

Ranch Life Surprise

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter One

Cade Collins finished loading the wagon and went in the house to retrieve his wife. He knew this trip was going to be difficult for her and was trying to be patient, but they really had to get started. It was almost a full day's ride from Sherman to Laramie, Wyoming, with a wagon, and he wanted to get there before dark.

He knew exactly where he would find Elsie, so he went straight to the nursery upstairs. He paused at the door to watch the scene before him. Elsie was down on her knees, hugging Velma and Henry, their almost two-year-old twins, one in each arm. Her Aunt Gertrude and their housekeeper, Maria, were doing their best to reassure her. Gertrude patted her niece's shoulder. "Elsie, they'll be fine while you and your husband are in Laramie. Maria will be helping when she's not cooking, and we'll all be fine. It will be good for you and Cade to get away for a few days."

"But we've never been away from them. What if they miss us and—"

Cade reached down and picked Henry up. "Honey, I'm sorry to tell you this, but they're almost two years old. At this age, I can guarantee you'll miss them a whole lot more than they'll miss us. Gertie and Maria will be here with them, and as long as someone they know feeds them and changes their diapers, they'll be happy."

Elsie picked Velma up and turned toward her husband. "I know you're right, Cade, but it's hard."

"I know it is; it's the first time we've been away from them. I'm going to miss them, too, but we really do have to get going if we want to make it to Laramie by nightfall."

She sighed, but nodded. After one final hug for Velma, she handed her over to Aunt Gertrude, and took little Henry, after his daddy gave him a hug. She gave him a big hug and handed him off to Maria. Cade gave Velma a hug, and tried for a quick escape, thinking it would be easier on Elsie. "Thanks again, ladies. We should be back in four or five days. Wyatt will be bringing wood in for the stove, and although he said he'll be eating his meals with the rest of the guys in the bunkhouse, let him know if you need anything at all."

Maria looked hurt. "As your foreman, Wyatt always eats with you. He's more than welcome to come in and eat with us while you're gone."

"I told him I was sure you'd feel that way, but he said he eats with us so we can discuss the ranch while we eat. Without a need to discuss the ranch, he said it would be easier to let you ladies eat in peace, without a dirty old cowboy at the table."

Gertrude chuckled a bit. "He just doesn't want to have to help feed the twins."

"That could have something to do with it, as well," Cade said with a grin. "I'll let the three of you work that out, but if you ladies need any help, ask him. If he's not handy, one of the hands is always around, at least Amos, the bunkhouse cook. Any of them will help."

"I know they will, and that's comforting," Gertrude said sincerely. "You have a good group of men working for you, Cade."

"Yes, he does," Maria agreed.

"Ask them if you need anything," Cade said in a rather stern voice. "Don't try to do something yourselves and get hurt when I have a good group of men right here that will gladly help." The ladies both nodded, and he hurried Elsie out to the wagon before she had time to look back at the twins and have to have one more last hug. He lifted her up onto the seat, and literally ran around and jumped in himself, releasing the brake as soon as he was in the wagon. He had the team backing up and heading out the lane in no time.

"Thank you," Elsie said after several minutes, as they moved along the road toward Laramie.

"For what, my dear wife?"

“For leaving quickly, before I had a chance to see the twins and get myself all worked up about leaving them.”

Cade’s eyebrows shot up. “You noticed that?”

“Of course I noticed it. I know you thought you were being sneaky, but I knew exactly what you were doing.” After a pause, she moved a little closer to him on the wagon seat. “And I appreciate it. It was hard to leave, but that was the best way you could have done it. Thank you.”

“Didn’t I tell you when you became Mrs. Cade Collins that I would take care of you, watch out for you, protect you?”

“Yes, and you have. It means a lot to me.”

“It means a lot to me, as well. I will always want what’s best for my wife.” He laid his large hand over her small one, giving it a little squeeze.

It was a nice spring day, and the two of them were happy with a companionable silence, both enjoying the fresh air and scenery. “It seems rather odd,” she said as they passed a meadow filled with wildflowers in a lovely spring bloom. “We always turn the other direction when we leave our lane, and go into Sherman. It’s nice to see something different.”

“It does make a nice change. If Laramie wasn’t so far, we could go there more often, just for the nice change of scenery.”

