

FAMILIAR STRANGER IN CLEAR SPRINGS

✧ *Excerpt* ✧

Elizabeth moved to the stove and filled the kettle with water. Stuffing kindling and old brown wrapping paper into the stove, she struck a match to it. “Just to take the chill off.”

Oh, my. She gave herself a mental shake. Here she was talking to her cat. Again.

Bells tinkled as the front door opened.

“We’re closed for the day,” she called out absently without looking up. A body should know one didn’t do commerce so late in the day. Who would be wanting something at this hour?

“Ma’am?”

Odd how a voice could stay in a person’s memory forever. The deep tone sent tremors to the ends of her toes. She nearly dropped the kettle. As it was her hand shook violently. A vision flashed through her memory of the stranger she’d seen riding through town earlier. Now she could put a name to that form. Tom. Tom Barrington. Elizabeth stood frozen to the spot, unable to move for a moment. Then she glanced up.

Despite the thick dark mustache and scruffy beard hiding most of his face, she recognized him. It was his eyes. The blueness that had been so striking all those years ago was still there. His shoulders were broader than she remembered, and his frame taller, leaner, as though he’d lived hard without a lot of the finer comforts. That barely registered. She’d given up on ever seeing him again and now here he was standing before her. She could scarcely remember to breathe.

He stood in the doorway, black Stetson in hand, waiting for permission to enter the store farther. So clearly did the image come to her of the last day she had seen him standing there in his soldier blues that she drew in a shaky breath and set down the kettle. He wasn’t wearing a corporal’s uniform now, but a dark gray leather duster. His clothes had a layer of grit on them at least a half-inch thick. The wind off the ocean had tousled his dark brown, nearly black hair until it was completely lacking its parting on the side—or perhaps he no longer kept it as he once had when he was in the military. He looked surprised to see her—perhaps even shocked.

“Elizabeth?”

How many times had she hoped he’d walk back through that door over the past four years? One hundred? Two hundred? She’d imagined all sorts of scenarios. He’d rush in and sweep her off her feet. She’d run to him and throw her arms around him. Always, always, the dreams had ended in a deep kiss. Of course, that had been when she’d thought he’d return for her upon receiving her letter. That hope...that dream...had died years ago. And, unlike Lazarus, it would not be revived. Four years was too long to wait for anyone.

Oddly, the thought flashed through her mind that she was glad she hadn’t yet changed from her day dress as she so often did once she shut up the store for the night. Usually she anticipated the removal of her corset at the end of a long day much as she imagined a horse reveled in the loss of his cinch and saddle. For now, the laced binding under her dark plum-colored skirt and bodice held her upright and firm. Perhaps she had enough layers on to feel sufficiently armored against his charm now.

After all, he was the one who had left *her*. Without word, without a care for what she’d thought they meant to each other, without asking her to wait for him or taking her with him. He’d been a scoundrel...and she hated him for it.

Well, at least she’d learned a thing or two since then. She had grown stronger after the initial hurt when she’d found out he was gone and wasn’t coming back. And she was strong enough to face him now. More than strong enough, even if her knees did feel a bit wobbly.

She swallowed. “Mr. Barrington.” The sound of his name came firm and cool. “I assume it is... ‘Mr.’ now by the way you are clothed. Not ‘Corporal.’ Not ‘Captain.’”

“‘Mr.’ is fine.” He ducked his head under the door frame and stepped farther into the store. The door swung shut behind him with a solid whump. He didn’t even jump at the sound. In fact, he appeared a bit dazed as he looked at her, almost as though he were seeing a ghost. “What are you doing here?”

His question baffled her. Where else would she be? "I'm not sure I follow..."

He huffed out a breath but still eyed her warily. "Same here."

The timbre and cadence of his voice hadn't changed and she recalled with a sharp pang how at one time she had loved its sound. He spun his hat slowly by the brim as the silence lengthened uncomfortably between them.

Her pulse picked up. "You're looking well," she managed to say. He did look well. She couldn't quite get over how he'd filled out in the years since she'd seen him. Irritated at herself for feeling even the slightest twinge of physical reaction she rested her hands on the countertop and intertwined her fingers, glad to have the solid wood between them to steady her.

His gaze swept down to her hands.

She thought he frowned, but she couldn't be sure under all that scruffy beard. "I must admit I'm surprised to see you at all. It's been so long." She was rather pleased with herself. She had spoken coherently even though her insides were dashing to and fro.

"I just got in from up north. Near Stockton. Thought I'd take a look around, check out the changes." He broke eye contact, finally releasing her from his hold, and glanced about the store—a cursory, uninterested look. "Hasn't changed much."

"Things are near the same here—except, of course, the army is gone."

"Heard that happened right after I left."

"For a while things were tough. Businesses left. But now the new nail factory is helping turn things back around. The men building it often use this store and the Fursts are reopening a small branch of the bank here, which will be good for the area." She didn't want to talk about the town or the nail factory. She wanted to know where he'd been and what he'd been doing since she'd last seen him. All the polite inanities meant nothing to her in the face of that. And yet...why should she care where he'd been? He'd left her and by the sound of it was only here on a whim. She began to wish he'd just go, just leave her in peace. She didn't need his brand of tormenting.

