

WYOMING RANCH LIFE
COLLECTION



MISTY MALONE



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Misty Malone
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MAIL ORDER SURPRISE



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CHAPTER 1



LARAMIE, WYOMING, 1890

It was a cool spring day as the train pulled up to the station in Laramie, but there wasn't anything cool about how Georgia Langley felt. She couldn't remember ever being this nervous before in her life, all twenty-two years of it. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, squared her shoulders and held her head high. She did one more check to be sure her hat was straight, before standing. It was time to meet her soon-to-be-husband, Austin Barrington.

She'd never met him, or even seen a picture, which was part of the reason she was so nervous. But truth be told, there was also one other small matter that caused her concern. She hadn't told her father and two brothers where she'd gone. They thought she was visiting her mother's sister, Aunt Sue Ellen, in New York. If this worked out, she would send a telegram home to Boston to let them know she was okay. If it didn't, unless she could find some kind of employment, hopefully teaching, as she'd been doing in Boston, she

would be forced to send a telegram to her father and ask for help getting home.

She put that out of her mind as she stepped off the train and started looking around. She'd memorized the description he'd given of himself. She was looking for a man who was tall, with broad shoulders, dark brown hair, and brown eyes. He said he was twenty-nine. A quick scan didn't reveal anyone matching that description, which worried her more. She knew it wasn't at all unusual for a man to be less than truthful about his appearance when he's trying to lure a lady. She had been suspicious when he said he was twenty-nine and owned a ranch. How could a man of twenty-nine own a ranch? It sounded like a rather large ranch, at that.

Looking in front of her again, she still didn't see anyone matching that description, so she turned and started walking toward the railroad office. As she was about to the door, she heard a voice behind her. "Georgia Langley?"

She turned around to look and ran into a solid wall. Well, maybe not a wall, but it could have been. A tall man with dark hair and a wide, muscular chest reached out to steady her. She had to look up to see that he had warm brown eyes, and a welcoming smile. She froze. This man was beyond handsome. Could he really be Austin Barrington?

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

His deep baritone voice snapped her out of her daze. "Yes, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I'm Georgia Langley. Are you Austin Barrington?"

"I am. You're just as lovely as I pictured you would be when I read your letters."

She felt her face flush, and looked down. "Your description of yourself was very accurate, as well."

"My wagon is over this way," he said, taking her valise. "Let's get your trunks and I'll load them up."

"I didn't bring any trunks. I have another valise that's a little larger than this one, but that's all."

He turned and studied her a few moments, before smiling. "No problem. We can buy you whatever you need. We'll get you settled in and comfortable. Then we'll make a list of things you'll need for living at the ranch. There's a good general store here in Laramie and they should have everything. There are some good dress makers, as well, and we can get you to one of them and get some dresses ordered for you."

Georgia was a little confused. She hadn't brought much with her, partly because she only brought what she could carry herself, but partly because she'd talked to people and read stories in the newspaper about life out west. She was under the impression that people didn't have a lot, and therefore, they didn't have a lot of clothes. She didn't bring any of her gowns, assuming she wouldn't have need of them. She brought what she thought would be sufficient for life on a ranch, however.

She had to wonder if Austin, even at only twenty-nine years of age, somehow had a large ranch that did very well, and would expect her to dress in fine clothes, and throw lavish parties. Apparently her understanding that people didn't have much out west wasn't too accurate.

She realized he was looking at her, waiting for a response, so she quickly thought back to what he'd said. "I wasn't sure what all I would need out here. I brought what I thought would be sufficient, but I may have guessed wrong."

"You said you've never lived on a ranch before, so I expected there would be things we'd need to get for you, like a good pair of boots. We'll see what all you need in the first few days and make a list. There's no hurry, we'll just see how it goes."

He seemed so easy going and generous, she felt herself starting to relax a bit. Her nerves were beginning to settle. They'd gotten to the platform where the luggage had been unloaded, and she pointed to

her other, much larger, valise. It had been a bit of a struggle for her to get it to the train herself, but he seemed to pick it up with remarkable ease. He carried both of them in one hand, while using the other to guide her with a gentle hand on her back in the direction of his wagon.

"This is my wagon," he said, stopping. He put her valises in the back, then turned to face her. Talking quietly, so no one would overhear them, he asked the very thing she had been concerned about. "Now, we need to talk a minute. I know you came out here with the idea of becoming my bride, and now that I've met you, I'm even more anxious for that to happen. However, I know you must be nervous. You've come a long way, and even though I feel we've gotten to know each other through our letters, we've just met in person. I want to make this as easy for you as possible. If you're ready, we can go see the preacher and get married now. If you'd rather, I can get you a room at the hotel for a couple days. We'll have supper, then you can stay in town here, I'll go back to the ranch tonight and be back in here tomorrow morning. We can spend the day together and get to know each other a little better. We can wait until you feel ready to get married."