After more comfortable silence, Elsie brought up a different topic. “What do you suppose Mr. Taglin wants to see us about?”

“I don’t know. It seemed to be aimed more toward you than me. Are you sure you’ve never heard of an attorney William Taglin?”

“The name doesn’t even sound a bit familiar to me. I’ve been trying to think back, but I don’t remember ever hearing Mama or Papa mention his name, either.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait until we get to his office to find out. It doesn’t sound a bit familiar to me, either.”

They stopped shortly after mid-day to let the horses rest. Cade unhitched them and took them to the creek to drink. After tying them loosely to a tree, he sat down on the blanket Elsie had laid out under the tree, and they had lunch. They didn’t linger long, but got back on the road, mindful of the time.

They reached Laramie just as the sun was starting to set. Cade got them a room at the hotel and got Elsie settled in before taking the horses and wagon to the livery. It had been several years since Cade had been to Laramie and this was Elsie’s first time, so they went for a walk around town. They passed Mr. Taglin’s office, where they would be going the next morning. It was beginning to get dark, so he headed them back to the hotel, where they had supper at the restaurant.

They enjoyed a leisurely meal, which seemed odd to them, not having to help Henry and Velma eat, or try to teach them to use a spoon. They didn’t even have any spilled milk to clean up. After supper they went up to their room, where Cade showed Elsie the other thing they had been short on time for since the twins were born. He took his time, reacquainting himself with every inch of her body again. They went to sleep that night cuddled in each other’s arms, fully sated.

Their trip to the attorney’s office the next day was certainly surprising. Mr. Taglin invited them in, and got right down to business. “Mrs. Collins, do you know Ralph and Bertha Ames?”

Elsie cocked her head to the side, thinking. “Ames. Ralph and Bertha Ames. The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place them.”

“Your parents met them about fifteen years ago, when Mr. and Mrs. Ames came into their mercantile.”

“Fifteen years ago?” Cade watched as a flash of understanding crossed her eyes. “They came into our mercantile with no money. They asked if Dad had need of an employee, even for a day or two, or knew of anyone in town who might.”

Mr. Taglin smiled and nodded. “Your parents recognized something was terribly wrong and closed their store half an hour early to talk to them. They found out they had sold everything they had

and were traveling to Kansas, where they had an opportunity to buy a farm.”

Elsie nodded. “They had all their money with them so they could buy some horses and a few head of cattle, along with seeds for the first year. The stagecoach they were in was held up and the thieves took every cent they had. They didn’t have any food or money, so they were planning to stop at the first town and find work. Once Ralph had a job and they could find a place to live, they would start all over.”

“But no one in town had any job openings for them,” Mr. Taglin went on. “Your parents found out they hadn’t eaten anything in over twenty-four hours, and they took them upstairs, where your family lived, above the store.”

“They ate supper with us that night. Papa said he could use help fixing up the storage area behind the store. They stayed in our extra bedroom and ate meals with us for a few days while they fixed up the store room. Then they fixed up the back of the store room into a little apartment, and they stayed there for about a year. He got a job at the livery and she got a job at one of the dressmaker’s. Papa slipped on the ice and fell about that same time, and Ralph helped Papa out in the evening after he got home from work, doing a lot of the heavy lifting. When supplies came in on the train, they stacked them at the back of the store, and Ralph carried them into the store and put them away. Papa didn’t charge them any rent while they stayed.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Ames appreciated your parents helping them like that. They said they were literally penniless and hungry when they met your parents, and they gave them food and a place to stay that day, then helped them get back on their feet. They eventually did get their farm, and started raising horses. They were successful with their breeding program, but they never forgot your parents, Mrs. Collins. They both passed away about a month ago, from that influenza that broke out in Kansas. They had wills, and specified that ten of their finest horses were to go to your parents.”

Elsie paled, and Cade began rubbing her arm. He turned to the attorney. “Mr. Taglin, my wife’s parents are no longer with us.”

“I know about the awful tragedy, and your parents being killed. But with the untimely death of your parents, according to their wills everything is to go to you and your husband. Therefore, you two have ten horses. My understanding is you have a ranch outside of Sherman and raise top quality horses, as well.”

