Chapter One

*Harmony Valley, California, 1907*

“Come out with your hands up.” Elena Seifert pointed her father’s double barrel shotgun at the makeshift ditch trap. Man or beast, she was prepared. No more of Papa’s dairy cows would be stolen if she had anything to do with it. The sun dipped behind the rolling hills, sending chills up Elena’s arms. She lifted her head to see what she’d caught. Better not go any closer.

“Elena, Mama’s calling for you,” Samuel drawled from behind. “Lars will be here any minute.” Her brother’s footsteps came toward her, his boots kicking the dirt beneath his shuffled gait.

Why did her brother pick this moment to come find her? *Please, Lord, keep him away*.

Lack of oxygen at birth left Samuel with impaired intelligence and motor skills. He was a walking miracle according to Doc Christen. Her spine trembled. She glanced at him for the briefest moment. “Stay back, Samuel.”

Elena startled when a man yanked the gun from her hand. “Didn’t anyone teach you to keep your eye on the target?” He was tall, medium build, and stood near enough that his warm breath brushed against her cheek. “And never give up your weapon without a fight.”

Air whooshed out of Elena’s lungs, and her heart tripped. Could it be? She peered at the man’s teasing smirk, and a sensation uttered inside. How long had it been since she’d seen the ruggedly handsome face of her childhood love? Two years? Three? She wanted to smack him and hug him at the same time.

She tipped up his hat. His amber-colored eyes and chiseled jaw were just how she remembered, back when the two of them square-danced in her father’s barn. She punched his arm. “Jonas Bollinger. You scared me half to death.”

“Ouch.” He laughed, rubbing the spot with his free hand. “This is the welcome home I get?”

Tucked under the neckline of her dress, Elena fingered the silver locket Jonas had given her on her tenth birthday. She still wore it a dozen years later, even though he had broken her heart.

A surge of anger welled up inside, and she planted her hands on her hips. “What are you doing on Seifert land? Don’t you know what’s been going on here? Of course, you don’t. You’ve been gone. Missing. Without a letter to let us know where you are. And now you come on our property like you’ve lived here all along.” She grabbed her papa’s shotgun from his hand and stepped forward, so close her mouth was mere inches from his. “Next time, I’ll shoot.” With that, she spun on her heels, grabbed Samuel’s hand and pulled him toward the house. If she didn’t get away from Jonas soon, she might do something stupid, like fall into his arms and tell him how much she missed him.

Samuel wiggled out of Elena’s grip and turned toward Jonas. “Lars Rissler is going to propose to Elena tonight. He owns Cayucos General Store.”

Her slow-minded brother needed to learn when to keep his mouth shut.

A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She tossed Jonas a glance over her shoulder and tugged on Samuel’s arm. “Hush now. Nothing’s official.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed. “Will be official by tonight. Right, Elena?”

Her brother had taken a liking to Lars the minute the shop- keeper gave him a job sweeping floors at the store whenever they went to town. Lars paid Samuel well and took her brother under his wing. Not many would take time out of their day to teach someone like her brother. Or give him a job. The work did wonders for the seventeen-year-old’s self-esteem and for her peace of mind.

Elena bit her lower lip.

“Is that why you’re gussied up?” Jonas’s voice held a teasing tone. “I’ve never seen you in such a fancy dress. Lars must have money ‘cause I know your family doesn’t have much to spare.”

The reminder that her parents struggled as dairy farmers cut deep. Wasn’t that the reason Jonas left in the first place? To make a better life for himself in a big city? Judging by Jonas’s thread- bare trousers and tattered shirt, he hadn’t struck it rich. Not by a long shot.

“I found a man who can afford a catalog dress.” Elena swallowed hard, attempting to clear the lump lodged in her throat. Let him think the dress was a gift from her wealthy suitor. No need to admit how she’d scrimped and saved her egg money to buy it.

Truthfully, material possessions had never been important to her, and Jonas knew it, but with every cow that was stolen her parent’s situation grew worse. Desperate times called for desperate measures. Lars afforded to give her and her family a comfortable and stable life, something people in the valley were unaccustomed to.

“Good night, Jonas.” She scurried ahead of Samuel toward the house.

Jonas’s laughter filled the air behind her. “Nice to see you too, Elena.”

Once in the house, Elena set the shotgun down inside the doorway and rushed to her bedroom. She checked herself in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her blonde hair askew. She tucked the wayward wisps up with the dainty combs her mother had loaned her for tonight’s occasion.

Inside, a battle raged between the man who had stolen her heart years ago and the one who would arrive any minute. *Lord, why did Jonas come back now?* On the night Lars Rissler was going to ask for her hand in marriage.

