

Anne must change her life whether for better or worse.

### **Tempting Offer**

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## Chapter One

Anne Fabian walked through the house. Familiar furnishings she'd lived with for ten years seemed strange. Grady should be relaxed in the old recliner, one hand holding a book, the other on Tonto's head. The dog usually managed to be within reach of a hand when it came to petting or feeding. The furniture was there, but Grady was gone. It didn't seem possible he wouldn't soon come through the door, smile at her, ask how her day went, and settle down with a glass of cold lemonade while she finished their evening meal. It was unthinkable that she'd never see him again.

She passed through the arched doorway and into the kitchen and looked around. The cabinets were hand-stained a honey gold. Cabinets Grady had made and painstakingly finished. His old rifle, one he'd taught her to use, leaned against the corner cupboard.

Tonto, lying under the table, perhaps mirrored her thoughts. Big, sad eyes watched her, and his heavy tail thumped a greeting.

Her heart ached for herself and for Grady.

Could she have done anything differently? What could she have changed to make a happy ending rather than tragedy? How did she miss Grady's deteriorating outlook? How could she not know he was suffering unbearable pain? He seldom complained, but she knew he was sick, knew he hurt terribly at times. Grady looked out for her, had for all these years, and he didn't stop just because he didn't feel well.

But...she should have seen that he needed more help than she could give.

A sound outside interrupted her musing. She walked to the door and watched the familiar white Cadillac pull around into the backyard. Reverend Monty Rocca heaved his bulk from the luxurious car and came towards the house. He'd been a friend when she and Grady needed one.

She pushed open the screen door.

"Good morning, Reverend," she said.

"Anne. You're looking lovely, as usual."

*Zelma Orr*

The same comment he always made caused her to smile just a little.

“Would you like iced tea?”

“No. No, thanks, Anne.” He looked at the brim of the Stetson he turned in his hands. “I need to talk with you.”

“All right.” She motioned to one of the ladder-backed chairs by the table.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, especially at this sad time in your life. The problem is the bank is after us for a percentage of the loan repayment. Could you see your way clear to pay five thousand in thirty days?”

Her heart somersaulted into her throat, and she stared at him. The church they belonged to had loaned them money when Grady’s doctor bills soared.

Shock froze her hand on the back of the chair she had started to pull out from the table.

“I... You said I shouldn’t worry about payment right now, that I’d have plenty of time.”

Grady had only been buried a week.

There was a pained expression on Rocca’s face.

“I realize that, but there’s been a change in the way they administer these loans, and a partial payment is due now.”

She would’ve laughed had it not been for the look on Rocca’s face. He knew as well as she that five thousand dollars might as well be five million. She had nothing. Plenty of medical bills. Veterinary bills. Feed bills. She didn’t have grocery money.

“I don’t have that kind of money as you well know,” she said.

The sunny kitchen, the one Grady had worked on so diligently, was no longer bright and cheerful. Darkness descended all around her.

Rocca stared out her kitchen window as though worried about her.

“No hope of raising even half that much?”

“No.”

He shook his head and sat thoughtfully for several slow seconds. He straightened as though realizing all of a sudden there was a solution to their problem.

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"Tell you what, Anne," he said. "I could help if..."

He passed a wide hand over his face and pursed red lips.

Anne's blood turned cold as she realized Rocca had no intention of helping her.

"If what?" She knew she wasn't going to be interested in his alternative. Instead of the friend he pretended to be, she pictured him as a huge vulture getting ready to pounce on a small road kill. And she was his victim.

He cleared his throat. "I, uh-um-mm-m, I'd be glad to intercede in your behalf with the bank, Anne."

"At an unbelievable rate of interest." She couldn't quite conceive of what he was saying.

He smiled, and her skin crawled.

"No interest, Anne. At least, money interest. What I propose is that I spend every other weekend at Outback Ranch. All I want is your company."

"What?" Astonished, she stared with her mouth open.

Rocca's wife had been dead for years. Anne had heard rumors of liaisons with church members but had ignored them, not being interested in malicious gossip.

Perhaps she should've been.

