

Independence Trail

Trails of the Heart ♥ Book Three

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 978-1-64917-352-2

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-353-9

Editors: Elena Hill and Heidi Glick

Cover by www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

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To my family and friends who so enthusiastically support me. Especially to those of you who prayed for me as I wrote this story. Your prayers keep me writing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kim Peters, my sweet, artistic friend, who answered my questions about painting. I would have Heidi using the wrong paints and a lot of other things wrong without your help. I hope I did you justice with Heidi's endeavors.

Dr. Eric Herrstrom, my wonderful pastor. His sermon series on forgiveness helped me to help my characters work through their past hurts and not give into bitterness. Lily quotes him while advising Heidi on how to let go of the past.



September 1873
San Antonio, Texas

Sucking in another shaky breath, Heidi Schultz stood outside the stage depot, taking her first good look at San Antonio. She'd made her escape. For now.

She scanned the dusty street, busy with wagons, buggies, and people making their way to wherever they were going. If only she could stride somewhere with such purpose. If only she could figure out how to find Suzanne. After that ... God only knew. She had no idea.

A grizzled stage employee set her carpet bag on top of the trunk settled near her feet.

"Sir, could you tell me the best way to find someone who lives around here?"

"I ain't been in town that long myself. The Hawkins over at the general store know everybody. Go there. You're welcome to leave your bags here for a while."

"Danke."

The man quirked both white eyebrows.

"Uh—thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

The instant the man left, she grabbed her carpet bag. She stepped inside the stage depot before digging out her favorite hat. She yanked off the hideous sunbonnet she’d worn to disguise herself from everyone in New Braunfels. With no mirror, she fumbled to pin her hat, ignoring the curious glances of the other people in the room.

After getting directions, she stepped outside. The stage worker hadn’t asked her for more information about who she wanted to find. Good. The less people who knew her true business here, the better. In case *Vater* ... no, Father found out where she’d gone. Friends said he had searched for her the day she’d slipped out of the house.

Heidi took in several ragged breaths while staring at the door of the general store. She used the glass window as a mirror to check her hat and hair then brushed as much dust as she could from her wrinkled skirt. Her disheveled appearance screamed she’d been traveling. But under the circumstances, it couldn’t be helped. Gripping the door knob, she swallowed hard.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” A man with graying dark hair smiled from behind the counter as she stepped inside. “Be with you as soon as I add up this order.”

The scents of pickles and crackers from the nearby barrels made her stomach growl in a most unbecoming manner. She’d intended to eat as soon as she got off the stage. But when the man at the depot assured someone could help her find her sister so quickly, food had become something that could wait.

An elderly woman scooped up the needles and thread she’d bought. She smiled at Heidi as she walked past.

“I’ll get that for you.” Happy for an excuse to help the lady leave the store sooner, Heidi opened the door. She’d rather not have anyone overhear her questions.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Heidi waited until the door closed to turn

and face the storekeeper, hoping she and the pleasant-looking man would be the only people here for a while.

“May I help you?”

“I hope so.”

The storekeeper cocked his head as she walked toward him.

“I’m Heidi Schultz. I’m looking for my sister, uh, my sister ... Lily Grimes.” The name her sister now used sounded odd to her ears and felt even stranger on her tongue.

The storekeeper stepped from behind the counter. He halted in front of her, looking her up and down. “You’re Lily’s sister?”

“Yes, sir. I am.” Heidi forced herself to look him in the eye and not squirm under his penetrating gaze.

“You’ve got her blue eyes. Your hair’s a little darker blonde than hers. She’s thinner and a little shorter.”

“You know my sister?”

“Maybe. But beg your pardon, I don’t know you.”

Heidi’s heart pounded as he scrutinized her. She hadn’t expected this type of reception. “No, sir. You couldn’t know me. I’ve hardly been out of New Braunfels my entire life.”

“I can believe that.” His serious blue eyes softened some.

Of course he believed her. Her German accent left no doubt where she was from.

How much to tell this man who was so reluctant to talk about the sister he apparently knew? She’d have to divulge enough to convince him she really was Suzanne’s—no Lily’s—sister. She took a deep breath. “My sister’s first husband was a man named Harvey who died in a tragic accident. She married Mr. Grimes, a local rancher, a couple of years ago.”

How she hoped he wouldn’t press her for more information. His intense scrutiny had Heidi so rattled she couldn’t remember the first husband’s last name or the second husband’s first name, nor the names of Lily’s children from her first marriage.

“Lily and Toby didn’t say anything about company coming when they were at church last Sunday.”

She licked her dry lips. Toby. She must remember the current

husband's first name. "That's because they didn't know I was coming. I should have written them, but there wasn't time. Please, sir, I need to find my sister." Her voice cracked in spite of her efforts at self-control.

"Sorry to upset you, ma'am, but I have to know who's looking for Lily no matter how much you look like her."

"Yes, well, I'd like to see her as soon as possible."

