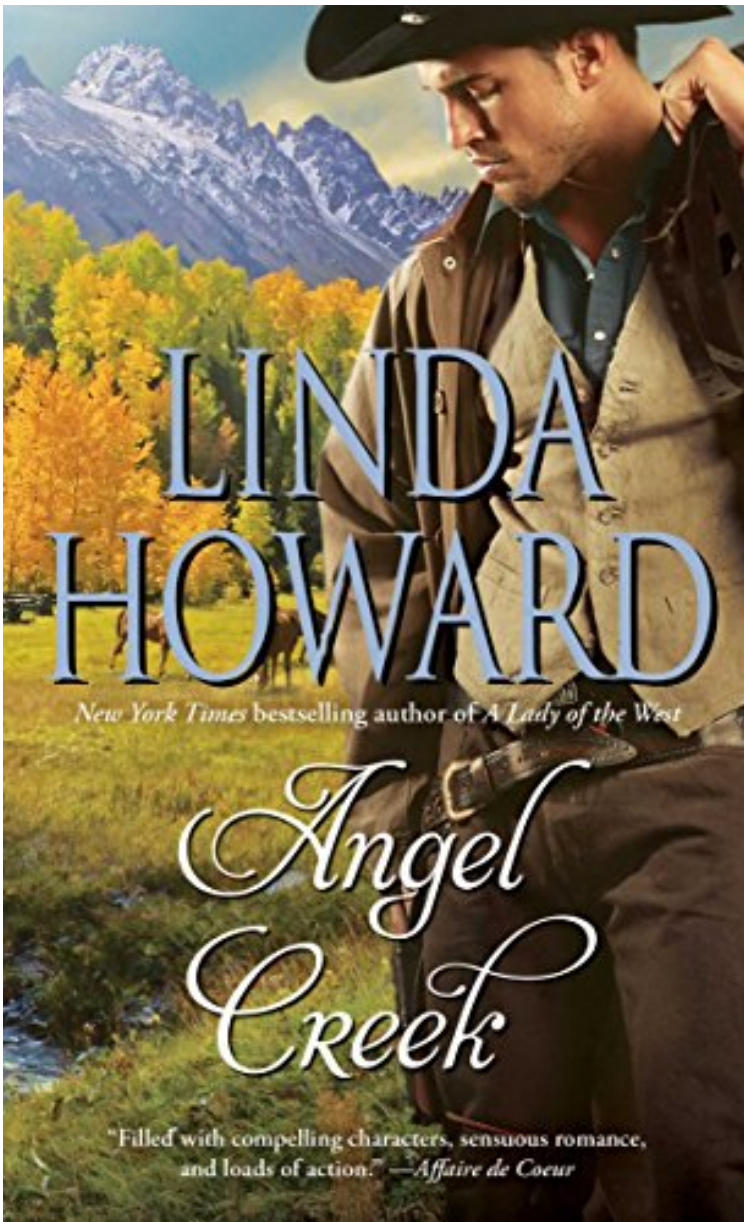


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# Angel Creek



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le: 2011-08-09Sorti le: 2011-08-09Format: Ebook Kindle

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**Description :** Description du produit Desire came like a wildfire to the Colorado hills...to claim a woman's property...and her heart. For five years after her father died, lithe, beautiful Dee Swann held on to Angel Creek valley and her independence. The homestead was hers, and she vowed no one else would ever own it...or her. Then Lucas Cochran came back to Colorado. In the drought-cursed high country, he needed Angel Creek and its cool water to turn his Double C ranch into the cattle dynasty he craved. His ruthless ambition guaranteed he would fight to take it away from the black-haired, green-eyed spitfire who claimed it. But the passion that blazed when Dee Swann and Lucas Cochran met shocked them both. Unbidden, unexpected, their kisses swept them toward a dangerous destiny where dreams might be scattered...men could be

killed...or love would be born as wild and unfettered as this glorious frontier.