Papa told her about the talk Lars had initiated with him on a Sunday a couple weeks back. How excited he was over the prospect of having a successful storeowner for a son-in-law. And her mother had been simply giddy.

Mama walked into her room. “There you are.” She shook her head in disgust. “In your new dress, no less. Look, the hem is soiled.”

“I heard something outside my window. I was trying to help Papa.”

“You ran out to catch a cow thief?” Her mother came up beside her and grasped her shoulders. “Please, dear. Leave the hunting to your father. He wouldn’t want you to put yourself in harm’s way.”

*Jonas’s return did more damage than five stolen cows*.

Mama gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze, then walked toward the door. She paused and leaned against the doorframe. “Did you catch something?”

Elena sucked in a breath. “Catch something?”

 “In the trap, dear.”  Dare she tell her mother that her childhood friend was back in town? Heat rose up her neck. Mama would see right through her if she didn’t come clean.

Mama stepped toward her. “Well, what was it?”

Willing her hands to stop shaking, Elena sat on the corner of her bed. Guilt stabbed at her chest. “It was Jonas. He’s come back.” She attempted to keep her voice even. “How can I accept Lars’s proposal now?”

“Get a hold of yourself.” Her mother’s eyes softened. “This doesn’t change a thing. Jonas is a foolish boy with a rich man’s dreams. He has run from responsibility before and he will do it again. He’s not stable, nor can he provide for you like Lars—a man with position and respect. Please, dear, don’t let your heart get in the way of your head.”

Elena lowered her gaze.

Mama knelt in front of Elena on the braided wool rug, tears glistening in her eyes. “Papa and I want you to be secure in life. Lars can provide that security for you...and for us. We’re praying you will say yes to his proposal.”

A knock on the front door brought her mother to her feet. “He’s here now. I’ll distract him for a few moments while you pull yourself together.”

When Ma left the room, Elena buried her face in her hands. Would her feelings for Jonas never subside? This night was supposed to be one of the happiest of her life. Why, that afternoon, she’d picked up her dress at the post office in Cayucos, nearly knocking over poor old Mr. Burkhart who was leaning on his cane for support. He’d chuckled at her clumsiness. “I know when a woman receives something special in the mail,” he’d said, “because her feet can’t keep up with her excitement.”

“I’m sorry, truly I am,” Elena had said before tossing the box in the wagon and climbing into the seat. “And you’re right. I bought a new dress!” She clicked her tongue and snapped the reins bringing Starlight to a trot.

Once home, she lifted the catalogue dress out of the box and hugged it to her chest, showing Mother and Samuel the pale yellow gown with golden flowers and lace she’d purchased for the night’s occasion.

Now perched on the corner of her bed, she ran a hand over the beautiful fabric. If she didn’t marry for love, at least she found a well-to-do respected man. Perfect enough for a woman with limited prospects in such a small town.

And it would have been too if Jonas hadn’t walked back into her life.

Elena blotted her eyes with a handkerchief. Mama was right, she needed to use her head. She would marry Lars and not disappoint her family. Their future depended on it—Samuel’s most of all. As a shopkeeper, Lars had knowledge about the latest advancements, as well as the means, that would help Samuel become independent. He’d never be able to live on his own and run a dairy farm.

No, she wouldn’t let her past longing for Jonas soil what God had for her now. Elena stood and straightened the sash about her waist. Would Lars see the mud that stained the hem of her skirt?

“Elena dear.” Her mother poked her head into her room. “Are you ready? Lars is waiting.”

“Yes, Mama.” Elena closed her eyes and inhaled, then slowly let out a breath. *Use your head, Elena. Think of your family.* One day she might fall in love with the shopkeeper like she had with Jonas all those years ago.

She walked across the wood floor and paused in the doorway when she caught sight of Lars. He wore a dark suit with a white waistcoat and dotted necktie. In his hand he carried a Homburg hat. Lars definitely dressed in the latest fashion, different from the casual attire of a dairy farmer. And miles apart from the way Jonas looked tonight.

She stepped forward and greeted her guest.

“You look beautiful.” Lars’s compliment brought a smile to her lips. “Shall we go?” He lifted his elbow. “Plenty of stars out tonight to guide our way.”

Her mother met Elena’s gaze, as she prodded her forward. “Have a wonderful time. Nothing can ruin such a beautiful evening.”

“Where’s Papa? I—I wanted to say goodbye to him.” Why was she stalling? Was her resolve weakening already?

“In the barn with Samuel. You’ll see them after dinner. I’ve invited Lars back here for dessert.” Mama shooed them out the front door as if they were a couple of wayward chicks. “Now, get along, you two.”

Elena’s stomach twisted into a queasy knot.

*Jonas, you’ve ruined everything!*