Georgia was stunned. He'd never mentioned anything like this in his letters, but it was a very generous, kind offer. Before she could answer, he continued. "If we get to know each other and you decide I'm not the kind of man you want for a husband; I'll buy you a ticket on the train back home."

Now she was more than shocked. There was a lot here that didn't make a lot of sense to her. Austin obviously had means. He sent her the ticket to come out, and she knew it couldn't have been cheap. Now he was offering to pay for a hotel room, which is an added expense, and offered a ticket back home if she decided she didn't want to marry him. He obviously was not destitute. He was also very good looking. Why would a handsome man who was financially stable, at the least, send for a mail order bride? You would think local ladies would be lining up to be his wife. Maybe

she should stay in the hotel until she could think this through and get to know him better.

On the other hand, he'd been nothing but a gentleman, and hadn't misrepresented anything in any of his letters. She hated to make him spend the money on a hotel, and make him lose a day or two of working on his ranch to come to town to court her.

She was trying to make sense of the situation, when he spoke again. "I have an idea. Why don't we go get some lunch? That will give us a little time to get to know each other, and I know you must have questions you'd like to ask me. I'll answer anything you want to know, and I'll answer it honestly."

She looked up at him when he said the last part. "Honesty is very important to me," he said by way of explanation. "I think it is necessary in a relationship, such as marriage. I will always be honest with you, and I expect the same from you. A marriage based on lies isn't going to be strong, and that's not what I want. My parents believed in total honesty, and that's the way they brought me up. They had a lot of respect for each other and were very much in love, and I want the same kind of marriage. So I want you to feel free to ask me anything, and I'll answer you honestly. After all, I'm asking you to share your life with me. You have every right to know what that life I'm asking you to share will be like."

Her respect for this man was growing by the minute. "Thank you," she said. "I do have a few questions."

"Let's go to the hotel. They have a very good restaurant, and we can talk." He offered his arm, which she took, and he led them to the restaurant, where he asked for a quiet table in the back. The waitress smiled and led them to a small area with only a few tables, none of which were occupied. Georgia saw the waitress giving her a good look as she was leaving. She seemed curious, but not rude.

Austin seated Georgia before sitting down. "I was hoping this section would be empty. This will give us some privacy so we can talk freely. Order anything you like, but they have very good fried

chicken here, and I saw on the board that their special today is pot roast, which is also very good. That's what I'm going to have."

"That sounds very good. I think I'll have that, as well. And some milk, if they have it."

"You like milk?"

"Very much."

"Good. That's one thing we have a lot of at the ranch." The waitress came back, and Austin ordered for both of them, including two glasses of milk. "We may want some pie afterwards, with coffee." The waitress thanked him and left. "If you can, save room for pie. Their cook makes very good pies."

"I'll try, but the meal sounds awfully big."

"Maybe we can take some home, or you can take it to your hotel room for later, if you choose to stay in town. What questions would you like to ask me, Georgia?"

"In your letters I got the impression you have a rather large ranch, and I know you have cattle. Do you have other animals?"

"We do have cattle. We milk some cows, but that's mostly so we have milk for us and our ranch hands. We have mainly beef cattle. We also breed and sell horses, though, and we have a few chickens, again, mostly for us and the hands."

"Will I be able to do anything involved with the ranch, other than in the house?"

"It would be helpful if you would take care of the chickens. I'll show you how to feed them and gather the eggs every day. The hands will take care of cleaning out the pens when they need it."

"That sounds like fun." She asked a few more questions, what the weather was like in Wyoming, and how far they have to travel to get to town, or to church. He answered each of them, making sure he'd answered what she wanted to know.

Her next question surprised him. "Do you have parties; will I be expected to plan and cook for lavish parties?"

His eyebrows raised. "I've never had any lavish parties," he answered, "nor would I know how to act if I went to one. People

out here are generally kept busy at home. Parties are few and far between. We do have occasional barn dances, or a wedding reception, but no, I don't throw parties." He looked a little concerned. "Will that be a disappointment? Are you used to lavish parties?"

"No, not at all," she assured him. "But you seemed a little upset that I didn't have any trunks, so I thought maybe I should have brought a few gowns with me. From what I'd read, people don't live lavishly out here, so I didn't bring a lot with me. I was wondering if maybe I should have brought more."