The rage was slow in coming, and she wondered why it had taken so long to hit her, his method of being repaid. A pile of unpaid bills she'd been checking was neatly stacked on the table. A Sterling silver letter opener that had belonged to Grady lay beside them.

She reached for it, and her fingers curled around it.

"Get your filthy butt out of this house. Now." She clutched the letter opener in her fist. Mad enough to hiss, she trembled as they stared at each other.

A hard light came into the dark eyes as he stood.

"Even if my faithful congregation doesn't know about you, I do."

"Meaning?" Anne waited, certain she was going to throw up. She knew what was coming. That nice Reverend Rocca she'd thought her friend was actually a bold predator without conscience or scruples.

*Zelma Orr*

"I know you and Grady were never married, that you have, in essence, been living in sin for ten years. Think how disappointed your friends at church would be to learn of your impropriety. The sweet and devoted Mrs. Walker has never been married. To anyone. She isn't a widow at all." He smiled, white teeth behind red lips like a shark about to bite.

For herself, she didn't care. What did it matter, especially from someone like Rocca? But Grady. Grady was a different story. A filthy snake like Rocca would not be allowed to dishonor Grady's name or his memory. He wasn't fit to walk the same desert sand as Grady because it would be dirtied and evil.

Anne dropped the letter opener, rounded the table and didn't hesitate as she reached Rocca. Her right fist came forward in a roundhouse punch to his mouth, staggering the two-hundred-plus pound man. Without taking a breath, she slammed a fist into his eye, then whirled to grab Grady's rifle from where it was propped by the cabinet.

Between gritted teeth, she said, "Vamanos, Rocca. And don't come back."

The reverend, shocked and bruised, too surprised to dodge the angry woman, nevertheless, persisted. He liked a bit of a fight in a woman. That meant she'd be a tiger in bed. His bed. And soon. He rubbed his throbbing eye.

"Now, Anne, think about this. It's a legitimate offer. A weekend of gentle loving such as a young widow needs and in return --"

She jabbed the rifle into his chest.

"This rifle is automatic and fully loaded. If you aren't out of this room in one second, it won't be your eye that's hurt." She raised the rifle. "Get your ass out of here. Now."

Rocca moved slowly. At the door, he turned, syrupy voice sending chills down her spine.

"I'll be back. Your bills are due, Anne. Pride won't pay them. You'll see." It was a definite threat. "I'll wait to hear from you." He rubbed his swelling eye and lips. "Don't wait too long." He opened the door and stepped onto the porch, glanced over his shoulder, and then started down the steps.

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He paused.

Anne blinked and looked to see why he had stopped. Tonto, the white, part German Shepherd Grady had brought her years ago, stood with feet braced apart, big teeth bared in a snarl. Black eyes, fixed on Rocca, glittered.

Rocca took one step down. The seventy-pound body hit him at the knees. Man and dog tumbled down the steps and rolled on the ground. Tonto landed on top, his massive jaws clamped on Rocca's leg.

Rocca was smart; he didn't fight so Tonto's teeth didn't tear into his flesh.

"Get him off me."

It gave Anne perverse pleasure to hear fright in Rocca's voice.

"I should let him have you," she said. "But I wouldn't want him to be poisoned." The rifle still pointed at the man, she said, "Tonto."

There was a tense moment when she thought he might not listen to her. Then he loosened his hold, and sat back but stared into the preacher's red face.

Rocca sat up slowly, reached for his hat and pulled himself to his feet.

"I could sue you for damages, you know."

"You can," she said and left it at that.

"Anne, you --"

"Leave while you can, Reverend. And don't come back."

She watched the big car move slowly from the yard. It was a long time before she lowered the rifle, reached to pet Tonto, and then wearily, walked back into the house.

Her throat hurt, her eyes burned, and her temper erupted. She looked at the rifle as though it were a foreign object, flung it on the table where it skittered across the surface and teetered on the edge. She grabbed salt and pepper shakers from the table center and sent them crashing against the door through which Rocca had gone. She swore unfamiliar profanity until she finally ran out of breath. She dropped into the chair and buried her head in her folded arms.

*Oh, Grady, what am I going to do?*

*Zelma Orr*

Grady couldn't answer this time. Eventually, she'd have to come to terms with the fact she was going to lose Outback Ranch.