Prsentation de l'diteur Desire came like a wildfire to the Colorado hills...to claim a woman's property...and her heart. For five years after her father died, lithe, beautiful Dee Swann held on to Angel Creek valley and her independence. The homestead was hers, and she vowed no one else would ever own it...or her. Then Lucas Cochran came back to Colorado. In the drought-cursed high country, he needed Angel Creek and its cool water to turn his Double C ranch into the cattle dynasty he craved. His ruthless ambition guaranteed he would fight to take it away from the black-haired, green-eyed spitfire who claimed it. But the passion that blazed when Dee Swann and Lucas Cochran met shocked them both. Unbidden, unexpected, their kisses swept them toward a dangerous destiny where dreams might be scattered...men could be killed...or love would be born as wild and unfettered as this glorious frontier. Extrait From "Chapter One" Lucas Cochran had been back in town for almost a month, but it still amazed him how much the little town of Prosper had lived up to its name. It would never be anything more than a small town, but it was neat and bustling. A man could tell a lot about a place just by looking at the people on the streets, and by that standard Prosper was quiet, steady, and -- well -- prosperous. A boomtown might be more exciting than a town like Prosper, and people could make a lot of money in such places, but mining towns tended to die as soon as the ore played out. Prosper, on the other hand, had started out as a single building serving triple duty as general store, bar, and livery for the few settlers around. Lucas could remember when the site Prosper now occupied had been nothing but bare ground and the only white men for miles had been on the Double C. The gold rush in 1858 had changed all that, bringing thousands of men into the Colorado mountains in search of instant wealth; no gold had been found around Prosper, but a few people had seen the land and stayed, starting small ranches.

More people had meant a larger demand for goods. The lone general store/bar/livery soon had another building standing beside it, and the tiny settlement that would one day become Prosper, Colorado, was born. Lucas had seen a lot of boomtowns, not just in Colorado, and they were all very similar in their frenzied pace, as muddy streets swarmed with miners and those looking to separate the miners from their gold: gamblers, saloon owners, whores, and claim-jumpers. He was glad that Prosper hadn't been blessed -- or cursed, depending on your point of view -- by either gold or silver. Being what it was, it would still be there when most of the boomtowns were nothing but weathered skeletons. It was a sturdy little town, a good place to raise a family, as evidenced by the three hundred and twenty-eight souls who lived there. All of the businesses were located on the long center street, around which nine streets of residences had arranged themselves. Most of the houses were small and simple, but some of the people, like banker Wilson Millican, had already possessed money before settling in Prosper. Their houses wouldn't have looked out of place in Denver or even in the larger cities back East. Prosper had only one saloon and no whorehouses, though it was well known among the men in town (and the women, although the men didn't know it) that the two saloon girls would take care of any extra itches they happened to have, for a price. There was a church on the north end of town, and a school for the youngsters. Prosper had a bank, two hotels, three restaurants (counting the two in the hotels), a general store, two livery stables, a dry goods store, a barber shop, a cobbler, a blacksmith, and even a hat shop for the ladies. The stage came through once a week. The entire town was there only because the Cochran family had carved the big Double C spread out of nothing, fighting the Comanche and Arapaho, paying for the land with Cochran blood. Lucas had been the first Cochran born there, and now he was the only one left; he had buried his two brothers and his mother back during the Indian wars, and his father had died the month before. Other ranchers had moved in, but the Cochrans had been the first, and had bought the security the town now enjoyed with Cochran lives. Everyone who had been in town for long knew that Prosper's backbone wasn't the long center street, but the line of graves in the family burial plot on the Double C. Lucas's bootheels thudded on the sidewalk as he walked toward the general store. A cold wind had sprung up that had the smell of snow on it, and he looked at the sky. Low gray clouds were building over the mountains, signaling yet another delay to spring. Warmer weather should arrive any day, but those low clouds said not quite yet. He passed a woman with her shawl pulled tight around her shoulders and tipped his hat to her. "Looks like more snow, Mrs. Padgett." Beatrice Padgett gave him a friendly smile. "It does that, Mr. Cochran." He entered the general store and nodded to Mr. Winches, the proprietor. Winches had done right well in the ten years Lucas had been gone, enough to hire himself a clerk who took care of most of the stocking. "Hosea," Lucas said by way of greeting. "How do, Lucas? It's turning a mite cold out there, ain't it?" "It'll snow by morning. The snowpacks can use it, but I'm ready for spring myself." "Ain't we all? You need anything in particular?" "Just some gun oil." "Down the left, toward

