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—KIMBERLY KEAGAN, AUTHOR  
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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



Best-laid Plans + Prequel Novella

No  
Plan  
at All

DENISE M. COLBY



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*To my writing critique group partners Marie Wells Coutu, Kimberly Keagan, and Christina Rich. This book would not have been written without your insight and thoughtful suggestions. I'm blessed by your friendship.*

*And for Ken. We may not always have a plan, but God has beautifully provided a life with you I love.*

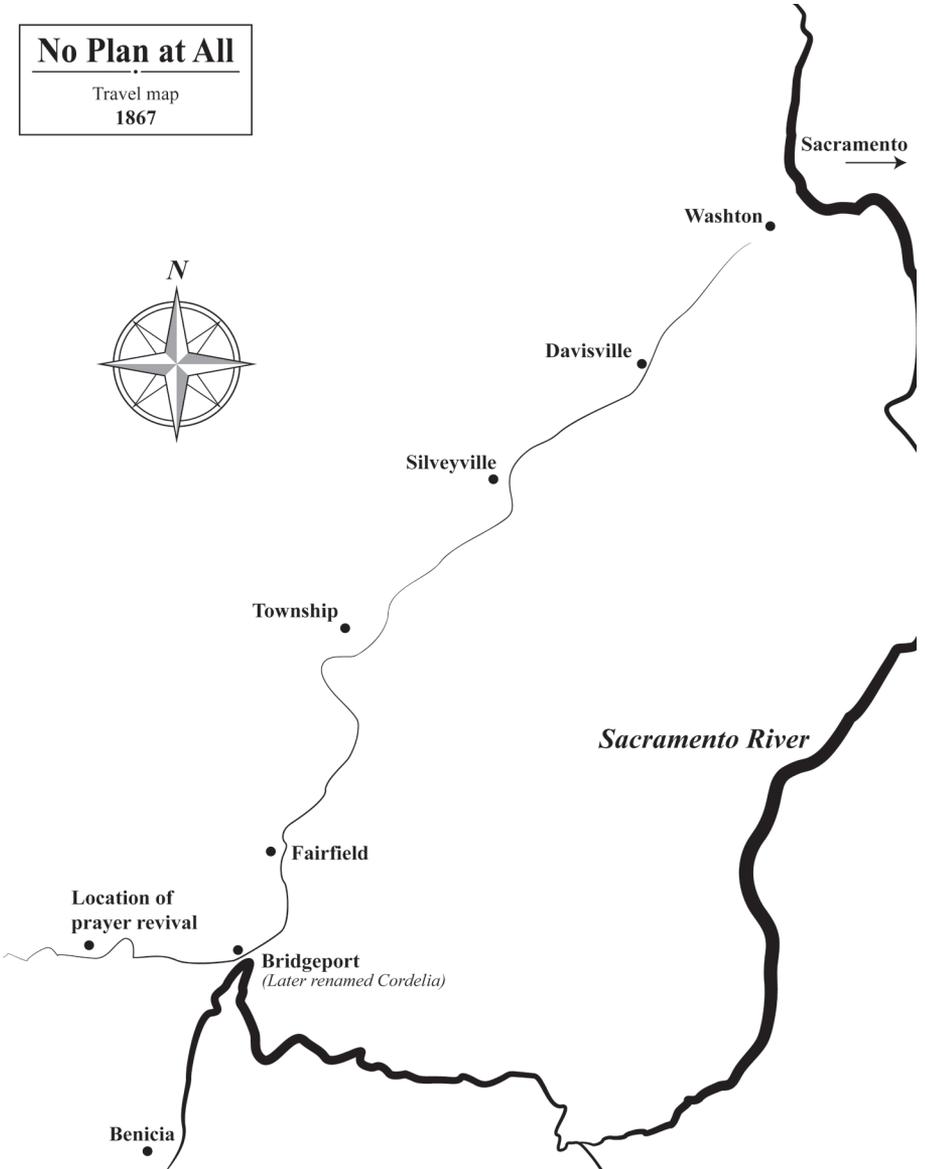


*But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart  
through all generations.*