"Why do you keep saying you need to find your own sister as if you don't know where she is?" His eyes narrowed as he continued to study her.

"I haven't seen her since she left home over seven years ago. I-I have the last letter she wrote to me." She shouldn't have said such things to a stranger. Especially since she didn't want to share her private correspondence with Suzanne—no Lily—to anyone. But her desperation to find her sister overcame her need for caution.

"A letter you say?" His piercing gaze softened only a little.

"Ja—yes." She rummaged through her reticule to find the letter. She held it out, hoping he wouldn't insist she unfold it so he could read more than the note on the outside of the sheet. "My sister sent it to a trusted friend to give to me, because our parents wouldn't have given me a letter from Lily."

He stared at the letter much longer than necessary. "That's Lily's handwriting. I've read enough of her grocery lists to know." His gaze softened. "How long did you say since you've seen her?"

"A little over seven years."

"From what Lily's told my wife, that'd be about right, so you are Lily's sister." He grinned as he extended his hand. "I'm Owen Hawkins."

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

Relief flooded through her. She'd told this man almost everything she knew about her sister. What she'd have done if he wanted more information, only God knew.

"Sorry to be so rough on you, but I had to be sure. Is it Miss or Mrs. Schultz, if you don't mind me asking?"

“Miss.” Since the man didn’t recognize Lily’s maiden name, he couldn’t know too much about her past. Lily must have left more than her family behind a few years ago.

“Lily and Toby aren’t expecting you, but God has it all set up.”

“He does?” Her squeaky voice sounded childish.

Mr. Hawkins’s grin spread ear to ear. “Toby’s foreman, Jethro Bannister, should be coming soon to pick up his order. Be glad he drove the wagon instead of riding his horse to town.”

“How nice.” Her stomach rumbled. Heat rushed up her face.

“Have you eaten lately, young lady?”

“This morning. If you think I have time, I’ll walk to a restaurant.”

He shook his head. “Best to settle for the crackers and such I can offer you here. Jethro’s gentleman enough to wait for you to eat somewhere, but there are enough varmints, animal and human, that it’s best not to get home after dark.” The gentleman gave her a boyish grin and gestured for her to follow him.

A few minutes later, Heidi sat on a crate next to a makeshift barrel table, enjoying crackers, dried peaches, and water Mr. Hawkins insisted on serving her for free. Her sister must be well thought of considering the way the storekeeper treated Heidi. That is, once he’d assured himself of who she was.

Why someone needed to be so cautious about who asked about Suz—no, Lily—would have to wait for an answer. Heidi had to remember to use the new name her sister had chosen.

If Lily and her husband welcomed Heidi and wanted to answer any of her questions.

The bell over the door jangled as a cowboy who couldn’t be more than a few years older than her nineteen years stepped into the general store. He removed his hat as soon as he spotted Heidi perusing dress goods with Mr. Hawkins.

The storekeeper smiled at the man. “You’re back at almost the exact time I said.”

“Of course. I always like to get home before dark.”

“Which is what I told this young lady. Miss Schultz, this is Jethro Bannister.”

“My pleasure, Miss.”

His formal tone and stiff posture made her wonder how true his words were, especially since he maintained his distance from her and the storekeeper. Which was more than fine, since she had no intentions of needing any man in her life ever again.

“Thank you. I’m Lily’s sister. Mr. Hawkins says you can take me to her.”

“Sure ...” Both eyebrows went up, almost colliding with the strand of honey-brown hair falling across his tanned forehead. He stared at Mr. Hawkins as if he needed assurance Heidi spoke the truth.

Her habit of being so observant had often helped her assess people. Had probably saved her from *Vater* and Johann’s scheming concerning her. But at this moment, she had no business paying such close attention to another man she would gladly ignore if not for needing him to take her to Lily.

“I’ve got Toby’s bill totaled and the supplies ready to load.” Mr. Hawkins jarred her from her thoughts.

The two men wasted no time loading the wagon. Mr. Bannister tipped his hat to her as he walked back inside. “We’re ready to go.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Uh, don’t you have a bag or something?”

She nodded. “I left my luggage at the stage depot.”

His green eyes widened. Whatever his thoughts, he kept them to himself as he opened the door for her.

Good. She wasn’t interested in his ideas or him. An escort who was as uninterested in her would do fine.

“Oh, Mr. Hawkins, could you do me another favor, please?” She halted in the doorway.

“Of course.”

“If someone comes in asking questions about me, please don’t tell them where I’m at or that I came here at all.”

“All right.”

“Thank you, sir.” Since he’d been so secretive about Lily, she assumed he’d do the same for her. Without asking why. She paused a moment longer to be sure he didn’t have any questions for her before following Mr. Bannister out the door.

AS HE HELPED his unexpected passenger onto the wagon seat, Jethro puzzled over the woman’s request to Owen as he walked around, then hopped up next to her. Mrs. Grimes never talked about her family, but if Owen said this woman was his boss’s sister-in-law, he’d take the storekeeper’s word. Just why she didn’t want Owen not to say anything about her or how much luggage she had was none of his concern.