the back." "Thanks." Lucas went down the aisle Hosea had indicated, almost bumping into a farm woman who was fingering the harnesses. He muttered an absentminded apology and continued without more than a glance. Farming was hard on a woman, making her look old before her time. Besides, he had just spotted a familiar blond head over by the sacks of flour, and a sense of satisfaction filled him. Olivia Millican was just the type he would want when he got around to getting married: well-bred, with a pleasant disposition, and pretty enough for him to look forward to bedding her for the rest of his life. He had plans for the Double C, and the ruthless ambition to put those plans into effect. There were two other young women standing with Olivia, so he didn't approach, just contented himself with a tip of his hat when her eyes strayed his way. To her credit she didn't giggle, though the two with her did. Instead she gave him a grave nod of acknowledgment, and if the color in her cheeks heightened a bit, it just made her prettier. He paid for the gun oil and left, not getting the door shut good behind him before a muffled flurry of squeals and giggles broke out, though again Olivia didn't contribute. "He danced with you twice!" "What did he say?" "I was so excited when he asked me, I almost fainted dead away!" "Does he dance well? I swear I had butterflies in my stomach just at the thought of having his arm around my waist! It's just as well he didn't ask me, because I'd have made a fool of myself, but at the same time I admit I was powerfully jealous of you, Olivia." Dee Swann glanced at the knot of three young women, two of whom were taking turns gabbing without allowing Olivia a chance to answer. Olivia was blushing a little but nevertheless maintaining her composure. They stood off to the side in the general store and were making an effort to keep their voices down, but their excitement had caught Dee's attention. It took only a moment of eavesdropping to discern that the gossip was, as usual, about some man, in this case Lucas Cochran. She continued to listen as she selected a new bridle. The stiff leather straps slipped through her fingers as she searched for the one that was most pliable. "He was very gentlemanly," Olivia said in an even tone. The banker's daughter was seldom ruffled. Dee looked up again with amusement sparkling in her eyes at Olivia's unwavering good manners, and their gazes met across the aisles in silent communication. Olivia understood Dee's mirth as plainly as if she had laughed aloud, just as she understood why Dee not only didn't join them but preferred that Olivia not even acknowledge her presence beyond a polite nod. Dee jealously guarded her privacy, and Olivia respected her old friend enough not to try to include her in a discussion that wouldn't interest her and might actually irritate her. Even as small as Prosper was, there was a definite social structure. Dee wouldn't normally have been welcome in the circles in which Olivia moved, and she had long ago made certain her friend understood she didn't want to be made an exception to the rule. Dee was totally disinterested in such socializing. Her penchant for privacy was so strong that though everyone knew they were acquainted, since they had attended the local school together, only the two of them knew how close their friendship really was. Dee never visited Olivia; it was always Olivia who rode out, alone, to Dee's small cabin, but it was an arrangement that suited both of them. Not only was Dee's privacy protected, but Olivia in turn felt a certain freedom, a sense of relief in knowing herself unobserved and unjudged at least for a few hours by anyone other than Dee, who was the least judgmental person Olivia had ever met. Only with Dee could she truly be herself. This wasn't to say that she was in reality anything less than a lady, but merely that she enjoyed being able to say whatever she thought. In their shared glance was Olivia's promise to ride out soon and tell Dee all that had happened since they had last seen each other, which had been over a month ago due to the late winter weather. Having made her selection, Dee took the bridle and her other purchases up to the counter where Hosea Winches waited. He painstakingly tallied her selections on the ledger page that bore her name at the top, then subtracted the total from the amount of credit remaining from the year before. There was only a small amount left, she saw, reading the figures upside down, but it would last her until her crops came in this summer. Mr. Winches turned the ledger around for her to double-check his arithmetic. While she ran a finger down his columns he eyed the group of young women still standing at the back of the store. Bursts of stifled laughter, high-pitched with excitement, made him snort. "Sounds like a fox got in the chicken house, what with all that squawking," he mumbled. Dee nodded her satisfaction with his totals and turned the ledger back to its original position, then gathered up her purchases. "Thank you, Mr. Winches." He shook his head absently. "Be thankful you're more levelheaded than some," he said. "You'd think they ain't never seen a man before." Dee looked back at the others, then at Mr. Winches again, and they both shrugged their shoulders. So what if Lucas Cochran was back in town after a ten-year absence? It didn't mean anything to either of them. She had recognized Cochran when he had bumped her in the store aisle, of course, but she hadn't spoken because recognizing someone wasn't the same as knowing him, and she doubted that he had recognized her. After all, he had left Prosper shortly after her folks had settled in the area. She had been a

