish reasons. She'd help him continue living in solitude the way he liked. The way he needed. Yet, he wanted to help her because she needed help.

His warring thoughts scared him more than if he were heading into a losing battle.