

Ranch Life is Great

By

Misty Malone

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Table of Contents:

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[About the Author](#)

[EBook Offer](#)

[Blushing Books Newsletter](#)

[Blushing Books](#)

Chapter One

Sherman, Wyoming, 1891

Cade Collins was on his way back to the barn after checking on a herd of heifers when he saw his foreman, Wyatt Hammond, coming up the lane of the ranch, riding hard. It wasn't like Wyatt to run his horse like that unless it was something important, so Cade was instantly on alert. He hurried to the barn, where he slid off Thunder, his gelding, and tied him loosely to the fence rail before hurrying to meet his foreman.

"Cade, you best be getting into town as quick as you can. Miss Elsie's parents are dead."

"Dead? What happened? They were both fine last night."

"When I got to town, I went to the Wintock Mercantile, but it's closed today. It seems Miss Elsie's mother and father went down from their living quarters over the store early and were getting the store ready to open for the day. When it was about time to open, Miss Elsie went down to help them and she found them lying on the floor. Somebody shot them both."

"Do they know who shot them?"

"Not that I know of. She and her Aunt Gertrude are pretty upset."

"I'm going in to see her right away. Can you tell Maria where I'm going and why? Tell her she may want to get a couple bedrooms ready. I'm going to try to talk Elsie and her aunt both into coming out to stay here. If Elsie's worried about staying here before we're married, we may just move the wedding date up—to today."

"I'll handle things here, boss. You take care of Miss Elsie and her aunt."

"Thanks, Wyatt." Cade untied Thunder and quickly swung himself up into the saddle and was gone. He'd been seeing Elsie Wintock for almost nine months and had recently asked for her hand in marriage. She'd accepted, and they were planning a wedding in the fall.

Wyatt stood in the lane and watched him leave. The next few days at least would be hectic for everyone. He'd do what he could to help at the ranch, but he knew his boss was going to have his hands full. He turned toward the house to warn Maria, Cade's cook and housekeeper.

Cade's mind was on his future bride as he hurried into town. He may try to talk her into

marrying him today instead of waiting until the fall. He didn't like the idea of Elsie and her aunt, two small but very pretty young ladies, staying alone in town, especially after what happened to her parents. His mind wandered as he rode hard toward town. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to kill Henry and Velma Wintock. They operated one of the two general stores in town, so most people in town knew them. He didn't know of one person who didn't like them.

Cade knew Elsie and her aunt would be devastated. Her aunt had come to stay with them about a month ago, when her husband passed away. He was glad her aunt was staying with them, but Elsie was still going to have a difficult time ahead of her. Helping her parents run that store had been a big part of her life for a long time. Now that would all be changed forever, and she would have to decide what she wanted to do with the store.

He got to the mercantile and slid off Thunder and tied him to the hitching post. There was a small crowd gathered outside, all talking low and looking down. He excused himself and made his way to the door, but it was locked. He knocked when he saw Elsie, her aunt, Sheriff Daniel Fitch and Deputy George Tillman. Elsie soon opened the door and went straight into Cade's waiting arms. He held her, while moving them inside the store and locking it. He led her back to the group, with his arm still tightly around her.

With no hesitation, he reached out with his other arm and pulled her Aunt Gertrude in against him, as well, before turning back to his intended. "Are you okay, honey? What happened?"

Elsie was very emotional and tears were flowing again, so Sheriff Fitch answered for her. "Miss Wintock came down from their living quarters on the next floor when it was time to open the store and found Henry and Velma lying on the floor. Someone had shot them. So far we have no idea who would have done such a thing. My quick check with the neighbors indicates no one seems to have seen or even heard anything."

Cade continued to hold both of the ladies close as he addressed the sheriff. "Do you know how or where they got in here? They generally don't unlock the door until it's time to open, do they?"

"No. As a matter of fact, Miss Wintock said that's how she knew something was wrong. She came down at opening time, but the front door was still locked, and no one came when she knocked. So she took out her key and opened the door herself."

He pulled her in a little closer. "I'm so sorry, Elsie. Are you two ladies okay?"

Elsie nodded, and Aunt Gertrude spoke. "We will be, Cade. Thank you for coming in. When Elsie saw her parents, she screamed. I heard the scream and came running down. I've been with her since, but you're the one she's needed. She's been shaking pretty badly."