True to his word, for a change, the Reverend Rocca destroyed what credibility she had left. He did it quickly and completely. She didn't know how it worked, what he said or did, but no bank would extend a loan. No friend or acquaintance came forward to offer help. It was just her and Joe Endicott who had been with Grady for years, living on the ranch, doing everything he could for them. It wasn't enough. She was going to have to sell the ranch, go somewhere and start over.

She settled against the rough-cut stone and stared out across the sloping green to where it dropped off into a sheer 300-foot wall to the valley below. For years, it had been her favorite spot on Outback Ranch. Still was, she mused. Her hand moved over the rock she leaned on, absently caressing. Her fingers found the shallow indentions of the writing engraved into the hard surface.

Grady. How she missed him. The steadiness of him. The gentleness in him. No pretensions whatsoever. His slow smile. The endearing grin when he told her there was no one on earth like her. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

*Why couldn't she have kept him?*

She crossed her arms over drawn-up knees and rested her chin on them. So many whys and what ifs fed through her mind. For ten years she had lived a full life. If it hadn't been what she'd dreamed about as a teenager, it had been good. Good enough. Grady had seen to that. They had worked hard, worked together, and their life had settled into a pleasant routine.

Until Grady became ill. Even then, they'd made the most of the time they had until near the end. Her throat thickened, but she swallowed the hot tears as she did so many times. Grady wouldn't want her to weep for him.

Her thoughts darkened as the Reverend Monty Rocca came to mind. If not for him. Once she'd thought he was the best thing that had happened to them, but she'd found out, much to her sorrow and despair that Rocca had his own interests at heart, not hers or Grady's.

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She blew out a breath. Too late to think of that. But if she had to mortgage her soul to the devil, Rocca wouldn't get his hands on the Outback. She'd sell it to old Lucifer himself before she'd let Rocca have it.

When the ranch was gone, then what? If she could salvage enough money to go somewhere else, get a job, get her life back on track, then maybe the searing anger would subside. She might come to grips with the hatred boiling like a caldron in her heart. It was wrong; she knew it was wrong to feel that way. Grady would gently remind her she was fighting windmills. She'd tackle all the windmills in Holland to get even with Rocca for his treachery. And lecherous leanings.

Just for Grady.

She rubbed her forehead against her shirtsleeve, and raised her head to watch a white-tailed hawk soar overhead, diving after some small, unfortunate prey. Like Rocca. Let your guard down one minute, and he'll drag you to your doom.

Reverend Monty Rocca.

"I swear all the stars in your crown will be jagged thorns dipped in cyanide," Anne said and gritted her teeth.

The sound of a horse's hooves clattering over stones brought her head up. Eyes narrowed, she watched the object of her hate guide the huge red gelding toward where she sat at the head of Grady's grave. If she could have lifted the stone, she'd have thrown it at him. As it were, she sat waiting until he pulled up near her, smiling his insincere smile. She could smell the evil in the man. It had been just a week since his last threatening visit. A century wouldn't be long enough.

He doffed the soft-brimmed black Stetson that was his trademark.

"Anne," he said. "You're looking as lovely as ever." He swung long legs over the horse and landed easily beside her.

The words must be the only ones he knew. They sickened her.

She didn't move. The chill in her eyes spoke more eloquently than words, but it was lost on the reverend. He was certain he held the



*Zelma Orr*

upper hand. She would be one of his minions, bowing to his wishes. That would be a cold day in hell.

A slight incline of her head.

"What do you want, Reverend?"

Her flat voice gave no indication of what she was feeling. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could ever show the depth of hate she felt for the man. It was a new feeling, this hate for a human being. She had been hurt, disappointed, disillusioned, but she had never hated anyone.

Until Rocca.

The man hesitated, glanced around as though to check if anyone else were nearby, and then knelt three feet away from her.

"I don't see your animal protector." His voice was sly, almost triumphant.

Yes, it was too bad Tonto wasn't with her today. Just her luck.

"You don't want to see him, do you?"

He stood, squaring his shoulders.

"No, I don't. But your time's running out, Anne," he said. "I need your answer. Or payment in full for the loan."

