

In *A Slight Change of Plans*, Denise M. Colby weaves a tender and hopeful story of second chances, resilience, and quiet courage. Jenny and Ren captured my heart from the very first page with their gentle strength and longing to belong. With a beautiful balance of romance, faith, and a touch of mystery, this story reminds us that sometimes life's detours lead us exactly where we're meant to be.

KIMBERLY KEAGAN, AUTHOR
OF *PERFECT* AND *HEART OF HOPE*

With a cast of characters sure to steal your heart (including a rooster who steals the show!), *When Plans Go Awry* beautifully touches that deep need within all of us to be loved and accepted. This deeply layered story also reveals a truth we often forget—that innate desire to trust when life has proven to be untrustworthy.

CHAUTONA HAVIG, *USA TODAY*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

This charming debut (*When Plans Go Awry*) from Denise M. Colby, about a young woman finding her bearings as a rural teacher in 1860s California, kept me smiling through the pages. If you love sweet historical romances with *When Calls the Heart* vibes and tender threads of faith, this story is sure to put a smile on your face too.

BECCA KINZER, AUTHOR OF *DEAR
HENRY, LOVE EDITH* AND *LOVE IN
TANDEM*

Best-laid Plans ♦ Book Two

A Slight Change of Plans

DENISE M. COLBY



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To my sons, Connor, Kyle, and Zach, and my daughter, Aimee.

Never give up on your dreams, no matter how long it takes.

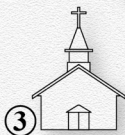
And for Ken. Thank you for supporting all of mine. I love you.

Here's to thirty.

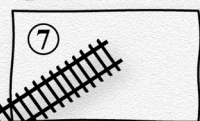
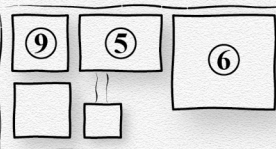
*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord,
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope
and a future.”*

—Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

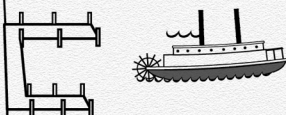
To Taylor Ranch ↑



The Main Road



The Sacramento River



The Town of Washton

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Martin Home | 7. New Train Station |
| 2. Woodward Store | 8. Mayor's Office |
| 3. Church | 9. Sheriff |
| 4. Schoolhouse | 10. Rooster Cafe |
| 5. Blacksmith | 11. Doctor |
| 6. Livery | |

One



This is the first journal I've ever owned. It's almost too fine for me to write in every day. Miss Beecher says to document our teaching journey as we head to California. I plan to save it for special occasions, the first of which, I have a roommate who is not a younger sibling. She goes by Livvy. She's quiet, yet very confident. Something I'm not.

—From the journal of Jenny Millard

*Spring, 1870
Vallejo, California*

“I’m sorry, Miss Millard, but there are no teaching positions available.”

Jenny Millard closed her eyes for a brief moment at the school board director’s words. “But ... I have a contract.”

He nodded. “You *did* have a contract. With the first school in Copperville. But when they closed their doors and sent you

here, it was canceled. We then secured a position for you at Mountain Ridge, but they, too, have closed their doors.”

“Isn’t there anything else?” Jenny strove to keep her voice steady.

The man winced. “I’m afraid not. Too many teachers have been sent here from area schools, and we don’t have enough positions.”

Jenny’s gaze dropped to the floor as she pressed her lips together. Why would her life be different here in California? Within a short six months, she had failed two schools. Or those two schools had failed her. The wishes and dreams she had when she first arrived had fizzled out. Now, she was a teacher without a school, even though it felt more than that.

He cleared his throat. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Miss Millard.”

She glanced up. Had she asked her question out loud?

“None of this is your fault. The communities in the surrounding areas are struggling and can’t afford a teacher right now.” He glanced out the window.

Unfortunately, she understood all too well. Her own family lived in a rural area with few resources, which was why she had come west.

He reached into his pocket. “We don’t have enough to cover your wages fully, but here’s what I can provide.” He slid over a few measly coins. “It’s the best I can do. I’m sorry. I wish you well.” He rose, indicating the discussion concerning her job was over.

And it was. Both the discussion *and* her teaching career.

What was she going to do?

The coins scraped across the desk as she scooped them into her hand. She followed the man to the door, picked up all her belongings, and stepped outside the one-room schoolhouse into the crisp morning air.

He bowed to her. "Thank you for your service."

She pasted on a smile and nodded to his retreating back. There was only one place she could go. Hopefully her one and only friend, Livvy, would help her. But she'd need to get to Washton first. The money jingled in her hand. She hoped it would be enough to purchase a one-way ticket.

She limped along the dirt road toward the train station, her suitcase bouncing off her leg with each step. After twenty minutes or so, she arrived at the heart of town. Her feet ached, and her shoes had worn so thin, the pebbles in the dirt poked through. She approached the boardwalk, lifted her foot and froze. A loose flap on the bottom of her left shoe almost caught on the wood. She gingerly lifted her leg high enough so she wouldn't stumble. What she wouldn't do for a chair and a cup of hot tea. But that had to wait.