He pulled both of them in tighter. "Thank you for being here for her, Aunt Gertrude. When you're done here, why don't both of you come out to the ranch and stay?"

Elsie looked up at him, shock written on her face. He patted her back. "You know there's plenty of room." He turned to Aunt Gertrude with an explanation. "Dad built a big house with the idea that when I found a wife and got married we could have our bedroom in one wing, along with any children we have, and they could live in the other. Both families would have privacy, while sharing the main house."

Gertrude nodded. "I knew Elsie said it's a huge house."

"When Mom inherited the ranch she grew up on in Texas, they debated what they should do; which ranch they should run. Dad said he knew I could run this one myself, but that one in Texas has been left in limbo for a few years while my grandfather was ill, and it's starting to get run down. They decided to move there and make a good working ranch out of it again. If they sell it, it will be worth more if it's a successful, operating ranch. Then once it's in good shape again, they'll decide if they want to stay there and run it, or sell it and move back here. That leaves me alone in that big house, with just Maria, my cook and housekeeper."

"That sounds like a good decision on their part," Gertrude said.

Elsie was shaking her head. "I just don't know if—"

Cade studied his bride-to-be, and tried to put her at ease. "I'm a gentleman, Elsie. I think you know that. You can trust me. No one will be talking or thinking otherwise, either, because Maria's there, and your aunt will be there, as well. Maria's home right now getting two guest rooms ready for the two of you. Anyone who knows Maria, which is most everyone in Sherman, knows that she will not allow anything untoward to occur before we are married. Aunt Gertrude will be there, as well, so we'll have two chaperons. I don't think tongues will wag. What do you think, Sheriff?"

The sheriff was a little surprised by the question, but quickly agreed. "I'd have to say you're right, Cade. Maria's been with your family a long time now, and I think pretty much everyone in town knows her, and they know her morals. I don't think people would be gossiping at all."

Cade turned back to Elsie. "So will you two lovely ladies come stay at the ranch?"

She paused, obviously thinking. Sheriff Fitch offered a thought. "Of course it's up to you, Miss Wintock, but speaking personally and as the sheriff, I think I'd feel better if you two stayed at the ranch for at least a few days while I look into this. I have no idea who could be behind this, but until I find out something about it, I'd feel better knowing you two are safe with Cade at his ranch."

Both ladies and Cade turned to look at the sheriff. Cade found his voice first. "Are you saying the ladies may be in danger?"

"I don't know, Cade. That's my problem. I can't imagine anyone who knew Henry and Velma who would have wanted to harm them. Everyone knew them and loved them. So I have no idea who could be behind this. But until I have some clue to go on, I don't know what to think." He turned to Elsie. "You don't know of anyone who may have been upset with your father about anything; anyone he may have had any kind of business with?"

"I really don't," she insisted. "I've been thinking about that since you asked me earlier, but I just can't think of anyone."

"You and your family moved here about nine years ago, you said?"

"About that, yes."

"Did he have any business dealings with anyone back east who could have been upset when you moved out here?"

"Not that I know of. He and his dad and brother ran the family general store. He came out here to open his own store, but his dad and brother continued running the store there. If there were any kind of problems, I would think they would deal with them. That store is still open."

"It doesn't sound like there could be any problem there. Nine years is a long time, too. If someone were upset with him there, I certainly wouldn't think they'd wait nine years to confront him. I think we can rule that possibility out. That still doesn't give me any clues, though, as to who may have done this, or why. Until I know that, I can't really say I feel comfortable with you two ladies staying by yourselves here, in the same building."

"I understand, Sheriff, and I have to agree with you," Cade said.

"We're not two helpless females, though, Cade. Papa taught me how to use a gun, and I have one upstairs. I'm sure he taught Aunt Gertrude, as well."

Gertrude nodded her head. "He certainly did. My brother believed that every lady should

know how to handle a gun so she can defend herself. I have a gun upstairs, as well."

"I can't disagree with him, and I'm glad he taught each of you how to handle a gun, but I would still feel much better if you were both at the ranch," Cade countered.

"But what about the store? I have to be here to open it."

Cade glanced over at the sheriff, who looked as shocked as he was. He turned back to his future bride. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Elsie?"

Now she was the one who looked shocked. "I have to. Cade, I have no choice. We have a store that's full of merchandise that needs to be sold, and there are people in this town counting on that merchandise."