Anne didn't speak, only stared into the liquid brown eyes. Oily, like a snake. How can he charm a church congregation, have them eating out of his hand, when he's a hypocrite of the highest order? His wide smile and effusive pleasantries charmed most people, but she had learned the hard way: Beneath the charm is a selfish, grasping bastard. Minister or not, he was a festering sore in her life. She hated with as much enthusiasm as when she loved: all out and complete.

From the time the Outback Ranch showed a profit, she and Grady had attended Rocca's church in Flagstaff, been involved in volunteer work, helped those less fortunate until Grady's illness set them teetering on bankruptcy. Rocca's church had stepped in and offered help. Anne had blessed them for it, had slept better at night. For a while. Now, the church, or at least the minister from there, had done an about-face.

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And today he's back just as he'd threatened. Sick at heart, she stared at Reverend Rocca. She couldn't possibly pay off the note, and he'd come back to gloat.

She wished him to burn forever in the hottest of hells. She'd work overtime to furnish fuel for the fire. She stood up and shoved her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

"I'm waiting for one more reply, Reverend Rocca. I should be able to give you a definite answer in fifteen days if you'll be so kind as to allow that."

Heat fought its way into her blood, but she bit back the words she wanted to scream at him. She had to play to him, to his vanity and arrogance. Make promises she didn't intend to keep.

Rocca, wearing the beautifully blocked Stetson, bowed his head in acquiescence. "I can be gracious and allow that. But that's the end of it, Anne. The very end. Either I get you. Or I get the ranch."

She inclined her head in reply and watched with hating eyes as he mounted, cast a deep look at her, and rode away. When he was out of sight, Anne bent double. Nausea churned in her stomach and the half of peanut butter sandwich she'd had for lunch resurfaced. Several moments later, she wiped her mouth and eyes, mounted Caesar, and turned him toward home.

## Chapter Two

With hand-tooled black leather boots propped on the cherry wood desk, Jeff Crandall glanced through the want ads in the Phoenix Globe. Idly, he went down the columns until he came to livestock. He hoped to add a few additional head of good stock, not in a big hurry, and only if he could get a good deal plus a few strong horses. Breeding interested him because he loved to see the strong traits passed onto generations of stock, just like people with their ancestors. It was fun. It was good business.

His eyes fastened on a brief advertisement. "Two hundred head of healthy cattle. Several strong thoroughbred horses, top breeding line." No name. No telephone number. A post office box.

His feet dropped from the desk, he picked up a pen and scratched off a note to the effect that he was interested in taking a look at the cattle and horses. Not a big number, but if they were good lineage, he'd like to see them. Rockaway Ranch was big, but he enjoyed seeing other people's accomplishments in the cattle business. And making deals. Advertised sales recently had indicated a top market for premium animals.

Four days later, he got an answer from his note, this time with a return address. And a signature.

Jeff stared at the words, then at the name signed in lovely handwriting. Anne Fabian. It was like stepping into a time warp. When was the last time he'd heard anything about Anne Fabian? Probably when his father died six years ago. And shouldn't the name be Anne Walker? Ah, yes. Thoroughly modern Anne kept her own name so as not to lose her identity. He wondered that Grady, being mostly Native American, would allow such a thing.

His curiosity became a dull, throbbing anger as he re-read the words:

*Jeff: Thank you for responding to my advertisement. The animals for sale can be seen at any time. If you or your foreman wish to see them, I'm at home most of the time. Sorry I don't have a phone, but anyone in Flagstaff can direct you to the Outback Ranch, about seven miles from town.*

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*I hope your family is well. Anne Fabian.*

*The only families I have left are ranch people.* He wrinkled the single sheet of paper in a tight fist. Melanie, his wife of three years, had given up the isolated life of a rancher's wife and sought more companionable associates. He didn't miss her. After she finally left him, it was almost a relief. Melanie had never been happy at Rockaway, positive until the very last that she could convince Jeff to be an absentee owner, live in the city where there were people, action, fancy restaurants, and theaters. She hadn't succeeded in that any more than she had succeeded as a rancher's wife. Aside from a general feeling that he'd failed at marriage, Jeff had picked up his life and gone on without missing a step.