*Psalm 33:11 (NIV)*



**No Plan at All**  
Travel map  
1867





## SCOTTISH BROGUE TERMS USED:

- Och = oh
- Oot = out
- Lass/lassie = girl/woman
- Bonnie = pretty
- Aye = yes
- Nae = no
- Dae = do
- Ye = you
- Dinnae fash yourself = don't worry yourself
- Lad = boy/young man
- Aboot = about
- Whit = what
- Ah dinnae ken = I don't know
- Halo = hello
- Tak a gander = have a look
- Aye that's grand = yes, that's good



# One



*My annual visit to Washton is about to end. I've stocked up on all the supplies my wagon can hold. Thank you for your faithfulness, Lord, and for the people in this town. Mr. Woodward's new general store will be a great asset for this town's future. I will miss visiting this friendly community.*

—From the journal of Alex Sinclair

May 16, 1867

Washton, California

Sarah Baker gripped her bag to her chest, hunching her shoulders against the downpour as her boots sank in the now-muddied ground with each step. Shrouded in darkness from the stormy night, she carried all her belongings, hoping to replace one life for another. No longer would she endure someone else's plans, living on a stinky ranch working sunup to sundown, being forced to marry her deceased fiancé's brother if she stayed.

Tears mixed with the rain. She didn't want to run away, but staying would make life unbearable. Mrs. Taylor had made it clear that Sarah and Luke must marry after she passed. And Luke agreed without ever considering what Sarah wanted. He would've jumped over the moon for his ma if she asked, dragging Sarah along with him.

She tried to explain to Luke she was still in love with his late brother, but he didn't understand. He dealt with his own raw grief of losing Michael and then his ma. Along with the full responsibility of his family's ranch and raising his two younger sisters.

Sarah wasn't anywhere near ready to take on the lifetime responsibility of a wife and mother, along with a ranch, with someone she saw as a brother only. But she couldn't stay without marrying Luke. That was plain as day. Not to mention, she'd end up stuck on the Taylor ranch forever. Ranching was not the adventure she and Michael dreamt of.

How she missed Michael. The dreams they shared. The way he held her hand for no particular reason.

She had to leave. Before things became irreversible.

Her boot stuck in the mud, and it made a loud sucking noise as she pulled it out. She continued sludging along the rain-sloshed road toward the peddler's wagon. He had shared his plans to leave, and she knew he was her only chance to escape. Tonight.

Impractical and impulsive, Sarah had a single-minded focus to save herself. And this was the best she could do at the moment. The pain of all that had happened was too much. Staying would be a constant reminder of all she'd lost.

A compulsion to look back overcame her. She squeezed her eyes shut. There was so much turmoil in her heart. From all the sickness and the loss these past six months. Staying up night after night helping them all survive. Then hearing his ma's

request for them to marry and Luke's agreement without consulting her. It was all too much.

When Luke announced they would marry on the morrow, her legs went weak and she saw spots. She had told him no, but she'd never stood up to him before. He didn't believe her, and since he was as stubborn as an ox, Sarah knew he wouldn't accept her answer. Would try to wear her down.

She was so weary. Enough to have hidden her suitcase in the back of the wagon. Requested a wagon ride with Luke to town so they could talk. When he stopped, she stated her feelings, stepped out of the wagon and took all she owned, and walked away toward the Martin's, which was on her way to her destination. She'd never done something so ...

Shivering, Sarah blocked out those thoughts. Numb from both her emotions and the wet rain, she plodded onward. She had already faced Luke. Told him goodbye and to not come after her. There was no other choice but to move forward.

A faint lantern light flickered ahead, guiding her to the peddler, whose wagon sat where he'd been all week. Soon she'd leave this small town, the only one she'd ever known. Where she went, she didn't know, nor did it matter. She just needed to go.

She held her breath as she approached the covered wagon. Unsure what to do, she moved closer. But the rain drowned out any noise her feet made. Shouldn't he be outside preparing his horse? Maybe he's inside near the opening to keep from getting drenched in the downpour. Not wanting to startle him, she coughed lightly.