"We don't live lavishly out here at all. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression earlier. When you said you had another valise, I pictured another one the size of the small one, and I didn't think much would fit in them. You're much smaller than I am, so I'm sure more of your clothes will fit in them than mine. I meant what I said, though; we'll buy anything you don't have, like a good pair of boots."

"I have a pair of boots. I don't know if they're the kind you need for a ranch, but I have a pair of boots."

"Good. Maybe they'll work for a couple days, anyway, and we'll see what else you may need."

She felt better, and as they ate lunch and talked more, she felt more and more at ease with him. He seemed to be a gentleman. He made that clear when he said he wanted to talk a minute about their marriage bed.

She turned red again, but nodded. She knew he had a right, as her husband, to expect her to be his wife in every way.

He looked around to be sure no one else was within hearing distance, then leaned forward and spoke softly. "From the day we're married, I would like us to sleep together, in the same bed. I think that's important. However, I will not force you to have husband and wife relations until you are ready. I want us to get to know each other first. The first time we come together as husband and wife I want it to be something we both want."

She was shocked, and looked at him carefully. He had a very

serious expression on his face, and she knew he meant the words he'd just spoken. That statement and his sincerity was the last thing she needed to make a decision. "Austin, I think, if you still want to, we should get married today, and go back to the ranch tonight."

His eyes lit up and his smile filled his face. "Are you sure? I don't want to rush you if you're not completely sure you're ready."

"I'm positive. You've been very honest with me about everything, in your letters and now, so I feel I can trust you. There's no reason to spend the money for a hotel for a night or two, and you missing work. I think we'll do well together."

"I think we will, too, Georgia. I was impressed when I read your letters, and I thought we would make a good match. I was still nervous about it, though, and I'm sure you were, as well. Now that we've met, though, I feel much more comfortable. I think we're a good match." He picked up one of her hands and kissed it. "After we finish eating we'll go see the preacher, and head home."

"I'm anxious to see my new home," Georgia said.

"I want you to feel like this really is your home, Georgia. Feel free to make any changes you want to make. You can do it right away, or take your time, but I want you to make it your home, too."

"Thank you."

An hour later the preacher pronounced them husband and wife, and Austin leaned down to kiss his new bride. Georgia was glad he had his arm around her waist, because his kiss nearly had her knees giving out. It was gentle, but firm, and very passionate. She'd never had a kiss that even compared to that one. If kisses like that were to be part of this marriage, she knew she'd made the right decision.

They were both happy as they rode to the ranch, holding hands. He talked about the ranch, giving her an idea of what life would be like. She was excited to start her new adventure.

Everything seemed perfect. Until he asked her about one thing she'd said earlier. "You said earlier that maybe you should have brought a few of your gowns with you. That tells me you didn't bring everything with you. Can I ask why?"

She hesitated, not sure how much she should say yet. "I just wasn't sure what all I'd need. I didn't think I'd need gowns, so I couldn't see dragging them out here."

"Is that all you left behind; a few gowns?"

"Well, no, there's a little more than that."

"Like what?"

"Well, I have a few more clothes. I wasn't sure what I'd need."

His brows drew together as he looked at her. She could tell he was thinking, and that worried her. "I just thought of something I didn't ask in my letters, and I'm thinking maybe I should have. Do you have family you were living with?"

"Um, yes."

"What family do you have?"

"Um, a father and two brothers."

"That tells me something happened to your mother, and I'm sorry about that," he said.

"Thank you."

"Do your father and brothers know where you are?"

She dropped her head and was suddenly very interested in her hands in her lap. He pulled the wagon over to the side of the road and stopped it. Then he turned to her and used one finger to pull her chin up so she was looking at him. "Mrs. Barrington, I've already told you how important I think honesty is in a marriage. Keeping that in mind, let me ask you again, do your father and brothers know where you are?"

"Not exactly."

He sighed. "Do they have any idea where you are?"

"Not exactly."

He sighed again, holding her chin so she had to look at him. "Apparently it's time we have another talk, wife of mine. Perhaps I should have told you this before we got married, but we were getting along so well that I didn't think about it. I apologize for that. You will find that I am a fairly easy going man. I won't ask a lot of you. But one thing I will demand is total honesty."

"I have never lied to you," Georgia insisted, worried about what was happening.