Cade and Elsie were looking at each other, speechless. Cade was the first to find his voice. “So we have ten good quality horses, and they’re in Kansas?”

“They were put on the train and shipped here to Laramie. I had to find something to do with them until I could contact you and you had a chance to come claim them, so I talked to an area rancher who also raises horses. He and his ranch hands took them out to his ranch, and he’s keeping them there. He said he’s heard of you, that you’ve got very good stock on your ranch, and he is anxious to meet you. He asked that I please tell you that you’re welcome to come get the horses anytime, but he wants you to know that he feels they are very good stock, and would be very interested in purchasing some of the horses from you.”

Cade was surprised again. “Can I ask who this rancher is?”

“His name is Austin Barrington. His ranch is several miles outside of town. As a matter of fact, you would have passed it on your way here from Sherman.”

Elsie looked at her husband. “That had to have been where we slowed to look at the good looking horses.”

“I think, too, it must be.” He turned to Mr. Taglin. “Maybe five or six miles outside of Laramie?”

“Yes, about that.”

“I’m anxious to meet him. I’ve heard of Austin Barrington, as well. He has a fine reputation, and if those were his horses we passed, I’m very impressed.”

“I think the four of you will get along fine. You’re both young couples, and I understand that you both have excellent reputations for raising top horses. As soon as we get the paperwork done here, you can go out there to meet Mr. and Mrs. Barrington and your new horses. They said to assure you that they

have plenty of room and would love to have you stay a few days and visit while you decide what to do with your new horses and how to do it. They're looking forward to your visit."

Two hours later, Cade and Elsie had finished the shopping they wanted to do while in Laramie, which was a larger town than Sherman, and were headed toward the Barrington ranch. "I'm anxious to meet them," Elsie said. "Will we pay them for keeping our horses; feeding and taking care of them?"

"Most definitely. These are actually your horses more than mine, so let me ask you, what do you think about possibly giving them one of the horses for taking care of them for us?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea. Mr. Taglin said he would like to buy some from us. Maybe you can give him the first one for keeping them for us, then if you want to sell him any others, you can. But please don't think of them as my horses, Cade. We're married, so legally what's mine is now yours."

"Legally, yes, but you know I don't feel that way."

"I know, and it's one of the things I love about you, but you're the one that knows about breeding and taking care of horses. My expertise is knowing how to feed them or care for them if they've been injured."

He reached over to take her hand in his and squeeze it. "And you're very good at that. Since you started caring for our injured animals, we've had more pull through. They seem to know they can trust you because they settle right down and let you change their bandages and put ointment on their wounds. The mothers even trust you with their newborns that need help. You have a way with animals that's very impressive."

"All I do is take care of them the way you show me."

"That's by far not all you do, honey. I've seen you sit in the stall with them and hold them, talk softly to them for hours. Calming them down like that helps more than you realize. My men have all seen the results of your work and commented on it. None of them thought that calf that was attacked by the mountain lion last year had any chance of surviving. They were all excited when it started to look like it just might pull through."

"She was such a sweet little thing. You didn't want me in the pen with her alone at first."

"You're right, I didn't. Not because of the calf. I knew she was too injured to hurt you any, but that calf's mama was very protective of her injured calf. I'd say she's what chased the mountain lion off. She's always very protective of her calves, and she's not a cow you want to mess with. We put her in with her injured calf so they would both be a little calmer, and that little calf needed her mama near her. But I wasn't at all sure how the mother cow would react to you being near her baby."

"I wasn't, either, at first. The first couple times I went in there I was glad you were in the pen, as well, to make sure the mama would be okay. She wasn't too happy with me being in there."

"No, she wasn't. But it didn't take long for her to see you were there to help, not hurt. She trusted you a lot sooner than I thought she would. I'm glad she did, because I think your putting the medicine on her baby as often as you did, and checking it, cleaning it is what pulled it through."

"I'm just glad she made it. Today you can't even tell she'd been injured." She leaned her head against her husband's shoulder, thinking back. "I'm so glad you let me start taking care of the injured animals. It's so fulfilling."

"I'm glad, too. Not only are you saving more of our animals, but I can tell how much you enjoy it." He squeezed her hand again.