fourteen-year-old schoolgirl, while he had been eight years older, a grown man. They had never even met. She knew his face, but she didn't know the man or much about him. Dee made it a practice to mind her own business and expected others to do the same, but even so she had been aware of what was going on at the Double C. It was the biggest ranch in the area, so everyone paid some attention. Ellery Cochran, Lucas's father, had died a few weeks before. Dee hadn't known the man personally, only enough to put a name to his face whenever their paths crossed in town. She hadn't thought anything unusual of his passing; death was common, and he'd died peacefully, which was about as much as a body could ask for. The matter was of only mild interest to her, on the level of hearing that a neighbor had a new baby. She had never had any dealings with Ellery, so she didn't expect to have any with his son. She had already forgotten about the Cochrans by the time she stepped out into the icy wind. She tugged her father's old coat more snugly around her and jammed his too-big hat down around her ears, ducking her head to keep the wind off her face as she walked hurriedly to the wagon and climbed up onto the plank seat. It began snowing late that afternoon, but the swirling of the silent white flakes was one of her favorite sights and filled her with contentment, rather than restlessness at yet another delay of spring. Dee loved the changing seasons, each with its own magic and beauty, and she lived close enough to the land to become immersed in the inexorable rhythm of nature. Her animals were snug in the barn, her chores finished for the day, and she was safe in the cabin with a brisk fire snapping cheerfully, warming her on the outside, while a cup of coffee warmed her on the inside. She had nothing more pressing to do than sit with her feet stretched toward the fire and read one of the precious few books she had obtained over the winter. Winter was her time of rest; she was too busy during the other three seasons to have either the time or the energy for much reading. But the book soon dropped to her lap, and she leaned her head against the high back of the rocking chair, her eyes focused inward as she planned her garden. The corn had done so well last year that it might be a good thing to plant more of it. Corn was never a waste; what the townspeople didn't buy, she could always use as feed for the horse. But extra corn would mean that she would have to cut back on some other vegetable, and she couldn't decide if that would be wise. By careful planning and experimentation she knew to the square yard how much she could tend, and tend well, by herself. She didn't intend to expand at the expense of the quality of her vegetables. Nor did she want to hire a young boy to help her. It was selfish of her, perhaps, but the greatest pleasure she got from her garden, other than the primitive satisfaction of making things grow, was her complete independence. She stood alone and reveled in it. At first it had frightened her when she had found herself, at the age of eighteen, totally alone in life. When Dee was sixteen, only a couple of years after they had settled in the narrow, fertile valley just outside Prosper, Colorado, her mother, a schoolteacher, had died, leaving her daughter a legacy of books, an appreciation of the benefits of hard work, and a level head. Barely two more years had passed before her father, George Swann, had managed to get himself kicked in the head by a mule, and he died in his bed the next day without regaining consciousness. The silence, the emptiness had haunted her. Her solitude, her vulnerability had frightened her. A woman alone was a woman without protection. Dee had dug her father's grave herself and buried him, not wanting anyone to know she was all alone on the homestead. When she had to go into Prosper for supplies she turned aside friendly queries about her father, saying only that he couldn't leave the ranch just then, and she comforted her conscience with the knowledge that she hadn't lied, even if she hadn't told the exact truth. George had died early in the winter, and during the long, cold months Dee had grieved and pondered her situation. She owned this fertile little valley now; it was too small to support a large-scale ranching operation, but too large for her to work herself. On the other hand, the soil was lush, fed by crystal-clear Angel Creek as it poured out of Prosper Canyon and ran right down the middle of the valley. She could never remember deciding on any exact day what she was going to do with the rest of her life; she had just done what she had to as each day presented itself. First and foremost had been the necessity of learning how to protect herself. With dogged determination each day she set out her father's weapons: a Colt .36 handgun, an old Sharps rifle, and a shiny, year-old double-barreled shotgun. The handgun was rusty with disuse, as George hadn't gotten it out of the holster where it had been hanging on a peg since they'd settled on Angel Creek. He hadn't been any good with a handgun, he'd often joked; just give him a shotgun, so all he had to do was aim in the general direction of something. Dee had felt much the same way, but she cleaned and oiled all three of the weapons, something she had often seen her father do, and practiced loading and unloading each weapon in turn, hour after hour, until she could do it automatically, without thinking. Only then did she begin practicing with targets. She began with the handgun, because she thought it would be the easiest, and immediately she saw why George hadn't much liked it. Over any distance at all it just wasn't accurate enough to count on. She experimented until she knew the distance from