Neither the boss nor Mrs. Grimes had mentioned he’d need to pick up a guest this afternoon. Did they have any idea this woman was coming their way?

“Thank you for doing this.” She gave him a thin smile that didn’t reach her light blue eyes as he grabbed the reins.

“Nothing to thank me for. Mrs. Grimes would have a fit if I left her sister stranded in San Antonio.”

“I hope so.” She sighed.

“Well, of course.”

Anyone blessed with family left should be happy to see them. Unless they were like his older brother had been the day Jethro left Georgia for good. So glad to see him leave he didn’t care what might or might not happen to his own brother.

Willing his unpleasant memories away, he turned his attention to guiding the wagon down the crowded street. The past was done and couldn’t be undone. God had helped him find peace in Texas as well as blessings he’d never dreamed about, so he’d be happy with that.

He headed the horses toward the stage depot, hoping he wasn’t bringing home trouble disguised as a pretty, but

unannounced visitor. Sweet Mrs. Grimes would have met her own sister in person if she'd known the lady was coming. Something didn't seem right about the nervous woman next to him fiddling with her reticule while she sat stiffer than a piece of dried out jerky.

Miss Shultz stared straight ahead the few minutes it took to get to the depot, which was all right with him. He had no idea what to say to this woman. And a gentleman had no business asking all the questions about why she was here but didn't want anyone to know.

"My trunk and carpet bag are the ones closest to the bench."

The large trunk she pointed toward might outweigh a sack of flour. Which meant she could intend to stay quite a while. Her carpet bag bulged, he doubted it could hold another item.

This woman had gall the likes of which he'd rarely seen by imposing on a family who didn't know she was coming. In his two years at the *Tumbling G*, he'd never heard Mrs. Grimes mention a word about her family. But the stranger beside him wasn't his sister, so he'd hold his tongue. More like bite it to keep from saying what he thought.

"Um ... how well do you know Lily?" She waited until the wagon was almost out of town to say another word other than to thank him for hoisting what had to be a very full trunk into the wagon.

"Know her? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. How well do you know my sister?"

Shaking his head, he studied this strange female. "Since the cook left, I eat most of my meals with them, but she's my boss's wife, not a close friend."

The woman's odd question didn't make sense. If the lady didn't look so much like Mrs. Grimes that he couldn't deny they were sisters, he might turn the wagon around and leave her to Owen.

She sucked in a ragged-sounding breath. "I haven't seen Lily

since I was twelve. Under different circumstances, I'd have written first. But I didn't have that luxury."

"Oh."

That little bit of information told him much more than she said. What kind of trouble might this lady be in? Or have caused? He'd leave that for Mrs. Grimes to discover. Any good cowboy knew better than to get too nosy. As did a former Georgia gentleman. So, he'd not ask for any further explanation from the obviously distressed woman.

"Since you're so reluctant to talk about my sister, tell me about the ranch, please."

"The ranch?" He must sound like a tongue-tied boy, but her perceptiveness threw him as off balance as an ornery mustang trying to throw him out of his saddle.

"Yes. I've lived in New Braunfels all my life. I know almost nothing about ranching."

That explained her frilly brown town dress and bustle, neither of which was going to be much at home on the *Tumbling G*. Why had she come?

"There's not much to tell. The longhorns graze and grow big enough to drive to Kansas. We round them up in the spring for the drive and do another roundup this month to brand the new calves and unbranded strays."

"I'd like to know all about a roundup and everything else, please."

Her breathless tone made her sound like an over-eager girl, except her womanly figure said otherwise. When he glanced over in her direction, her eyes shone like a child's at Christmas. Why anyone could be so interested in stories of eating dust behind longhorns was more than he could fathom.

The woman asked him more questions in the next three hours than he'd heard in his entire life. She talked so much she'd worry the horns off a longhorn if the boss let her get within thirty feet of one. If she were this wordy all the time, he'd be learning to cook well enough to eat supper in his own place.

As soon as they topped the first ridge, the ranch came into view. "That's home." Jethro pointed toward the one-story stone house and the wood outbuildings.

"Ohh ..." Her mouth formed a pretty *O* to match her comment as she stared speechless at her first sight of the *Tumbling G*.

His almost sore ears would have thanked her for her silence if ears could talk.

"I'm glad I brought my pencils and paints. The way the evening sun shines on the buildings and the land is breathtaking."

She'd brought her paints too? He clamped his mouth shut to keep from saying something so rude out loud. Someone coming only to visit didn't pack to that extent. The boss and his wife were in for a surprise. Too bad he was the one bringing her in.

But gentle Mrs. Grimes would have his hide if he left her little sister stranded in town. He'd eat whatever he could scrounge in his kitchen tonight. Supper at the main house might be hotter than any Texas summer day he'd seen so far.