They found the ranch, and Austin and Georgia Barrington came out to greet them as they pulled up to the house. Austin moved protectively in front of his wife, and Cade had to smile. That was exactly as he did when they had visitors they didn't know. He smiled at the couple as he halted the horses and put the wagon's brake on. "Mr. and Mrs. Austin Barrington?"

"We are. Would you be Mr. and Mrs. Cade Collins?"

"We are."

Austin moved so Georgia could move with him toward the wagon. He held out his hand. "I'm Austin Barrington and this is my wife, Georgia. I've been anxious to meet you, Mr. Collins."

“Please call me Cade, and this is my wife, Elsie. I’ve been anxious to meet you, as well. I hear you raise some fine horses, Mr. Barrington.”

“Call me Austin, and I’ve heard the same about you, Cade.”

Cade reached and picked Elsie up to help her down from the wagon, where Georgia was waiting to welcome her. “Welcome, Elsie. Come on inside. I’m sure the men are going to talk horses for a bit at least. How was your trip?” As they neared the house, Georgia turned back to the men, who were already on their way to the barn. “I’ll have coffee and lemonade in the house when you’re ready.”

“We’ll be in in a bit. Thank you,” Austin yelled back in return.

The ladies hit it off immediately, and chatted while they put coffee on and squeezed lemons for lemonade. “I love fresh lemonade,” Elsie said, “but I’m surprised you have lemons on hand. They’re not too easy to come by in Sherman. I guess that’s where living close to a bigger town has its advantages.”

“I’m sure it does help, but I got these and have been saving them until you got here,” Georgia admitted. “I wasn’t sure how soon it would be, but Mr. Taglin said you sent a telegram saying you’d be in Laramie the first of the week. I’m so glad you made it. Austin’s heard about your husband and the horses he’s been breeding. He’s been so anxious to meet him, and I’m always excited to meet another rancher’s wife.”

“Me, too. And ever since Mr. Taglin told Cade that Austin Barrington was caring for his horses, Cade’s been excited to meet him. We passed your ranch on our way to Laramie yesterday, and Cade was so impressed with the horses he stopped the wagon so he could look at them closer.”

“I hope you can stay for a few days. I’m sure they’re going to be talking horses for a good little spell. Austin said he was sure Cade would be impressed with these, as well, but he’s hoping he can talk him into selling him at least a couple of them for a good new blood line in his breeding stock. I was hoping they’d be willing to talk about their horses for a few days so we’d have time to visit.” She stopped short, as a thought occurred to her. “I’m sorry, I should have asked, do you have a family you need to get back to as soon as possible?”

“Yes and no,” Elsie answered truthfully. “We have twins, Henry and Velma, that are twenty-two months old.”

“Oh, how wonderful. Is this your first time away from them?”

“It is, and I miss them, but I have to admit I think Cade was right. He told me it would do us some good to get away for a few days. My Aunt Gertrude came to stay with us about a year ago and she’s been a huge help with them. She and Maria, our housekeeper, are quite capable of caring for them until we get home, and Wyatt, our foreman, and the other hands are all there and will jump in if they have any problems. So yes, we have a family, and I miss them, but I know they’re in good hands. Gertie and Maria agreed with Cade, assuring us they’ll be fine and encouraging us to take our time and enjoy our trip. How about you; do you have any children?”

“Not yet, but we hope to soon.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Did you say your housekeeper’s name is Maria?”

“Yes. She’s a wonderful lady. She was there taking care of the house when it was just Cade, and thankfully she’s stayed on.”

“We have a housekeeper, as well, and her name’s also Maria. Austin liked the idea of me teaching the kids on the ranch, but was concerned about me trying to do that and still take care of the house. About that same time, one of our neighbors died, leaving Maria alone. Austin offered her a job cooking for us while I taught, and she’s been with us since. She’s gone right now, visiting her sister. She always takes a couple weeks to do that during the summer, when I’m not teaching.”

“That works out well.” The ladies were still talking, getting to know each other when their husbands came inside and straight to the kitchen.

“I’ve got fresh coffee, or some fresh lemonade, and some cookies. Would you like to visit in the parlor, or outside under the tree?”