which she could reasonably expect to hit within the circle of the target she'd painted on a big tree trunk. With the rifle it was much easier to hit what she aimed at, and from a much greater distance. But, like her father, she liked the shotgun best. A man up to no good might reason she wouldn't be able to hit him with a pistol, or even a rifle, and take his chances, but no man with a brain between his ears was going to figure she was likely to miss with a shotgun. She didn't waste her time trying to build up any speed with the pistol; that was for fast draws, gunslicks looking to make a reputation, and wasn't what she needed. Accuracy was her goal, and she worked on it day after day until she felt satisfied that she was competent enough to defend herself with whichever weapon was at hand. She would never be more than competent, but as competency was what she wanted, that was enough. The garden was something that had seemed necessary, too. She and her mother had always planted a garden and worked long hours every summer canning the vegetables for use during the winter. Dee liked working in the garden, liked the rhythm of it and the way she could actually see the fruits of her labor. Losing both of her parents so close together had stunned her with the realization that human life was temporary, and she had needed something permanent to get her through the desolation of grief. She had found it in the land, for it continued, and the seasons marched on. A garden was a productive thing, returning a bounty for the most elemental care. It eased her grief to see life coming out of the ground, and the physical labor provided its own kind of relief. The land had given her a reason to live and thus had given her life. By early spring it was known in town that George Swann had died during the winter, and she had had to weather the storm of questions. People with no more than a nodding acquaintance would ask her outright what her plans were, if she had any folks to take her in, when she'd be going back East. She had cousins in Virginia, where she'd been born, but no one close, even if she had been inclined to go back, which she wasn't. Nor did she consider it anyone's business except her own. The townfolk's nosiness had been almost intolerable for her, for she had always been a private person, and that part of her personality had grown stronger during the past months. Those same people were scandalized when she'd made it plain she had no intention of leaving the homestead. She was only a girl, not yet even nineteen years old, and in the opinion of the townsfolk she had no business living out there all by herself. A respectable woman wouldn't do such a thing. Some of the young cowhands from the area ranches, as well as others who hadn't the excuse of youth, thought she might be pining for what a man could give her and took it upon themselves to relieve her loneliness. They found their way, singly and sometimes in pairs, to her cabin during the summer nights. With the shotgun in hand Dee had seen to it that they had even more quickly found their way off her property, and gradually the word had gotten around that the Swann girl wasn't interested. A few of them had had to have their britches dusted with shot before they saw the light, but once they realized that she wasn't shy about pulling the trigger they hadn't come back. At least not in the guise of generous swains. That first spring she had, by habit, planted a garden meant to provide enough for two, as that was what she had planted before, and the crops had been on the verge of bearing before she realized she would have a large surplus. She began taking what she couldn't use into town to sell it off her wagon. But that meant that she had to stay in town all day long herself, so finally she arranged with Mr. Winches that he would buy her vegetables, sometimes for cash and sometimes for credit on his books, and resell them in his general store. It was an arrangement that worked out for both of them, as Dee was able to spend more time in the garden and Mr. Winches could sell the vegetables to the townspeople -- the ones who didn't have their own small garden plots -- for a neat little profit. The next year, this time deliberately, Dee planted a huge garden and soon found that she couldn't properly take care of it. The weeds outstripped her efforts to destroy them, and the vegetables suffered. Still, she made a nice profit through Mr. Winches and put up more than enough to feed herself over the winter. The next spring, as Dee planted her third garden, a new rancher moved into the area south of Prosper. Kyle Bellamy was young, only in his late twenties, and too handsome for his own good. Dee had disliked him on sight; he was overly aggressive, riding roughshod over other people's conversations and opinions. He intended to build a great ranch and made no secret of it as he began acquiring land, though he was careful to avoid stepping on Ellery Cochran's toes. Bellamy decided