"I know you've helped your parents with the store for several years, but do you know all you'll need to know to be able to step in and take over running it? I mean, do you know how to keep the books, and how to place your orders?"

She pulled back from him and looked up at him. "Are you saying I'm not smart enough to run the store?"

He tried to pull her closer to him again, but she was staying right where she was, obviously waiting for his answer. "No, I'm not saying that at all," he tried to assure her. "I know you and you're a very smart lady. All I was asking is if your father showed you how to do those things." He smoothed her hair as he pulled her in against him. "Honey, I had an awful lot of respect for your father, and I think you know that."

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound challenging."

"That's all right. You're under a lot of stress right now, and I understand that. But that's part of the reason I want you to go to the ranch with me. Give yourself a couple of days to come to grips with what's happened, and then we can talk about what you want to do. If you want to run the store, at least for a while, I'll do what I can to help. I'm not saying I won't worry, because I probably will. But I'd feel a lot better if you at least give the sheriff a couple days to see if he can get some kind of clue as to who may have done this. I don't want whoever did this to come back for you and your aunt."

He could tell she was fighting tears again, but he watched as his brave little lady squared her shoulders. "You're right, that does make sense. But then you're fine with me opening the store again? We have regular customers who count on us."

"I know you do, Elsie. I'm one of them. But I think everyone in town will understand if

you're closed for a few days while the sheriff looks into this tragedy. If any of your regular customers need something, they can go to the other store this one time. I'm sure they'll come back to you once you get it back open."

"That makes sense, I know. I just hate to see them go somewhere else. What if they don't come back?"

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Everyone who came here loved your family. I think they'll be back."

Again, he watched as she took a deep breath, drawing strength. She looked at her aunt. "What do you think, Aunt Gertie?"

"I think you should listen to your future husband. He's a smart man. I think we both need a couple days or so to attempt to find some kind of peace with what happened."

"Will you do that, please, Elsie? Maria will be excited to have ladies to talk to, and I'll feel a lot better knowing you two are safe at the ranch while Sheriff Fitch investigates this tragedy. We'll make arrangements for a funeral, and then you and your aunt can take a little time to think about this and decide what you want to do. When you feel ready to make a decision, I'll help you all I can. Whatever you decide to do, we'll do it together."

"Thank you, Cade."

"You're going to be Mrs. Collins soon. Of course I'll help all I can, whatever you decide to do."

They finished answering questions the sheriff had, and Cade suggested the ladies gather up a few things to take with them while he went to the livery to rent a buggy to take them home.

Elsie shook her head. "We'll go get some things together, but there's no need to rent the buggy. Dad's buggy is in the building out behind the store, and the horse is at the livery. I can drive Aunt Gertie and me out."

"We'll compromise," he said, not asked. "We'll take your buggy and horse, but I'll drive it. We'll tie Thunder on behind. I don't like the thought of you driving after what you've been through. There's plenty of room at the ranch and the men will take good care of your horse and the buggy."

She nodded and the two ladies went upstairs to pack. When they came back down Cade had the horse and buggy ready to go, with Thunder tied on behind the buggy. He helped both ladies into the buggy and they headed for the ranch.

Both ladies were quiet on the way there, which Cade could understand, but was also a bit concerned about. He reached over and took one of Elsie's small hands in his. "Are you all right, Elsie?"

She looked up at him with sad eyes. At that moment, he realized just how vulnerable his little future wife was. At not much over five feet tall, with beautiful blonde hair and gorgeous blue eyes, she was small, or as she liked to call it, petite.

What she lacked in size, though, she made up for in spunk. She was a real dynamo. To everyone who saw her, she seemed so strong, though he'd always known she had a softer side and appreciated the help and guidance he gave her, though she'd never admit that to anyone. He doubted she even admitted it to herself. But he didn't care. He'd seen her flourish, even thrive, and always seemed happy when he kept a watchful eye on her. She was headstrong, and occasionally he had to rein her back in a bit for her own good.

Maria had always said the two of them made quite a pair. She was barely over five feet tall, while he was just under six feet. His dark brown hair and brown eyes offset her blonde hair and blue eyes. He often wondered what their children would look like. But they got along well, and that was the important part. She was more carefree, even to the point of being reckless at times, while he was more the steady and careful type. Wyatt often compared them to the tortoise and the hare. Cade often thought the comparison, though funny, was fair.