Austin looked at his guests momentarily, before answering. "It's such a beautiful spring day out, let's go outside." Georgia had everything on a tray and started to lift it, when Austin took it from her hands. Elsie had to smile, thinking he reminded her of Cade. He would have done the same thing. These two men seemed to be alike in several ways, and she had a feeling they'd get along really well.

When they were all comfortable under a big oak tree with drinks in hand, Cade turned to his wife, excitement all over his face. "Honey, wait until you see Austin's horses. He has some fine animals."

Austin addressed his wife, just as excited. "He's agreed to sell me some of these horses. What's more, his breeding program sounds fantastic, and he's invited us up to see it."

Elsie looked a bit surprised, but delighted. "Oh, that's wonderful. Please say you'll come visit, Georgia."

"I'd love to. How kind of you," Georgia said. "I'm like you, it would be wonderful to get away for a few days." She blushed a little as she added, "Plus I'd love to see your ranch and horses."

"Austin said you grew up on a horse farm and know as much as he does about them," Cade said with a look of admiration. "I have an idea. Austin, you said you'd like to buy a few of these, and I'm willing to do that. I have an idea, though. I'm anxious to get this new blood line in my herd, as well, but I'd also love to buy a couple of your horses. Do you have any you'd be willing to sell right now? Or maybe, if you're interested, you could come look at mine, and if you see any you like, maybe we can do a little horse trading."

"I'd be very interested in that," Austin quickly replied. "As a matter of fact, if it works with you, Georgia and I could accompany you and your wife back. Between the four of us I feel sure we can get your new horses back to your ranch, along with a couple of mine. Then I'm confident we'll be able to come to an agreement as to a fair trade or purchase price."

"That sounds very reasonable. Pick out one of these new ones you want to keep as payment for caring for all of them. Then we can do some trading for the rest of them."

"No, I'll gladly pay you for any of these you'll let me keep, Cade. I'm glad to have the opportunity to add animals of this quality to my herd."

"I understand what you're saying, Austin, but from what I understand, the horses were put on the train the same day Mr. Taglin received a telegram saying they were coming. That meant he had to find someone to keep them right away, without much warning. You did that, making space for them quickly, and keeping them, feeding them for going on three weeks now. That's worth a great deal, so I won't take no for an answer. We can go out later on and talk about how many of these you'd like and how many of yours you'd be willing to sell or trade, and make our plans."

"That sounds like a good plan."

Cade and Elsie stayed with Austin and Georgia for a couple days, while the men looked over the horses and decided which ones would accompany them to the Collins ranch, and Austin made arrangements to be gone for a few days.

During that time, the ladies became fast friends. Elsie learned that Georgia grew up outside of Boston on a horse breeding farm, and was raised by her father and two older brothers, and they are all very close. She went to school to be a teacher and now teaches at a school Austin and other men from area ranches built on their ranch for the kids living on the ranches too far from the nearest school to attend.

Elsie shared that her parents had run one of two general stores in Sherman. Her Aunt Gertrude was staying with them for a little while after her husband died. Her parents were killed, and when the sheriff finally was able to figure out who killed them and why, it was a sad case of mistaken identity. She and Cade had been engaged at the time, and at his suggestion, they moved their wedding date up, and she and her aunt moved to his ranch.

In talking, it didn't take long for them to realize they shared a love for animals, and would rather be out in the barn than in the house doing the work most women did.

While they were in the house getting to know each other, the men were out in Austin's barns and

pastures, doing the same. Their respect for each other was growing as they shared their knowledge and breeding tips.

After two days of visiting and planning, they were ready to set out for the Collins ranch. They would be taking six of the new horses with them, along with three of Austin's horses he had agreed to trade or sell to his new friend. Cade felt confident tying the six new horses to the back of their wagon for the trip, and Austin had decided to take their buggy and tie his three horses to the back of it. They also planned to take saddles along with them. If they had trouble and broke a wheel on the wagon or buggy, they could saddle one of Cade's new horses and ride back to whichever ranch was closer and get what they would need for repairs.

The extra horses would slow them down, they were sure, especially when they stopped to water them all, but they still felt they could make the trip from the Barrington ranch to the Collins ranch in six or seven hours. That shouldn't be a problem at all, especially since they planned on packing a picnic lunch.