that he needed another good water source for his growing empire, and he offered to buy the Angel Creek valley from Dee. She had almost laughed aloud at the ridiculously low offer but managed to decline politely. His next offer was much higher. Her refusal remained polite. The third offer was even higher, and he was clearly angry when he made it. He warned her that he wasn't going to go any higher, and Dee decided that he didn't quite understand her position. "Mr. Bellamy, it isn't the money. I don't want to sell to anyone, for any price. I don't want to leave here; this is my home." In Bellamy's experience, he could buy anything he wanted; it was just a question of how much he was willing to spend to get it. It came as a shock to him to read the truth in Dee's steady green eyes. No matter how much he offered, she wasn't

going to sell. But he wanted that land. His next offer was for marriage. Dee would have been amused if it hadn't been for the abrupt shock of realization that she was as disinclined to marry anyone as she was to sell her land. Whenever she had thought of the future she had always vaguely assumed that she would someday get married and have children, so she herself was surprised to learn that that wasn't what she wanted at all. Her two and a half years of complete independence had taught her how entirely suited she was to solitude and being her own mistress, answerable to no one but herself. In a split second her view of life was shattered and rearranged, as if she had been looking at herself through a distorted mirror that had abruptly righted itself, leaving her staring frankly at the real woman rather than the false image. So instead of laughing, she looked up at Kyle Bellamy with an oddly remote expression and said, "Thank you, Mr. Bellamy, but I don't intend ever to marry." It was after her refusal that some of the cowhands began to think it would be fun to ride through her vegetable garden, firing their pistols into the air to frighten the animals, laughing and shouting to themselves. If they expected her to be hiding under her bed, they soon found out, as had her erstwhile swains, how dangerous it was to underestimate her. That vegetable garden was her livelihood, and she protected it with her booming double-barreled shotgun. She never doubted that most of the cowhands were from Bellamy's ranch, but more and more small ranches were springing up, bringing in strangers who had to be taught to leave the Swann woman alone. During the growing season she learned to sleep with one eye open and the shotgun at hand, to ward off the occasional band of hoorahing, cowboys who saw nothing wrong with harassing a nester. She got along just fine except for that, and she felt she could handle the hoorahing. If they ever became more than a nuisance, if she felt threatened herself, she'd start doing more than dusting them with buckshot. It was six years since her father had died. Dee looked around the small cabin and was satisfied with what she saw, with her life. She had everything she needed and a few small luxuries besides; she had a slowly growing nest egg in the bank, credit at Mr. Winches's store, and a fertile little valley in which to grow her vegetables every year. There were two cows in the barn for milk, and a bull to make certain that she always had a yearling to provide beef. Eventually the bull and cows would be replaced by those yearlings, and life would go on. She had one horse, a sturdy animal who pulled the plow and the wagon and occasionally bore her on his back. A small flock of chickens kept her in eggs and provided a change from beef. It was all hers, and she had done it all herself. When a woman married, whatever she owned automatically became her husband's property, subject to his will rather than hers, just as the woman herself did. Dee saw no reason ever to give up control of herself and her land. If that meant she would be an old maid, well, there were worse things in life. She was truly independent, as few women were, working her own land and supporting herself. The people in Prosper might think she was a little odd, but she was respected as a hard worker and an honest businesswoman. She was satisfied with that. Copyright 1991 by Linda Howington From Publishers Weekly Howard's ( *A Lady of the West* ) ability to develop engaging romantic characters is the greatest asset in this otherwise routine tale of a 19th-century female homesteader and the rancher who wins her heart. Dee Swann lives alone, and that's the way she wants it. She tends her small Colorado settlement, dissuading the occasional unwelcome suitor with a round of buckshot. Unfortunately, the local gents are also interested in Angel Creek, Dee's reliable water supply. When after a 10-year absence Lucas Cochran returns to inherit his father's ranch, he succumbs to the lure of the spunky woman and her creek--although he expects he'll marry socially well-placed Olivia Millican, Dee's only close friend. Dee's claims of independence seem less convincing after a fall renders her temporarily immobile, dependent on neighbor Lucas's help for even the simplest chores. Lucas presses his advantage, luring Dee into the intimacy she had always shunned. But as the relationship blossoms, the land withers in a dry spell that makes Angel Creek look ever more desirable to ranchers with thirsty cattle--men with no qualms about running roughshod over Dee or her little patch of earth. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.