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Plan

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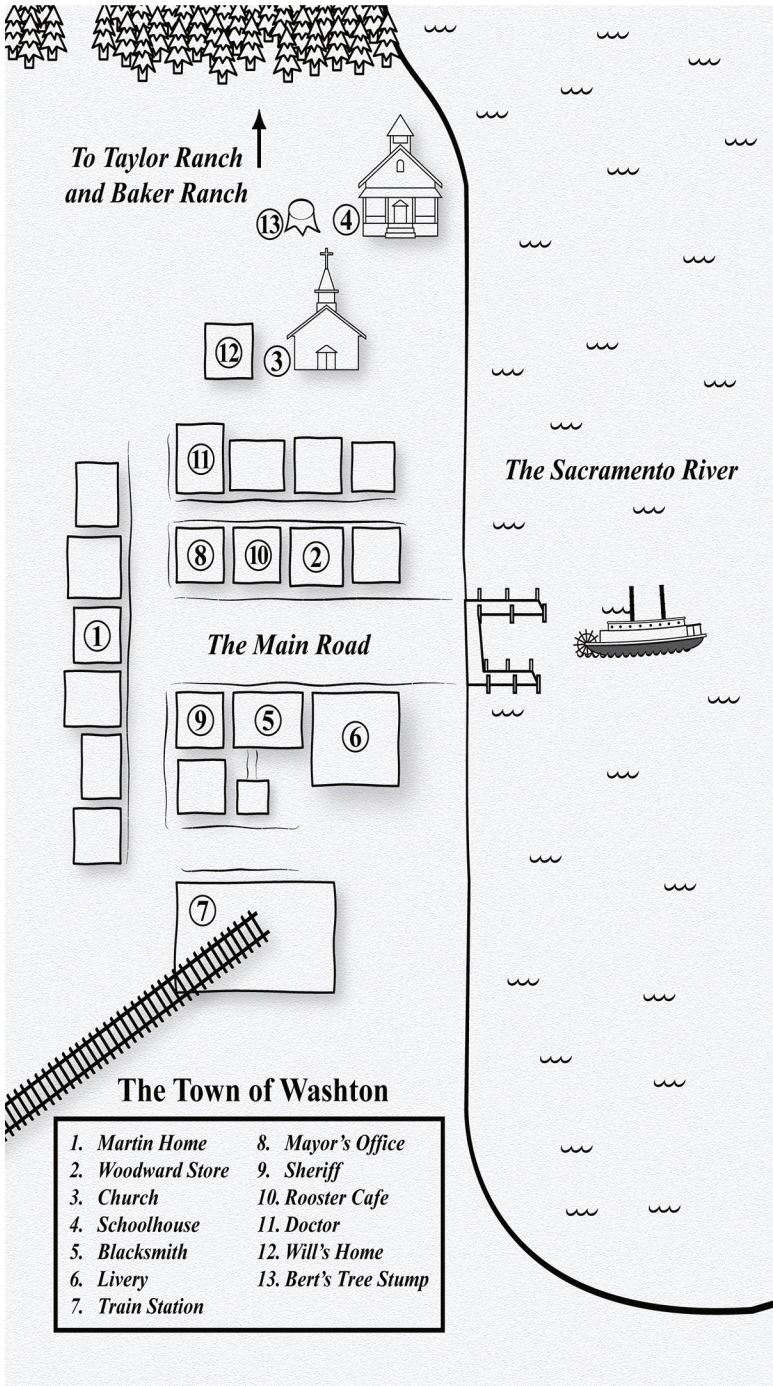
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*To Pat and Suzanne. Every youngest sibling should be blessed with
older sisters like you.*

And for Ken. I love the way you lean on God to guide our family.

*Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose
that prevails.*

Proverbs 19:21 (NIV)