No response.

Her body shivered in her soaked clothes. There was no time to be subtle. "Hello," she said in a schoolroom voice.

Still no response.

Sarah expected the man who'd discussed his plan in detail

and invited anyone to join him, to poke his head out and tell her welcome aboard. Had she gotten the day wrong? Maybe he fell asleep.

Louder this time, Sarah yelled, “Mr. Smith?”

A banging came from within, causing the light to flicker from the sudden movement. A few unfamiliar words were mumbled from inside the wagon in his strange accent. “Aye, who is it?” Mr. Smith shouted.

Sarah was too cold to hesitate, even though a seed of doubt crept into her mind and planted itself. “It’s me, Mr. Smith.”

“Me, who?”

She blew out her breath. It was so like him to jest. He seemed a jovial person who enjoyed chatting and welcoming people to his traveling shop. “It’s Sarah Baker. I’m ready to go.”

Silence.

In fact, no sound could be heard anywhere as the rain stopped at that precise moment.

Panic seized her, and she slogged closer to the opening right as a head popped out between the two pieces of fabric. Sarah slunk back as she recognized Mr. Smith’s golden locks, although the rain changed their appearance to a light brown. His deep blue eyes locked onto hers. When he studied her, she felt seen and heard. As if she was the most important person. He reminded her of her brother, Will. Someone she could trust.

“Och, Miss Baker? What are ye doin’, lass? Shouldn’t you be home asleep in ye own bed?”

Sarah frowned. “Isn’t tonight Thursday? You’re leaving soon, are you not? You said you planned to leave at nine o’clock. Well, it’s Thursday and it’s nine o’clock.”

He stared at her.

She must look a fright since the rain had soaked her clothes, hair, and bonnet. As he kept staring at her, she shifted from one foot to the other. “Is there something wrong?”

He blinked. “Wrong? Aye, what could be wrong? It’s raining cats and dogs, and a young bonnie lass is standing in the rain during the night telling me she’s going with me. An invitation I didn’t know I made. What could be wrong?”

Sarah’s confidence fell. He didn’t seem happy to see her. Would he not allow her to travel with him? She had risked everything on his open invitation.

A new set of tears rolled down her cheeks. Had she conjured the entire opportunity in order to find some way to escape? No. He could provide a ride for her somewhere. He had customers, which meant towns and other folks and a place to start over.

With all the bravado she could muster, she lifted her chin and searched Mr. Smith’s eyes. “I need to go with you. Tonight. I can’t go back. And I don’t have anywhere else to go. Please. May I come along?”

\* \* \*

ALEXANDER SINCLAIR, known in these parts as the peddler Mr. Smith, stared at the terror in Miss Baker’s eyes. The lass was spooked, otherwise she wouldn’t be standing before him soaked with her hair drooping in her eyes like a highland cow.

She glanced over her shoulder, then back at him. “I promise I won’t cause you any trouble or be in your way.”

The movement wasn’t lost on Alex. And the pleading in her eyes caused a knot to form in his stomach. “Have you been hurt?” He couldn’t tolerate any man who used their physical strength over a woman.

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the steady patter of the rain, which started again. When she finally spoke, her voice was a whisper. “I’m okay. But if I go back, my life will be over.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken fears. Alex's protective instincts flared. He couldn't say no to a lass in trouble. He'd met plenty of people out west who'd run from their homes—he was a prime example. Whatever this lass was leaving behind, it scared the wits out of her.

Despite her wide-eyed desperation and her trembling body, he'd give her points for bravery. She barely knew him, and even though California was less strict about propriety, an unmarried woman did not travel alone with an unmarried man. Whatever she was running from, she felt the risk was a better option.

"Give me a minute," he said before pulling his head back inside, where it was warm and dry.

He hadn't given her a chance to answer, but relief swept across her face.

With a heartfelt sigh, he donned a few layers of clothing, his boots, and hat. So much for a few hours of shuteye before he pulled out.