But now he was concerned about her. She hadn't said anything since they'd left Sherman. She was looking at him, had obviously heard his question, but hadn't responded yet. He put his arm around her and slid her over closer to him. Keeping an arm around her protectively, he tried again. "I know this has been a very difficult morning, Elsie. Are you all right?"

She nodded slightly before leaning her head on his shoulder. "I will be. It's just a lot to absorb."

"I know. If there's anything I can do to help you, let me know. That goes for Maria and Wyatt, as well. I'm sure they'll both feel the same way. If any of us can do anything for either of you, please tell us."

She nodded. "I've just been thinking about all I have to do. I have to make the arrangements for the funeral, and I have to get Mama and Papa's wills. What do I do with them?"

"They had wills, for sure?"

"Yes. Papa showed me one time where they are, and told me the mercantile would go to

me. I could still live above it, and that's probably why he taught me everything I'd need to know to run it. He showed me how to keep the books. As a matter of fact, he's had me doing that part of the time to make sure I know how to do it. He showed me how to order merchandise to replace what we sell. He had me do that a couple times, as well, to make sure I know how to do it. So I know I can do it now. It's just not going to—"

She paused, and he knew what she was thinking. "It's not going to seem right for you to be running it without your mother and father there, helping, I know, honey. That's why I said you should take some time and give it some thought. Wait until your head has cleared a little bit to make these decisions."

"But I have to run it, Cade. What else would I do?"

"Honey, you have to do what feels right to you. If you want to run it, that's fine. If it's too painful for you to do it without them there, that's understandable. You could sell it, or you could rent it out for a period of time. That would give you some time to decide for sure what you want to do. I'll back you in whatever decision you make, but it has to be what feels right to you."

"Thank you, Cade," she whispered.

"I'm so glad you're here for her, Cade," Gertrude said from the back seat. She addressed her niece next. "Elsie, Cade can be a real help for you, if you allow it. You're lucky to have such a good man. Don't be too stubborn to let him help."

Cade had to bite his tongue to keep from chuckling. Aunt Gertrude knew his Elsie well, it would appear.

There was one other thing he wanted to talk to her about, but he wasn't sure exactly how to bring it up. He finally decided just to come straight out with it and hope for the best. "Elsie, before we get back to the ranch, I have something I want to talk to you about."

"What's that?"

"Our wedding. I know we're planning a fall wedding, which is several months away yet. If you want to keep it there, that's fine, but I thought maybe you might want to move it up. I won't push you, but I want you to know that if you want to move it up, I'm fine with that. We can get Maria and Wyatt and go back and find the preacher and get married yet today if you'd like."

Her eyes were wide when she looked at him. "Why would I want to do that?"

"I'm not saying you should want to, honey, but simply telling you if you do, I'm fine with it. Truthfully, I'd love it. But again, you don't have to make any important decisions right away,

just keep it in mind over the next few weeks. While you're sorting things out in your mind, if you decide you'd feel better staying here than over the store, that's fine. I could certainly understand it. If you decide to stay here and would feel better if we were married, we sure can do that."

"Thank you."

"I know you're hurting, and I'd love to be able to hold you in my arms as you go to sleep so I can comfort you and reassure you, remind you I'm here for you. People know we're planning a wedding anyway, so no one would question it if we move it up now after what's happened. I love you with all my heart and am anxious to make you my wife, but like I told you when you agreed to marry me, I will not push you. Just keep the offer in mind."

"All right, I will. Thank you." She was quiet during the rest of the trip, and he assumed she was simply thinking back over her morning. He knew she had a lot on her mind.

They arrived back at the ranch not much longer after that conversation. Wyatt came in from the barn and Maria came out of the house. Both were there to greet them when he stopped the buggy. He lifted each of the ladies up and helped them down, and Maria had them tightly wrapped in a hug the second their feet touched the ground. "I'm so sorry for your loss, both of you," she told them sincerely. "You let me know what I can do to help you. Let's get inside. I have some nice hot tea and cookies for you."