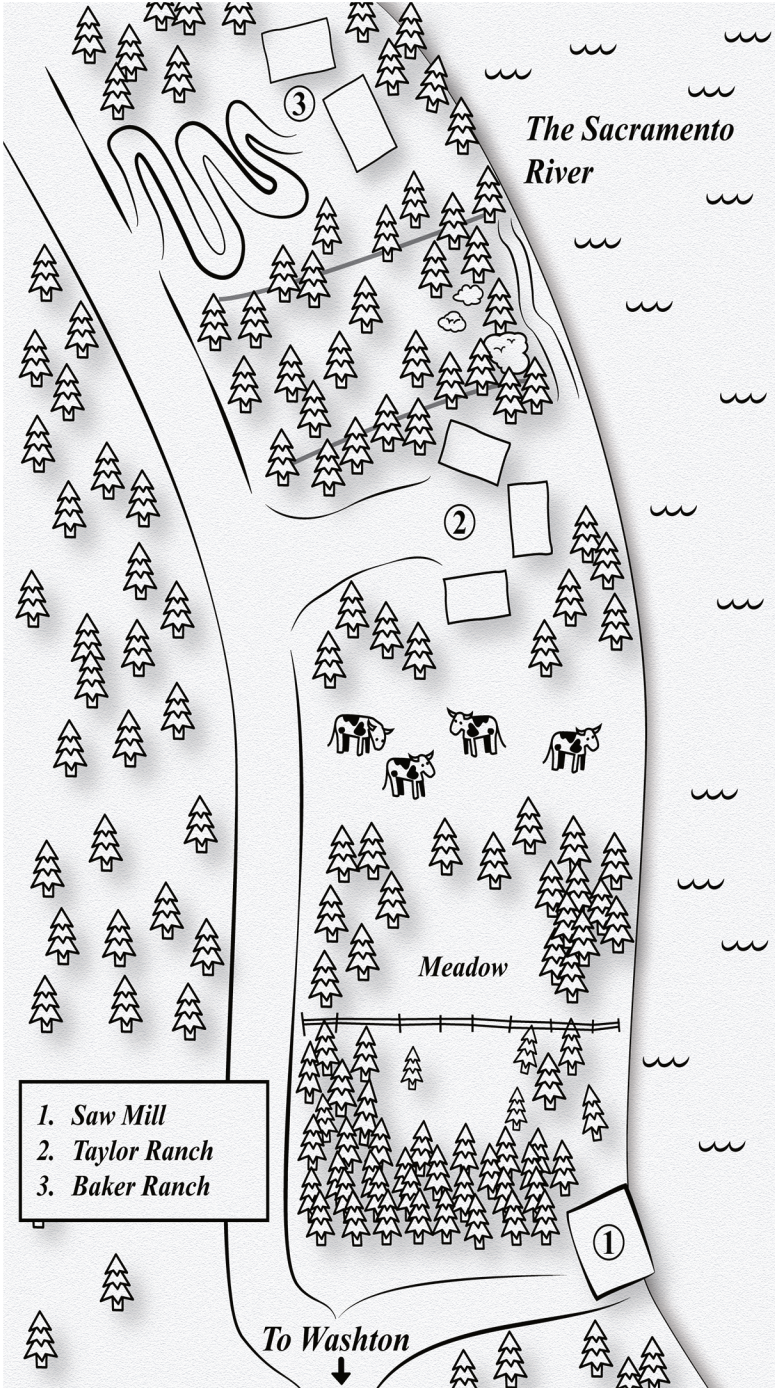
To Taylor Ranch
and Baker Ranch

The Sacramento River

The Main Road

The Town of Washton

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Martin Home | 8. Mayor's Office |
| 2. Woodward Store | 9. Sheriff |
| 3. Church | 10. Rooster Cafe |
| 4. Schoolhouse | 11. Doctor |
| 5. Blacksmith | 12. Will's Home |
| 6. Livery | 13. Bert's Tree Stump |
| 7. Train Station | |



One



I've been on the Taylor ranch more than two months now, waiting for my injury to heal. Still no sign of Boss Man or his associates. Hopefully, the wedding today will go undisturbed.

—From the journal of Lydia Spencer

July, 1870

Washton, California

Pastor William Baker pasted a smile on his face and shook hands with fellow wedding guests as they congratulated him on a job well done. He should be happy. The ceremony had gone off without a hitch, and his best friend was married to a woman who completed him.

What, then, was the source of his melancholy?

People all around him were laughing and enjoying themselves. Luke and Olivia's relationship showed clearly how God had transformed them both. Will should be ecstatic.

“Great service, Will.” Mayor Arthur Martin reached out his hand.

“Thank you, Arthur.” Will glanced at the happy couple who were hugging Luke’s younger sisters, Rose and Caroline. “I’m happy for them.”

Arthur didn’t say anything.

“What?” An uneasiness filled Will as Arthur studied him.

Arthur shook his head. “Nothing. I thought you’d have more to say. It’s not like you to say so few words.”

Will smiled. “Well, I said plenty during the ceremony. I’m saving the rest for the invites I’ll be making for everyone to come to church tomorrow.”

Arthur laughed. “You can take the pastor out of the church, but not the church out of the pastor. Relax a little. Have some fun. Eat some of Chrissy’s fried chicken. It’s incredible.” He patted Will’s shoulder and headed over to the newly married couple.

