

Familiar Stranger in Clear Springs ~ Chapter One

Southern California, 1876

Elizabeth looked up from marking the last sale in her ledger and frowned at the youngster standing by the large wooden crate of fruit from the backcountry. “Timothy Daugherty! I saw that! That apple does not have your name on it. Put it back right now. Gently please!”

Ten-year-old Timothy looked sufficiently chastised; however, Elizabeth knew better. Under that contrite expression he was plotting how he would talk his way out of this. It wasn't that he was starving. With his father managing the building of the new nail factory up the road, his family had the funds for whatever they desired here in the mercantile. It was the challenge that drove Timothy. He wanted to boast to his friends that he'd given “old Miss Morley” the slip and had gotten away without her realizing she had one less piece of fruit to sell.

His best friend and cohort, Lucas Slater, stood shoulder to shoulder with him and, by the looks of him, was also hiding an apple behind his back. He, however, concerned her. His mother, Martha, struggled to put food on the table for him and his sister ever since her husband passed on suddenly a year ago.

Timothy scowled and tossed the apple back in the crate.

Elizabeth winced. That would be a bruised—and therefore unsellable—piece of fruit. She mentally counted to ten. Deep breath in, deep breath out, letting the briny scent of the harbor fill her lungs. Better that than saying something she would regret. It would be so easy to retort with a sharp word. Too easy. And then wouldn't she be one step closer to being the sour old spinster she vowed never to become?

“Don't you have schoolwork or something you need to be doing?”

“Naw. It's Saturday.”

“I am well aware of the day, young man.” It was the day before Sunday—when after church she would sequester herself inside to be proper. A day she was coming to hate for all that it forced her to be alone when everyone else had families to enjoy. Usually she would work on her quilting, although even that pastime had dulled of late. She had made several quilts and given them away, but wouldn't it be wonderful to have a reason to make a special one to keep?

She pressed her lips together. Wasn't she sounding bitter all of a sudden? Better to be grateful for what she had—a roof over her head, sustenance, her health. She put a smile in her voice. “Perhaps you'd like to earn that apple...and a few more...by doing some chores for me.”

Timothy wrinkled his freckled nose. “Ugh...I got enough chores at home. Don't need no more.”

“Don't need *any* more,” she corrected gently.

“That's what I said!”

“Well, then...” She turned toward the other boy. “Lucas? How about you?”

Startled just as he was returning his own stolen apple, Lucas jumped and scraped his fingers across the edge of the barrel. He winced and examined his thumb.

“Here. Let me see,” Elizabeth said, reaching for his hand. Two splinters pierced the skin and had settled below the reddened surface. “I'll get my drawing salve...and needle.”

She found the items behind the counter and returned to Lucas. His eyes grew large when he saw the needle. “I remember my mother doing this for me when I had a splinter.” Her throat tightened at the image of Mother tending to her minor hurts over the years. Oh, how she missed her.

At Lucas's anxious expression, she pulled her thoughts back to the present situation. “It will hurt much less to have the piece of wood ease out than it did going in. I promise. Just hold still for me.”

He braced himself, trying hard to be brave, but still he squirmed under her attention. When the splinters came out, she spread the salve and tied a small cloth bandage around the injured thumb. "There now. Have your mother look at it tonight."

"Thank ya, ma'am." He shuffled a bit with his feet and avoided her gaze, his face a bright red.

"You're welcome." Amused at his obvious embarrassment—was it from being caught red-handed with the apple or because she'd held his hand?—she found herself studying him. His dark tousled hair could use a combing. For that matter, his clothes could stand a cleaning.

"Isn't your mother taking in laundry now?" she asked.

"Yes'm."

Like the cobbler who didn't have shoes for his children, it must be the woman didn't have time to wash her own family's clothes...or have the energy once her other work was done. Elizabeth sighed. Her knack for details was a good thing to have in running the mercantile, yet it unfortunately came with a negative side—the tendency to be altogether too critical of others. She would make up something for Lucas to do—perhaps sweeping or dusting—even though the store was as clean as could be. Then he could take home a sack filled with apples for his family.

Lucas shot a look at Timothy, who had started backing away.

Timothy cocked his head, indicating they should go.

"Can't stay today," Lucas said. "We're goin' fishin'." And with that, he bolted out the door with his buddy. They each grabbed a fishing pole that they'd left leaning against the store's outer wall and jumped off the boardwalk. The motion dislodged the wedge that propped open the door and it swung shut with a loud bang. The shelving display of colored glassware rattled at the disturbance.