"Total honesty to me is more than just telling the truth about what I ask. Total honesty is not only being truthful in what you say; it's also telling the whole story. I'm going to let this time go because I hadn't talked to you about it yet and you didn't know my feelings on the subject. However, I'm going to explain it to you, and from now on I expect you to be not only honest, but forthcoming."

"Forthcoming?"

"Yes. I expect you to tell me about anything that would be a concern to me."

"But you never asked if I have a family."

"I know, and I hadn't explained my thoughts yet, so don't worry, my little wife, there will be no consequences this time, but listen carefully to what I say so there will be no surprises if it happens again."

Georgia was a little nervous as she nodded.

"You are my wife, and I intend to take care of you. That means that what affects you, affects me. What's important to you is important to me. It bothers me that your family doesn't know where you are, and unless you give me a valid reason not to, we're going to turn around right now and go back to town. We'll send them a telegram so they know where you are. They must be worried half sick about where you are, and I don't want that. Is there a reason you left without telling them where you were going? He picked up her hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "Have they been abusive in some way?"

"No," she quickly answered.

"Then why would you leave without telling them where you were going? Do they know we've been exchanging letters?"

"Um, not exactly."

He used his finger to tip her chin up again. "This would be a good time for total honesty, wife. What is going on with your family? Are you close? Do you dislike them?"

She tried to look away, but he was having none of it, holding her chin steady. "Okay, I'll explain everything," she whispered. He nodded, but didn't let go of her chin. "I love my father and my brothers, but they've been trying to marry me off. My father wanted me to marry his friend's son, and I'm very against it. He's not a terrible man, but he's over twice my age. I'm twenty-two, and he's forty-six."

"That is quite a bit older than you."

"It is. My brothers have someone else in mind. He's a friend of theirs. I've met him a few times, and I don't care much for him. They say I'm not giving him a fair chance, and maybe I'm not, but I can't help it. Sometimes you just don't care much for a person, and this man just strikes me wrong. I don't care for him at all. He's tried to get me alone on several occasions, and I just don't trust him."

"So you left home so you wouldn't have to marry men you didn't want to marry?" She nodded. "You weren't against marriage, just—"

"I was fine with getting married. In fact, my parents had a marriage that sounds similar to your parents' marriage. They loved each other, and I've dreamed of having that some day for myself. I was pretty sure that if I married either of those men I wouldn't ever have that. There weren't any men around us that I could see me being happy with, either."

He nodded his head slowly, obviously thinking. "How about me; can you see yourself being happy with me?"

"Yes, I can," she said in a convincing way. "I thought that while we were exchanging letters. That's why I accepted your proposal and came here."

"But you didn't tell your family we were exchanging letters. Why not?"

"My father would not have allowed me to move this far away. I didn't want to go against him, but I just couldn't see myself with either of those men for the rest of my life."

He patted her hand, and turned the wagon around. "We're going to send them a telegram so they know you're here and you're safe."

We'll make sure they know they're all welcome to come visit us anytime they want. I'd love to meet them, and I know they'll feel better if they see where you're living and that you're happy."

"Thank you, Austin."

"You're welcome. It bothers me, though, that you kept this information from me. On our way back to town we're going to have a little talk about keeping things like that from me. For me to take care of you and protect you, I need to know what's going on in your life. That's why I insist on total honesty. I will warn you, I am very protective by nature, so I will be very protective of you. I think this might be a good time, as well, to talk about what will happen the next time you keep something important from me."

"You mentioned something about consequences earlier. I'm not sure I understand what you mean by that."

"Then we'll talk about it. I believe you make choices in your life, and everyone needs to be held accountable for those choices they make. If you make bad choices, there have to be consequences so you'll think about what you've done, and hopefully those consequences will be incentive not to do it again."

"You're making me nervous. When we were growing up my brothers and I had consequences when we did something wrong. But I'm an adult now. Surely you're not saying—"

"What kind of consequences did you have?"

"Different things. Sometimes I had to spend all afternoon or evening in my room. Sometimes I had extra chores to do. Basically, the more upset my father was with me, the more time I had to spend in my room, thinking about what I'd done."

"I see. Those are all good ideas for children, and perhaps we'll consider them some day for our children, but out here women play an important role. Most women have chores they perform, in the house, out at the barn or both, and the men are busy. They don't have time to watch over their wife while she sits in a bedroom to think about what she's done. They both have work they need to do, so when a man feels the need to correct his wife, they do it in a

much quicker way. It's also a very efficient way. It gets the punishment over quickly, and she is forgiven, and the whole incident is forgotten."

"And what is this quick, efficient method?"

"A bare bottom spanking."