He glanced around his crowded wagon. What would he do with her? There was barely enough room even for him with all the goods he carried. Not to mention the extra supplies needed for two people would cut into what he could sell.

Alex rubbed the back of his neck. Sometimes going with the unplanned was the best course of action. He had extensive experience with adapting to new circumstances. He would figure out the details later. For now, getting her out of town before dawn seemed the wisest decision.

Would her father or any brothers search for her? Was she even of an age? And with that thought, he stuck his head out again. "Och, Miss?"

She raised her head and their eyes met. "Yes?"

"Might I ask how old ye are?" He cringed. Asking a young lady her age wasn't proper, but he needed to know.

“I’m nineteen.” She answered matter-of-factly, unfazed. Her stance reminded him of a startled deer who wouldn’t move when spooked.

“Aye. I’ll be oot in a moment.” And he pulled back inside a second time.

“Okay.” Her voice quivered. “It’s quite cold out here.”

He wanted to tell her to get used to it because every night was cold when you didn’t have a building with windows and doors to secure you. But she would realize that soon enough. The gentleman in him couldn’t be rude.

He finished layering on his travel clothes and climbed out of the wagon, his boots splashing in a small puddle as he jumped down. Water sloshed onto Miss Baker’s skirts, but she didn’t seem to notice.

She eyed him warily as he rose to his full six-foot-two-inch frame. Taller than most men, the bulk of his arms and chest added to his size. He had his Scottish heritage to thank. Which was one reason he came out west to try his hand at hard labor, engaging both his body and mind in productive work. There wasn’t much for him to do back home except play a role he wanted no part of.

He looked at Miss Baker and grabbed his hat brim. “Aye, let’s load up.” He stepped forward and reached for her luggage. She didn’t move, only shivered, staring at her feet where water pooled around her soaked shoes. Was she succumbing to the cold already?

Grabbing hold of the handle, he pried her chilled fingers off one by one. He shoved her bag through the fabric slit on the wagon and blindly grabbed his backup overcoat and a blanket. He wrapped both around her, keeping as much space between them as possible. “Let’s get you dried up first, then you can climb inside the wagon.” He flicked his thumb over his shoulder.

Her eyes moved in the direction he pointed and then back to him. “You’re going to let me come with you?”

“It is what you wanted, aye?”

She nodded multiple times. “Oh, yes. Please. Thank you.”

He grunted. “Okay then, let’s get you situated, and we can head out.”

She pulled at the ends of the blanket, wrapping it further around her shoulders. “Can I ride up front with you, if you don’t mind? I don’t do well when I can’t see where I’m going.”

It would be better if she remained hidden as he drove out of town. “It’s night and you won’t see much.”

“I won’t take up much room,” she pleaded. “I don’t want to become unwell and have to stop.”

He glanced at the sky. Great, she could retch from traveling in a wagon. “You’ll continue to get wet.”

“I’m already soaked. And you’ve given me a blanket and slicker to cover myself. I promise I’ll stay quiet and hidden. No one will know who I am.”

So she understood what he hadn’t said.

He sighed. “Follow me.” He strode to the front of the wagon and placed a hand out to offer assistance. Her cold, wet hand touched his as he lifted her into the wagon seat. He hoped she didn’t catch a chill.

She settled into the far end of the wooden bench and placed his overcoat over her head and the blanket around her legs. In the darkness it would be impossible to know who she was.

But he would know. Unsure if this was the wisest move, he focused on the bridle and harness in his hands rather than the stranger in his wagon. He hadn’t had a companion travel with him before. Five years of solitude and fending for himself dulled his edges. How awkward would this be?

He hoped she wasn’t expecting conversation. He expended

all his energy while his shop was open, but his time afterward he spent in silence. Talking with God and his horse. Since he didn't stay in one place long, he never developed genuine relationships. Precisely why he'd come out west in the first place.

*Lord, I'm not sure what you're doing here, but guide my ways.*  
He wondered if he would regret allowing her to come along.