Will watched Arthur hug each of them. The man had a big heart, and he’d welcomed Olivia as if she was his daughter, treated Luke as a son. He had done the same for Jenny, who recently married Ren, the new blacksmith. Treated Will similarly.

So why did Will feel as if he wasn’t in the same circle anymore?

He glanced around the ranch yard. The tables had been set up in straight lines with the wooden chairs, benches, and crates used during the ceremony. No one seemed in any hurry to go home. Off to the side, a few neighbors tuned their fiddles to play after supper. He’d need to eat soon if he was to join them with his guitar.

Will’s stomach growled. He hadn’t eaten at all today. Even though he’d performed several marriage ceremonies, this one

was extra special. Luke was more a brother to Will than a friend, though they'd been estranged when Will's sister had left the Taylor ranch abruptly a few years ago. But all of that was behind them now. Watching his friend find love and happiness after he experienced much loss and sorrow filled Will with gratitude.

Yet a coldness swept through his bones, and he shivered. The wave of sadness that settled inside him was unexpected.

"Wonderful words, Pastor Will." Gideon's voice came from behind.

Will blinked away whatever it was that had no business in his heart, and he turned to greet another friendly face. "Thank you."

"Have you eaten yet?" Gideon asked. "There's not much left, so you better hurry."

"I was heading over to the table now to fill up a plate. If you'll excuse me." He shook Gideon's hand, then wove through the mingling crowd toward the food table. The tin plate he picked up was warm from the summer sun.

Finding enough food to fill his tin, he searched for a spot to sit. Chrissy Martin waved at him, and he headed her way. What else could he do? Chrissy mothered all of them. And he could use some mothering about now. Although she'd also see right through his fake cheerfulness and ask probing questions. But he couldn't ignore her.

He smiled as he thought of all the blessings he'd had over the last year. People who had come to know the Lord through his church and teaching. A healed friendship with Luke and a new friendship with Ren. His sister happily married and seeing the world with her Scottish husband. A little cottage next to the church to call home. He truly was grateful, and he knew gratefulness would put gladness in one's heart, even when it was heavy.

Will should know. He'd had a heavy heart since his parents died in a flood when he was seventeen.

"Will, you did a wonderful job with the ceremony." Chrissy spoke before Will set his dish on the table. Seated next to her was a young beauty he'd never seen before. Chrissy kept right on talking. "It's about time those two got married. Just look at them. They were meant for each other. Just like Jenny and Ren." She sat up straight. "Oh, where are my manners? Will, this is Miss Lydia Spencer. Lydia, this is Will Baker. He likes to be called Pastor, but I've known him before all that, so I only call him that at church." She turned to Will and winked.

The woman's light blonde hair was swept into a pretty knot with light wisps framing her face. Her bright blue eyes watched him with a wariness he couldn't decipher. He stopped pulling out his chair and reached out a hand. "Hello. It's a pleasure to meet you."

She placed her hand in his, but instead of soft, delicate fingers, her grip tightened like a man's.

The action caught him off guard. He stayed there with his hand in hers, their gazes locked.

She cleared her throat.

He blinked.

"Nice to meet you, Will." She frowned and pulled her hand away.

Had she felt the spark of electricity too? And her voice. He hadn't expected the deep alto from such a young lady. He found himself at a loss for words. Who was she and what was she doing here?

Chrissy must've heard the questions swirling in his brain. "Lydia is a friend of Olivia and Jenny."

"Are you a teacher, too, then?" Will asked as he sat down.

The startled look she gave confused him. What an odd reaction.

“I am. We met at school, and I came west with them. We’ve stayed in touch through letters.”

“You must live close to pay a visit?”

She glanced at Chrissy.

After years of talking with people who struggled with guilt, he recognized the look. She had a secret.

Miss Spencer studied the tablecloth. “I’m actually staying in town. Here, in fact, on the Taylor ranch.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Well, if you’re staying in Washton, I hope to see you at church tomorrow. I have it on good authority the message will be lively and engaging.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Chrissy laughed. “Will. That might work on the townsfolk, but not our visitors.” She faced Lydia. “What he means to say is he would love to have you join us at church tomorrow. Service starts at nine o’clock.”

“You know I can’t, Chrissy,” Lydia whispered.

“Oh, hush. That’s not an excuse.” Chrissy waved her hand, dismissing Lydia’s comment.

Will set down his chicken and wiped his hands on the cloth napkin. “May I ask why not?”

Lydia hesitated. “Um, I have an injured leg, making it difficult to get around. I’m sure your service would be lovely, but I don’t think I’ll be able to attend.”

He frowned. “How did you injure your leg?”

