
A DUSTY DREAMS WEDDING

Dusty Dreams Ranch - Book Two

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

Jessie Mills rode her horse at an easy walk out toward the hayfield. Her dog, Indy, followed her and she thought it was the perfect way to spend a warm, sunny spring day. She passed by the section of pasture that held her cows and their little calves, born a few weeks earlier. Brady, the love of her life, and Red, the ranch hand, were working out in the hayfield. She had a saddlebag full of sandwiches and brownies for them and she figured they'd be more than ready for them.

Once the two men saw her, they didn't waste any time getting back to her, and she laughed, knowing they were hungry, as usual. Jessie dismounted and got out the bundles from her saddlebags and kept the two men company while they ate. Indy waited patiently for Brady to toss her a bit of his sandwich, laying her head on his knee and watching him hopefully. He finally laughed and tossed it to her, ruffling her fur after she wolfed it down. Jessie got the dog some water from the gigantic picnic jug the guys had in the four-wheeler and got ready to ride back to the house.

"Don't run off so fast," Brady said. "You must have a little something else in those bundles."

Jessie laughed and handed him the brownies, and he grabbed her and pulled her in for a kiss.

"There you go," she said. "I'll have supper ready by the time you come in. Everything looks good out here and there's still no rain in the forecast."

Brady nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Tom is coming to help with baling tomorrow. I think I need another kiss before you go."

Jessie was glad to oblige before she got on her horse and started back to the house. She felt the familiar pride as she looked around the ranch she had bought with her brother, Jake, before he had been killed in Afghanistan. He had saved his men's lives but lost his own. Brady was one of the buddies he'd saved, and he'd been Jake's best friend. Jake had gotten Brady to promise to help his sister get the ranch started and he had kept his promise, never dreaming that he was going to end up in love with Jessie. They'd had some bumps in the road, but they were happy together and the ranch was thriving.

Jessie sang while she did a load of laundry and a little cleaning, then she started a big pot of beef stew and made a chocolate sheet cake. She'd make a pan full of buttermilk biscuits just before dinnertime and they'd have leftovers for the next day, which would be too busy for cooking. She and Brady had made the decision to invest in some more farm equipment and were making their own hay this season. They would be able to put away enough for their own herd and still sell enough to make a chunk of actual income for the ranch. Jessie still got a case of butterflies when they spent a significant amount of money, but she had come to realize that sometimes it was necessary if the ranch was going to be successful.

Jessie and Brady had a tendency to clash over decisions to spend money on the ranch and sometimes the clash was fiery. But Brady was firm when he knew they really needed something and he didn't back down, even if it meant he had to take his beloved Jessie to task for it. Jessie was perfectly well aware that

her reactions were often unreasonable, and she had come to expect Brady to take her in hand on those occasions. It would be different if he was wrong, but he always reached those kinds of decisions after careful consideration and he never failed to find them the best value for the money they spent.

Jessie tossed a tennis ball for Indy to chase while she gathered some early lettuce for a simple salad. Her chickens scratched contentedly in their pen and her two horses grazed peacefully in the front pasture. By the time the men came in and washed up for supper, they'd all had a full day. They sat around the big kitchen table, and she smiled as she watched the two men wolf down their stew and biscuits like it was the best meal they'd ever tasted.

"Somebody bought the old Hartman place," Red said as he buttered another biscuit.

"That house is pretty run down, isn't it?" Brady asked.

"Yeah, it's been empty for a long time."

Jessie frowned, trying to place the house they were talking about. "Oh, I know the place. It's just a farmhouse on a couple of acres, isn't it?"

Red nodded. "Yep, and a barn that I don't know if anybody can save. I heard it's a single woman with a little boy who bought it."

"Really? That's a big job she's taking on," Brady commented.

Red said, "Yeah, and the rumor is she's doing most of the work herself, all but the plumbing."

"Wow," Jessie said. "She must be a lot more knowledgeable than I am! I wouldn't know where to start."

Brady grinned at her. "Maybe she's got a friend to help her."