Elizabeth stepped to the entry and propped the mercantile door open again with the wooden wedge and watched the two race across the dirt road to the open area beyond the old jail. Just before scooting out of sight behind the building, Timothy reached into each of his bulging back pockets and pulled out two apples, handing one to his cohort. Amused, Elizabeth blew out a short breath. At least it wouldn't weigh on her mind about Lucas being hungry.

Something pressed against her ankles. Patches. She reached down and picked up her cat, scratching him behind the ears as she cuddled him to her and continued to watch the two boys. They headed for the small strip of sandy beach where they rolled up their pant-legs and waded into the water to throw in their lines. September, as a rule, was warm enough for wading, but another month and it would be too cool to fish that way. Still, she envied them their freedom. It had been years since she walked barefoot on the beach and dug her toes deep into the soft sand.

A cool sea breeze teased a tendril of hair that tickled her neck. She tucked the strand back up in her loose bun. It was a cursory repair that would be down again in another half hour, but by then she would be closing the mercantile and how she looked to her customers would be the last thing on her mind.

Across the way, in front of her alterations shop, Mrs. Flynn stopped rocking in her porch chair and waved.

Elizabeth raised her hand in response and then lowered it slowly when she noticed a scruffy-looking rider down the main street of town. Something about him seemed familiar, but with his back to her, she couldn't place where she'd seen him. The way he sat his horse reminded her of someone. With one last glance toward the boys, she turned and entered the mercantile.

Twilight offered Tom Barrington the anonymity he craved as he rode his horse down La Playa's main street and silently took in the changes in the town. Twilight, and the fact that his month's growth of facial hair and well-worn clothes made him look every bit the dusty itinerant. Not far from the truth. He'd lived in the shirt and canvas pants long enough they'd lost their itch and then regained it. How—he didn't want to contemplate too deeply.

He reined the Major to a stop before Rose's Hotel. Through the front windows the warm glow of lamplight beckoned hospitably. His first order of business, once he'd seen to his horse, would be a bath and a shave. After traveling for the past three weeks he could scarcely stand to live with himself. He dismounted, taking care to put his weight on his right leg, and looped the reins around the front post. The Major pranced sideways and then pawed at the ground. "Easy now," Tom said quietly. When he was sure his horse had settled, Tom climbed the steps and strode through the front door.

A short, balding man stood behind the high counter, took his information and handed him a room key and a folded note. "Mr. Furst left this for you. Northern California, you say? Seen any Indian action?"

Tom had, but long ago he had learned to keep things to himself. “Some,” he murmured. Upon reading the message he relaxed slightly. Sam had received his wire and would meet with him later that evening. He had just enough time for a bite to eat after taking care of the Major.

“May I see to your horse?” the clerk asked.

The livery was probably in the same place. And in a town this size, if it wasn’t, he would soon find it. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Suit yourself.”

He slipped the key and the note into his inside vest pocket and headed back outside. The Major snorted at the weeds at the base of his holding post, sending up a small cloud of dust. He stomped one foreleg, the motion jarring his muscles up to his shoulder. He had seen a lot of action over the years. A new place, a sharp sound, and his horse could easily break into an all-out dash down the road and be three miles to the foothills before anyone noticed. For three weeks, Tom had used his saddle as a pillow and slept close by, sensing calmness in the horse when he was near. Wouldn’t happen tonight. He was done in. The lure of a soft, clean bed was more enticing than camping out on stacked hay bales near a skittish horse. Once settled, Tom hoped a full feed bucket and a warm stall would soothe the Major’s disposition.

The livery was the same, inside and out, as it had been when he’d been posted here in the army. The town had changed some—construction had commenced on what looked to become a large building on the outskirts of town. Other than that, some businesses had left—most notably the bank. Couldn’t blame ‘em. Nothing much happened in a town this size. Seeing as it was Saturday night, a few regular customers were in the small saloon, but all in all, it was still a quiet, isolated place compared to just about anywhere else on earth but the desert. Heck, if he remembered correctly, even the main road to San Diego washed out on a yearly basis. Nothing like that to keep a town to itself.

He sure hoped Mr. Furst, Sr. hadn’t wired Sam the minute he’d left the main bank in the city. He’d like to say his piece before Sam completely shut him out and refused to listen. During the ride south he had asked himself how he would handle it if neither man would talk to him. Hadn’t come up with any answers. Guess if it came to that, he’d know what to do.