Cade smiled. He knew Maria would be like a mother hen to them, which he figured is exactly what they needed right now. The men followed them into the house. Wyatt expressed his condolences, and told them he would do anything to help them, as well. The ladies thanked him, and he went back to the barn, leaving Cade to tend to the ladies, while he tended to the animals and ranch hands.

With Maria's help, the ladies settled in easily. Cade helped them make all the arrangements for her parents' funeral, and was there with her, supporting both of them through all of it. He suggested she take a few days to decide what she wanted to do from there, but his headstrong bride-to-be was having none of it.

"Cade, I have to get back into town and get the store open. Our customers have gone without being able to buy their supplies from us for five days. If I don't get it opened again real soon I'll be losing all our customers that Mama and Papa worked so hard to get. I can't do that. I'll be going back home this afternoon and the store will be open tomorrow."

He sighed, and took one of her hands. "Elsie, I understand why you feel you have to

reopen the store and, if it were my family's business, I would probably feel the same way. My concern is that the sheriff hasn't had any luck figuring out who did this terrible thing."

"I understand your concern, Cade, and I thank you for it. But I can't let Papa down. He worked hard to build it up and taught me how to run it. If I don't keep it open, I'm not honoring him."

He took her in his arms and held her a few moments. "Then I'll take you two back into town this afternoon and help you get the store ready. Before we do that, though, I'd like to take you both outside and let you show me how you handle a gun."

"I assure you, Papa taught us both. We know what we're doing."

"I believe you, honey, but you know me. I'll worry about you, but I'll feel a little better if I see for myself that you can both defend yourselves."

Gertrude, who was standing at the window, turned to face her niece. "He deserves that, Elsie. We both know we can handle a gun just fine, but if the tables were turned, you would be concerned about him. He'll feel better knowing we can keep ourselves safe. I think it's only fair."

Elsie turned back to her intended. "You're right. I'm sorry. We'll go get our guns."

"Thank you. I'd like to see how you handle them, make sure you know how to clean them, load them, and then we'll do a little target practice. It really will ease my mind, I think, if I see it myself."

She nodded, and the two ladies ran upstairs to their rooms. They returned a few minutes later, and proceeded to unload and clean their guns. They then reloaded them and took them outside. He watched as they repeatedly hit the targets they were aiming at. He felt much better about them having guns with them, but was still worried.

He took them into town in their buggy, with Thunder tied behind again. They went into the store and he helped get it cleaned up and stocked so it was ready to reopen. Sheriff Fitch saw them come into town and went to talk with them.

Cade was counting on finding the sheriff and talking to him before he went back to the ranch, so he was glad he'd come to the store. "Have you found anything at all yet, Sheriff?"

"Unfortunately, Cade, I haven't found a thing. No one seems to have seen or heard anything, which is highly unusual. I don't know if they really did sneak in unnoticed, or if the neighbors are afraid to talk, but either way, I have nothing to go on. I went over this store with a fine tooth comb, and I haven't found anything inside to give us any clue, either. I sent telegrams

back east, and Elsie's right. That first store is still operating, and they've had no problems there, so I don't think it's anything that involves that store. I've talked with a lot of people in town here, and no one knows of any problems Henry or Velma have been having with anyone."

"So what happens now? Are the ladies safe to stay here and reopen the store?"

"I can't honestly say, Cade. I'm going to keep looking into it, but frankly, I'm running out of places to look, or people to talk to. I have telegrams out to sheriffs all over the area, so maybe someone will hear something and get back with me. In the meantime, all I can say is I'll keep checking on the ladies as often as I can during the day. I'll keep looking for any clues, and I'll keep listening."

"Thank you, Sheriff, for checking on them when you can. If someone is watching the store for some reason, I'm sure your frequent visits will make them think twice."

"I hope so." He turned to the ladies. "If either of you hears anything at all, come and get me. Don't try doing any investigating on your own, please. Come get me and tell me what you heard, and I'll check it out."

"We will, Sheriff," Elsie promised. "Thank you for all the work you've done. Would you please keep me informed if you find anything?"

"Of course. In the meantime, you ladies be careful. At least for the time being, I would make sure you're both in the store when you're open. One lady alone may be asking for trouble until we find out who was behind these horrible deaths."

"We understand, Sheriff," Gertrude said. "We'll stay together, at least at first."

Cade caught the look that passed between the two ladies, and made a mental note to ask Elsie about that. There was something she wasn't telling him, and that worried him.