Jessie laughed at his reference to when he had showed up to take over managing the ranch for her. She'd been so lost; she hadn't even been able to make the simplest of decisions. She'd never have been able to do it on her own, she swore to this day, though Brady always said he had faith that she'd have found her

way. Now *that* had been a fiery period for the two of them, but they had found their way through it and, with Brady's love and support, Jessie had finally made peace with the crushing grief of losing her brother. Once they'd started making real progress with the ranch, Jessie had blossomed, and she was loved by all who knew her. She'd won the hearts of Brady's warm and outgoing family and made real friends in the little town of Jasper, near the ranch in western Nebraska. Dusty Dreams Ranch had been Jake and her dream, and now it was Brady and hers.

"The guys at the farm store said she's a real looker but keeps to herself. She's in there a lot to buy stuff she needs for the house and she bargains with the best of them, but she doesn't get very friendly. So, all anybody knows about her is she has a little boy, and what she might be working on one day to the next, going by what she's buying."

Jessie laughed at him. "It's driving all you guys crazy, isn't it, her being private like that?"

"Well," Red reflected, "she's sure not giving us anything to gossip about."

Brady snorted. "Is that stopping anybody from gossiping?"

Red chuckled. "Now you know better than that. It's a small town."

Jessie said, "I wonder if she'd be offended if I took her a pie or something."

Red looked shocked. "How could anybody be offended by you giving them one of your pies? You make the best pies in the whole county!"

"Well, if she's a private person, she might not welcome someone showing up at her door. Still, it'd be the neighborly thing to do."

Brady gave her a look. "Neighborly, or has Red got your curiosity up?"

Jessie said primly, "It's not for curiosity's sake; it's just the nice thing to do, to welcome her to the community."

A Dusty Dreams Wedding

"Well, if she slams the door in your face, I guess you'll know it was a mistake, huh?"

Jessie chided, "Oh, Brady, I'm sure she wouldn't slam the door in my face. I'm not going to try to bother her, just introduce myself and welcome her. Then I'll be on my way."

Brady shrugged. "Up to you, darlin'."

Jessie gave him a big grin. "Good, I'll bake apple pies tomorrow. Oops, not tomorrow, we're making hay. As soon as the hay is in, then."

"Are you just teasing us with all this talk about pies, or did you actually make dessert tonight? You've got two hardworking, starving men here, you know."

She laughed and patted his hand. "I made a Texas sheet cake. As soon as I clear up here, you can have some."

Brady gave her a loud kiss. "In that case, I'll help you clear up."

They had big pieces of the chocolate cake, washed down with ice-cold milk and soon after, Red took his leave.

"Tomorrow's going to be a big day. I'm planning to get a good, hot shower and a long night's sleep."

Brady nodded. "That's exactly my plan. We'll see you in the morning."

Later that night, Jessie snuggled close to Brady as he drifted off to sleep and thought about how perfect her life was here at Dusty Dreams. She had everything she wanted, and she knew that if Jake could see the ranch, he'd approve of what they'd done. She found herself wondering about the woman who had bought the rundown farmhouse. She had to admit, she was itching to find out more about her. She couldn't believe that she was planning to renovate the place on her own. She'd have to call her friend, Kayla, and see if she knew anything about the mystery woman. Kayla was seeing Mitch Crager, the bartender and owner of the Rusty Spur, a little bar and grill in town. All the town gossip ran through either the Rusty Spur, the farm

store, or the pretty little church that most of the community attended.

Jessie was up early to cook a big breakfast for all of them, to get them through the morning. Indy had fetched the morning paper when she went out to do her business and Jessie was gathering eggs and feeding her chickens while the coffee brewed. Soon, she was busy at the stove, making her brother's specialty, the breakfast garbage skillet, while the gravy thickened, and a fresh batch of biscuits baked. There was fresh butter and homemade jam on the table. Brady came in and kissed her good morning, sniffing appreciatively as he poured himself a cup of coffee and topped off Jessie's cup.

"Need some help?"

Jessie nodded and asked him to set the table, and by the time Red and Tom got there, they were ready to sit down at the table. Everyone ate heartily, and then the men headed out to do morning chores before they went out to the hayfields. Jessie soon had the dishwasher humming and fresh coffee brewing to fill up the thermos she would be hauling out to the fields along with picnic jugs of lemonade and iced tea. Later in the day, when the weather got warmer, she would also haul out a cooler full of bottled water on ice.