Her eyes grew wide. There was that look again. Hiding a secret. “I tripped over my dog. He can be a bit lively sometimes.” She shrugged.

“Well, maybe I can make a personal visit this week and bring you some encouraging words from the Lord.” The words were out before Will could think on them.

Chrissy pursed her lips, failing to hide the smile lurking behind them.

He ignored her and looked at Miss Spencer in anticipation of her answer. But instead of a smile, a frown etched on her face. Not the response he expected—nor wanted. He opened his mouth to encourage her again but caught himself. He didn't normally offer any such services, so why was he pushing them onto this woman? He didn't even know her. Nor did she show any interest.

He picked up his fork, put a large amount of food in his mouth, and chewed. Anything to prevent himself from saying something more.

* * *

LYDIA SPENCER HAD no words to respond to the pastor offering to call on her. Anyone familiar with her knew that was not usually the case. One, because she normally played the flirt as her undercover persona, and two, she could talk anyone's ear off. But she had no desire to develop deep relationships here, even if she found the combination of the pastor's short red hair, neatly trimmed beard, and gray-blue eyes striking.

More so, she was in no mood for conversation. Her ankle and leg throbbed, and moving around was a challenge. She didn't know anyone here other than Luke, Olivia, Ren, and Jenny. And now Chrissy. All of them understood why she was here. She didn't have to pretend with them. For that, she was thankful.

But with Pastor Will, she had to pretend.

"Please don't go out of your way for me."

He nodded and shoveled more mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"I might be here for a while. There will be other weeks." Why was she encouraging him? She had no plans to attend

church here. Or anywhere for that matter. And her true work could take her away at any moment.

“Lydia will be our teacher this fall.” Chrissy patted Lydia’s hand resting on the table.

Lydia grimaced. Teaching was her alibi. It was where she could fit in the community and observe, learn, and share what she gathered with her director at the Pinkerton Agency.

She had liked teaching, at first. But after catching her first criminal, she wanted to do more in the field with the agency. Her current plan was to stay in Washton while she rested and her leg healed, waiting for instructions from her director. Yet the envelope on her bed inside the ranch house did not contain the news she wanted. Her orders were to stay put. To help in town. Let her leg heal fully and keep an eye out for the criminal they called Boss Man or any of his associates. None of them knew if this Boss Man would send someone else to extract funds from Olivia. Stopping this crime boss was paramount.

She glanced at her friend, who radiated well-deserved happiness as she visited with other guests.

How Olivia managed to snag an eligible rancher in the area when she had declared quite adamantly she never wanted to get married, Lydia couldn’t guess. She grinned inwardly. Lydia was the one who had declared she was looking for a man. All part of her ruse, and one Olivia had chastised her for repeatedly.

But when Lydia showed up a few months ago, Olivia was shocked to learn the truth. Lydia had grown up in some of the same circles Olivia had, although they hadn’t met prior to becoming teachers. There was more Lydia hadn’t said, but she would never divulge the other events that had led her into the cloak-and-dagger world of being an agent. Olivia only needed to know she had a knack for it. And enjoyed it.

“Where did you teach before coming to Washton?” The pastor had emptied his plate and leaned back in his chair, watching her closely.

“I was in a small community south of here called Dicksonville. Finished the school year in early May. Olivia and Jenny had written to tell me they were getting married and there was an opening here if I was interested.” Why was she fibbing to the pastor? It was a partial truth, which she learned from the agency. Tell as much truth as possible to keep details straight. “Not only can I be near friends, but I can teach here too.”

“She’ll stay with us once the school year starts, but for now she’s here,” Chrissy added.

Keeping an eye on everyone in the family.

“Are you able to do much with your injury, Miss Spencer?” Pastor Will asked.

No one needed to discover she didn’t know a thing about cooking. “I can sit at a table and peel potatoes and stir ingredients in a bowl just fine.”

He laughed. “Yes, I guess you can.”

A loud bark sounded by the barn. Lydia glanced over to make sure her dog was still tied up. But where Fido should’ve been sitting and waiting, a limp rope lay on the ground. The large, black, fluffy canine was nowhere to be seen.

Mew. A young calf cried out as it ran toward the party.

Baa. Two young ewes followed.

Lydia’s heart sank. She pushed herself to a standing position, her leg protesting fiercely.

Will stood, too, glancing between her and the commotion heading their way.

Chrissy rose to her feet as well. Her frown caused Lydia’s stomach to plummet alongside her heart. For behind the baby

lamb, Lydia's mutt gleefully chased all three animals toward the food table.

"Fido!" She stepped forward to catch her dog as he ran past, and she fell flat on her face.