Jenny shivered and wrapped her thin coat tighter to block the biting wind. She couldn't wait to get on the train and put the new past behind her. What should've been a fresh start had turned into a nightmare, much like the previous six years before she left home.

As she passed the mercantile, she overheard the excitement about the candy in the window display from a few young children.

"I've never seen so many colors. How many do you think there are?" asked the smallest girl.

The older boy next to her paused a moment. "I count six different ones, the color of the rainbow."

"How do you know the color of the rainbow?" she asked.

"I've seen one. You can trust I'm telling ya the truth, sis."

The young girl smiled at the boy and grabbed his hand. He didn't pull away, grinning back at his younger sister. What a stark contrast to her own lonely childhood. A bittersweet warmth spread through Jenny's chest.

None of her brothers had looked out for her like that.

Jenny continued walking, but her heart ached for the relationship she never had with her siblings. Maybe if she hadn't been the oldest, looking out for all of them, things might've been different.

A woman bumped Jenny's arm as she brushed past, causing Jenny to stumble. She caught herself, but not before a small grunt escaped her lips from the throbbing pain of her toes jammed farther into tight shoes. The lady didn't look back to see if Jenny was all right. Which made sense. She'd never had anyone look out for her or show they cared. Even just a little.

Oh, she was being quite the downer. Hard to be positive when the situation was not favorable. First, her family had asked her to leave because they couldn't afford for her to stay, then not one, but *two* towns where she'd taught closed their doors, leaving her with no work and no home.

The message was clear.

She didn't matter. She was disposable.

Tears threatened, and she swallowed the dark thoughts that clouded her mind. How could she support herself without a position? She was willing to put in hard work, but how could she do that without a job?

She sighed.

All the families in these towns faced a situation similar to the one she left behind. Two parents who worked long days to put food on the table for their family, with nothing left over because there were too many mouths to feed.

Is this how life was supposed to be?

Her stomach growled, reminding her she had yet to eat. Still, she needed to save the coins for the train ticket. The grumbling continued as she kept a steady pace along the boardwalk. It wouldn't be the first time she went without food.

She pulled the top of her bonnet down so it covered more of her face as she crossed the street and approached the train station. Even though no one should recognize her, she preferred to hide in plain sight. A habit ingrained at a young age.

Jenny handed over all the coins in her hand at the ticket booth, placing one last sliver of hope on her friend's willingness to take her in and help. There was no one else she could turn to.

Thankfully, this new rail line ran directly from Vallejo to Washton, which was where Livvy was situated. Jenny should arrive by mid-day. Passengers could arrive in Washton to board the ferry and cross the river to Sacramento to reach the main train station. Fortunately for Jenny, the route was frequent, making the journey more affordable.

The train whistle blew, notifying passengers it was last call to board.

Of course, Livvy was unaware of Jenny's struggles. She hadn't told anyone she had to move the first time, not wanting to be a burden. Which meant any letters from the teachers she had come west with would not have reached her.

Now, she wasn't sure what she would say once she arrived.

Clutching her ticket, she hurried to stand in line behind a young couple with a child. The little boy turned around and gazed up at her. She smiled back at him while her heart ached inside.

She couldn't leave fast enough.

Once boarded, Jenny headed to the back row to blend in, hoping no one would pay her any attention.

She must move on. Thinking about the past did nothing but bring her down. And it was important to cling to the little tiny dream she still held in her heart. For something more. For someplace to belong. To be loved without any strings attached.

If she thought too much, she felt as if no one wanted her—unless she was needed to watch the little ones. Or cook the food. Or wash the clothes.

There must be someone who wanted her for herself.

Maybe she would find that someone in Washton.

One could only hope.

* * *

“I HAVE to go out for a while.” Ren Lyman’s boss shouted over the clang of metal. “Do you mind watching the smithy?”

Ren paused mid-stroke. This was the moment. The chance for Ren to see if the people of Washton would accept him when Gideon Roberts wasn’t around. What could he say? He couldn’t very well say he wasn’t ready. Besides, he was curious to know himself. No sense staying where one wasn’t wanted.

Thankful to Gideon for opening his shop and home to Ren, he couldn’t very well hide in the back forever. “Sure.” He faced the man who treated him with nothing but kindness and held up his hand. “You don’t think it will be a concern?”

Gideon shook his head. “I don’t think it will be a problem as long as you don’t make it a problem. Why do you think your scars would be an issue?”

Ren couldn’t blame Gideon for making light of his deformity. Gideon wasn’t the one who had to deal with the comments or the disdain others showed Ren because he had ugly, twisted skin all over his right hand and parts of his face. Scars which made it impossible to hold tools or write with his right hand. Ren adapted as a young child by switching to his left, but at school, left-handers were ridiculed and forced to conform. He couldn’t, though, and thus, he was a freak. At least, that’s what most people called him.