Jessie made her first run out to the fields, with Indy running alongside the four-wheeler. She was pulling the little trailer behind her, loaded with drinks and a big container full of homemade cookies. She sat at the edge of the first hayfield, watching the tractor and wagon traveling the length of the field. The baler spit out the fresh bales of hay and Brady and Tom stacked them on the wagon while Red drove. When they made the turn at the far end and started back, Brady gave her a wave and she grinned and waved back at him. The air was fragrant with the smell of fresh hay, the sun was bright and the air was warm. There was no rain in the forecast for the next few days and it was perfect haying weather.

A Dusty Dreams Wedding

At noon, Jessie made another trip to the fields with sandwiches, fruit and fresh jugs of drinks. She brought the cooler of bottled water and had lunch with the men before she took the empty jugs from her morning run back with her. She needed to put last night's stew in the crockpot, and she also had a lasagna she had made and frozen a few days before. It would make kind of an odd mix for dinner, but she was sure the guys wouldn't care. She put the lasagna in the oven and set the timer for it and then took one of her peach pies from the freezer as well. Making hay was hungry work and she was making sure the men were well fed.

At the end of the day, there were loaded hay wagons in the barnyard and the first field was finished. The men quickly did the evening chores and washed up in the sink that Brady had put in the barn, so they wouldn't be so hard on Jessie's powder room. Then they all gathered around the table with cold beers and plenty of food. Red bragged about keeping up with the younger guys, and Brady pointed out that Red had driven the tractor for most of the day. Not long after dessert, the weary hands took their leave, thanked Jessie for keeping them fed, and went on their way. The next day would be another long one as they tackled the second hayfield.

So it was that several days went by before Jessie could bake a pie to take to the new woman in town. She had managed to find out that her name was Devon Bridges, but that was pretty much all she knew. With the apple pie still warm, she pulled up into the driveway of the old house. There were stacks of material around the house and a dumpster alongside the driveway, where old materials were being thrown away. Jessie marveled once again at the knowledge that Devon was tackling this project on her own. She climbed out of her truck and carried the pie with her to the front door. As she knocked, she could hear a lot of commotion, with hammering and banging coming from inside the house. After a couple of knocks, she decided to walk around to the back.

She knocked on the back door just as there was a loud crash, and she could see a cloud of dust rising, accompanied by the sound of a woman letting out a string of curses.

Jessie hesitated and then opened the door, sticking her head just inside. "Hello," she called. "Are you all right in there? Do you need help?"

There was a moment of silence, and then a young woman appeared through a doorway, pulling off a work glove so she could shove her hair back. There was a suspicious look on her face as she stepped toward Jessie, examining her closely.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what are you doing here?"

Jessie smiled at her. "I just wanted to come and introduce myself, welcome you to the community."

The other woman regarded her without cracking a smile. Finally, she said, "So you're, what, the town welcoming committee?"

Jessie laughed. "Nope, just a neighbor. I baked you a pie. I'm Jessie Mills."

Devon gave her another piercing look and finally said, "I've heard your name in town. This sure seems to be a place where everybody likes to know everyone else's business."

Jessie said, "Yeah, I guess it is. Sometimes that's a good thing, though."

Devon gave a sniff. "I like my privacy."

Jessie nodded. "That was one of the reasons I ended up here. It's good to have privacy when you need it. It's good to have neighbors sometimes, too. I wrote down some phone numbers that might be useful, since you're new here. If you ever need a hand, don't hesitate to call; my number is right at the top."

Finally, Devon stepped a couple of steps closer. "Well, I appreciate the pie. And the phone numbers. There was a phone book left here when I moved in, but it's about twenty years old."

Jessie handed her the pie and the list and smiled again. "I won't bother you; you're clearly busy. It was nice to meet you."

A Dusty Dreams Wedding

With a little bit of chagrin, the other woman said, "Oh, I guess I didn't even tell you. I'm Devon Bridges." She couldn't resist inhaling the aroma of the warm pie as she accepted it.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Devon. Like I said, if you need anything, don't hesitate to call."

With a little wave, Jessie backed out of the door and walked around to her truck. As she backed down the driveway, she caught a glimpse of Devon peering out of a front window and she smiled as she drove away. Devon Bridges was a very interesting woman and Jessie intended to get to know her better. And soon.