"You been working here all that time?"

She shrugged slightly, still confused at his question. "Of course."

The kettle whistled.

Startled, she jumped, having forgotten about the tea. Relieved to have something to do, she turned back to the stove and grabbed a quilted pad to protect her skin, and then slid the kettle off the burner plate.

"I don't see a ring on your finger. What happened to that rich fellow?"

Still facing the stove, she absorbed the import of his words. He thought she had married? Then he didn't know? Her mouth dropped open before she covered it with her hand and turned quickly to face him. "I...I never married Preston."

He pulled back as though she'd slapped him, an incredulous look on his face "Never? What the deuces happened?"

Why was he suddenly angry with her? She was the one who had been spurned. He left *her*! In the middle of the night he left her without a word! "You have no call to raise your voice at me, Mr. Barrington."

Rapid footsteps sounded outside the door and her neighbor, Mrs. Flynn, barged into the mercantile. The interruption punctured the air of discord that had grown between the two of them. Elizabeth exhaled.

Her heavyset neighbor was huffing like she'd run a race rather than just walk across the dirt road. The woman glanced sharply at Tom and then back at her. "Oh, my. I didn't realize you had a visitor. I had a bit of extra stew, dear. Thought you might like it for your supper." She raised the item in her hands—a dish covered over with a heavily embroidered towel.

The bright innocence in her expression didn't fool Elizabeth. Apparently she had seen Tom enter the store and wanted to find out what was going on. "Mrs. Flynn, this is Mr. Barrington," she said, trying to muster up a more gracious attitude. "He has just come to town and didn't realize I close the store at dusk."

Tom glanced from Mrs. Flynn back to her, sizing up the situation. It was unseemly for a man to be present in the store after hours unless it was family. Her reputation could be called into question. His jaw tensed as he slid on his hat and tipped the brim to Mrs. Flynn. "Ma'am." He turned back to Elizabeth, his blue gaze stormy. "Sorry to interrupt your evening *Miss* Morley. I'll just take my leave." He strode out the door.

She sank into the nearest chair. Truth be told, she was grateful for the reprieve. His question hammered inside her with no answer. Why had the man thought she married Preston? It didn't make sense, not after the kiss they'd shared. How could he think she would go and marry someone else after that earth-shattering kiss?

Her neighbor's eyes were alight with anxious speculation. It wasn't every day that the town spinster was caught alone with a gentleman caller. She wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Flynn had this spread faster than a fever all over the village by tomorrow. She groaned inwardly, realizing the looks she might have to endure at church services tomorrow morning. If only she had thought to keep the door wedged open. At least that would have made everything more socially acceptable. As it was, Tom's entrance had completely flustered her.

"Nothing untoward happened," she said irritably. For goodness' sake, she was a grown woman. And this was her store. Her house.

Mrs. Flynn set the covered dish on the counter. "I understand, dear. I just thought you might need my help with an uncomfortable situation. I was on my way over when I heard raised voices."

That stopped Elizabeth. "You interrupted...because you were worried?"

Mrs. Flynn readjusted her wire-rimmed glasses on her button nose and peered down at her. "Of course. You live alone. Someone has to watch out for you. And I know your mother would appreciate it."

"Then thank you. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful just now."

The older woman fussed with the placement of the towel over the bowl, trying to keep the steam and heat contained. "Did you know that man, dear?"

Elizabeth sighed. "Once, a long time ago."

"He's rather gruff if you ask me. And unkempt."

Her appraisal sparked a memory, making Elizabeth relax her grip on her frustration. "You should have seen him in his soldier blues. He was quite dashing."

She ignored the woman's sudden renewed interest and rose, walking over to the counter and the bowl of stew. The aroma of onions and cooked meat wafted up. She wasn't hungry in the least. Not now—now that she knew Tom Barrington was near. "Thank you for this. It smells delicious."

"You are entirely welcome. I'll...just be going, then."

"Good night, Mrs. Flynn."

Elizabeth waited for her to leave, and then shut and latched the door. Through the crack between the shade and the window frame she peered out the window and watched her neighbor enter her house. Exactly how long did the woman intend to look out for her? Until she herself was ninety? Her brother... Mrs. Flynn...they meant well. In their way, they made her feel safe. She loved La Playa, loved the harbor and the people. Truly, she did. But lately the town seemed to close in on her in the same way that the air could feel heavy before a threatening storm.

She walked to the stove and poured the hot water from the kettle over the tea infuser while her thoughts centered on all that Tom had said. He thought she was married! All this time! For all these years! It was so improbable. Could that be why he had never answered her letter?

And now, what did it mean that he was back? He had given no reason for his being here, and since he'd believed she was married, it certainly wasn't to see her.

He might come back—although judging from his past record she didn't know why she should believe that. Slowly, the tightness in her chest eased. Perhaps the question she should be asking herself is whether she wanted him to. Just thinking that way made her stomach churn. No. Definitely no. It would not be for the best.

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I hope you have enjoyed this excerpt!