He stabled the Major, gave him an extra helping of oats and headed back to the hotel. He should wash up a bit and shave before meeting Sam. As he neared the building, he could smell the beginnings of supper cooking, the scent of onions and garlic and fish floated on the breeze, intertwined with the briny odor from the harbor. After hours in the saddle, the walking eased the pain in his leg, so instead of going directly into the hotel’s restaurant, he headed down to the water’s edge.

Miniature waves lapped against the pilings of the wharf—the sound relaxing him further.

A light flashed overhead, bouncing off the low clouds. Adrenaline shot through him. Instinctively his hand wrapped around his gun handle. He hesitated...and then exhaled, feeling foolish as he remembered. He’d seen the beam of light before—the lighthouse at the end of the peninsula. Skittish? Heck, he was worse off than the Major.

Across the harbor in Old Town, lamplight flickered, the same as it did in the adobe and wood homes scattered along the roadside and up against the base of the ridge behind him. It seemed peaceful, but peace in his line of work was more often than not an illusion.

He reached in his pocket for paper and tobacco and rolled a cigarette, the motion smooth until he realized his hands shook. Disgusted with himself, he tossed the paper and pinch of tobacco into the shallows. What was he doing here? The military couldn’t use him anymore except behind a desk sorting papers. What made him think he was different than anybody else in his line of work that this had happened to?

Was he getting too slow for this kind of work? He wanted to squash that thought even as it sprang into his head—just as he had the past fifty times he had considered it. He knew plenty of men older than his thirty-one years who still handled fieldwork. To hear them talk they did all right. However, they weren’t crippled. It was his injury that ruined everything and made him a has-been.

But then he remembered Jeff Cranston. His own injury was nothing compared to what had happened to his partner, whose body now rested eternally. He swallowed hard. *Leave it. Nothing good comes from digging up the past.*

The past... He took a long look at the quiet street, for the first time letting his gaze roam past the small bank building, past the dark jail and the old Mexican custom house, until he came at last to the mercantile. The store windows were dark, as he expected, yet above, on the second floor, a soft glow lit one window. Who lived there now?

Four years ago it had been Miss Elizabeth Morley and her brother. He'd never gotten along with her brother, but he sure remembered her. Prettiest deep brown eyes he'd ever seen along with her rich, coffee-colored hair. She was taller than most women, slender and graceful to a fault. The day he had walked into her store and first laid eyes on her he'd been hard-pressed to find an intelligent word to say. He had fallen under her spell even before they'd shared that kiss, but once that happened he knew she was the only one for him. He thought for sure she felt the same way.

Anyone worth his salt could see she was a catch back then. She could have had her pick of any of a dozen officers in the army. They all thought she was something special, yet they'd all given up the minute that dandy from the city started hanging around her doorstep. He'd been the fool to keep coming around. Maybe that's why he wasn't officer material—it took him longer than most men to admit defeat whether it was chasing down criminals or when it came to matters of the heart.

Guess in the end money talked louder than any feelings she had for him because he wasn't gone four weeks before he heard she had up and married that rich fellow. Remembering the letter he'd posted was an embarrassment now. He had explained why his contingent had had to light out in the gray light of morning, but more than that, he'd gone on for an entire second page about making plans for when they'd see each other again. Likely by the time his letter made it here from Texas she was already set for her wedding. One thing was certain—she sure hadn't bothered to send a reply.

Even thinking of it now set up a slow burn in his gut. He should listen to that and leave things alone. That chapter of his life had closed a long time ago. Over. Done. It was a frustration that the entire ride south from Sacramento he had been unable to avoid thinking about her. The closer he got to La Playa, the stronger the images of their time together returned. Likely because this was the first time in years he was back in this small town.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten anything since two cold tortillas he'd saved from his breakfast at that cantina along the San Luis Rey River. He turned toward the hotel and then paused, looking once more down the main street of town toward the mercantile.

She wouldn't be there. He knew that. Why did he feel this compulsion to see for himself? Was it for old times' sake? Which was a maudlin emotion he should abandon right now. Or was it to torture himself over the fact that she was gone and married off? She was probably living in some big fancy stucco house in San Diego now with a passel of children.

“Aw...hell...”

He wouldn't be satisfied until he saw for himself. She wouldn't be there...but maybe whoever owned the place now would have word on what had happened to her.

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