Still did in some towns. “It seems to have caused trouble in

every town I came across on my journey here. You're the only person who never flinched or drew away from me when I reached out my hand. All my life, I have been teased and made to feel less a man because of this." He pointed to his face and hand.

Gideon tilted his head. "Do you feel you're less of a man?"

Ren's mouth fell open. No one had ever asked him that before. He responded without thinking. "No, not really."

"Why is that?" Gideon asked.

Ren searched his heart. "Because the Good Lord made me who I am, and I am nothing without him."

Gideon nodded. "Son, I don't think you have anything to worry about." He turned and walked away, "I'll be back in a couple of hours," he called over his shoulder.

Ren stood staring at the doorway, not quite sure what to make of his new boss.

An hour later, Ren pounded out the finishing touches on the wheel for Mr. Adams when the store bell chimed. He set aside his work and brushed ash off his leather apron. Leaving the mitts on, he passed through the doorway that linked the back of the smithy to the front. "Be with me, Lord. I like it here and don't want to have to move on again," he whispered.

A tall, lanky man stood at the counter. He wore a large brown hat and held his hands in his back pockets. He frowned when he saw Ren. "Where's Gideon?"

Ren reached deep to find the nicest voice he could muster. "I'm Ren. Been helping Gideon in the back for the past few weeks. How may I help you?"

The gentleman gave Ren a cursory once-over.

Ren felt as if he was cattle being inspected before a purchase.

The man acknowledged Ren with a tilt of his head. "Well, if

Gideon trusts you in his shop, then I do too. Name is Luke Taylor.”

Ren blew out the breath he held and saluted the man with his gloved hand. “What can I do for you?”

The man pointed to the broken horse bit and horseshoes lying on the counter. “I need three new horse bits. And since I’m here, I should get some new shoes for one of my horses. These are run down.”

“No problem. I can get to them as soon as I complete what I’m currently working on.”

“My horses are at the livery while I run a few other errands in town. I’ll check back in an hour or so.”

Ren picked up the broken pieces and held them to his chest. Best way to avoid a handshake is to keep his hands full. “I can have it done by then. Nice to meet you, Luke.”

Luke’s hand gripped the rim of his hat. “Likewise.”

A little disoriented from the positive interaction, Ren headed back to the forge. Voices from his childhood days haunted him, yet the kindness of Gideon, and now Luke, helped to lessen the sting of the memories. All of that could change once the man saw his hand. But for now, he would enjoy the moment of non-judgment and hope his next run-in would be with a stranger who was just as kind.

Gideon entered as Ren finished pounding out the metal on the anvil. “Any customers drop in?”

Ren put the finished metal into the water to quench it in place. Steam rose into his face, but he stayed near, twisting the tongs that held the metal. “Yes. A man named Luke.”

“Oh, he’s a good man, Luke Taylor. What was it he needed fixed this time?”

“Broken bits and some shoes.”

Gideon put on his own apron. “He owns the large cattle ranch north outside of town. Inherited it from his parents. He’s

raising his two sisters. Recently got engaged to our schoolteacher. He's a good customer. And he'd be a good friend."

Ren shook his head. "I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to do a good job as a blacksmith and learn as much as I can from you."

He expected Gideon to praise him for focusing on his work, similar to how his father would've responded.

Instead, his boss placed a hand on Ren's shoulder. "Well, everyone needs to have at least one friend in their life." Gideon tied the string behind his back and picked up a sledge. "There's a lot of work for us before we break for lunch."

Ren nodded and went back to work. The two of them had established a compatible rhythm since the first day Ren started working for the man. Their techniques complimented each other, and his new boss was mindful not to talk Ren's ear off. In all of Ren's twenty-five years, he had never met anyone else who saw the world as he did. He wanted desperately to know if it was a sign from God to stay. His heart yearned to put down roots somewhere, and, so far, Washton seemed a good place to do that.

But was it the right place for him?

Time passed quickly, and the train whistled in the background, announcing the noon train would arrive soon. Ren had to go now before the railcars docked and the incoming crowd filled the streets. He set the pieces aside and walked to the nail on the wall, where he hung up his apron and gloves. "I'm going to take my walk now, if that's okay."

"Suit yourself," Gideon yelled over his own pounding.

Ren tapped his shirt pocket, making sure the piece of worn paper was still there. He exited out the front, then crossed the street and headed up the hill, entering the white building with the tall steeple on the roof. The sunlight beamed through the

windows, highlighting the unsettled dust in the air as he approached the front pew. He sat and gently pulled out the piece of paper, being extra careful as he opened it for the umpteenth time.

His mother handed him this sheet filled with fifteen verses when he left home. She'd cried, hugged him goodbye, and told him these words would see him through wherever the Lord would take him. He carried the list with him all the time and had already read through it several times.

He picked up the small Bible sitting in the pew and turned the pages till he found the next verse on the list. As he reflected on the word of God, his thoughts kept returning to the idea of staying in Washton. He'd been protecting his heart for so long. Could he lower his guard and let people in?

His heart thumped double-time as if answering a resounding *yes*.