He glared at the crumpled paper in his fist and thought if he could get hold of the writer, he'd simply wring her neck. He pushed back from the desk and strode to the window, his gaze going over a favorite view, rock landscaped yard, neat fences and corrals, people and animals moving around in the early morning sunlight.

Anne Fabian. He could picture her plainly, the cute six-year-old daughter of then Rockaway foreman, Henry, and his wife, Betty. Cute. With a child's precocious ways and a woman's knowledge, she'd trailed after twelve-year-old Jeff. Ten years later, she was still pestering him, a mature college graduate. Then he'd come home one year from advanced agriculture and animal husbandry studies and found a beautiful seventeen-year-old Anne still chasing him. The inevitable. He'd fallen head over heels for Anne, although telling himself she was still too young. That hadn't kept them from making love. Anne, the sweetest armful he could ever remember. His body, even ten years later, remembered too well touching Anne, tracing the contours of firm, sweet flesh that responded hotly to his touch. God, she'd driven him crazy with her kisses, her innocent hands exploring his body. She'd gone straight to his heart and tumbled him straight into planning for 'happily ever after.'

Then the letter from his mother telling him Anne had left Rockaway with Grady Walker, then foreman of Rockaway Ranch. Bitter. Oh, hell, yes, he was bitter. Why the hell couldn't she have waited? He was almost finished with his schooling and would have been back on Rockaway in nine months, twelve at the most.

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But Anne couldn't wait. He remembered her response to his lovemaking. He'd been her first, but her body had been ready for him, her warm mouth, hands exploring, and the questioning light in her green eyes. Sweet. So damned sweet. He could still feel the texture of midnight black hair, wrapped around his fingers when he plowed them through its thickness. She hadn't held back; neither of them had been able to. He'd taken her, loved her, gone eagerly back to his studies so that he could finish and come home. To Anne.

But Anne was gone.

*Yeah, I'll look over your sales, Anne. And you. You'd better keep Grady close by or I might do more than look. Wonder if she's changed? Probably fat and lazy with five kids. You can't be lazy with five kids.* He swore for no reason whatsoever.

Funny. He hadn't gotten this angry at Melanie in three years, even with her inborn laziness, extravagance, her pouting, outrageous demands for trips, for cruises, for moving into town. But a short note from Anne, and he was livid from his thick black hair to his size twelve boots.

\* \* \* \*

She wondered when, or if, Jeff would come. Who was foreman of Rockaway now and would he come instead? What could she and Jeff say to each other? Her last communication with anyone at Rockaway Ranch was when Jeff's father had died, not many months after his mother's death. Anne had been hurt by both deaths because she had loved them just as she'd loved their son. Jeff hadn't spoken to her at the funeral. Her notes of sympathy had gone unanswered, but she hadn't expected anything else.

Now, Jeff was coming to see her. On business. Yes, that's how she'd handle it: strictly business. She sighed, pushed the heavy braid of hair over her shoulder and straightened to rub a hand to the small of her back. She'd gotten up with a headache. Her back hurt. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, especially her. A cold dread settled against her spine. She knew the reason: Jeff. She'd never gotten over him. He'd never forgiven her.

Instead of spending the time dreading his arrival, she gave vent to the hope that Jeff would buy the cattle and horses. That way, she'd not only get a fair price, but he would put them to good use. Jeff

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had always been an astute businessman, one his father had trusted, and one who'd come to be known in the community as fair in prices, more than fair to his workers. Sure, she kept up with him through the cattlemen's catalogs, articles on ranches in the area, their owners, their problems, their accomplishments. Jeff was prominent in all area activities, so his name appeared regularly.

Sometimes she just sat and looked at his name, or if a picture appeared, she studied it, and then kept it. She knew when he'd married. When he'd divorced. Births at the ranch. Deaths. She wanted badly to see him, yet she dreaded it more than anything she could recall in the past few years.

Unless it was the appearance of the Reverend Rocca.

Snarling, she swung a forkful of hay into Caesar's stall. Any thought of Rocca sent her blood pressure skyrocketing. Hate built up like an untended pressure cooker. While forking the hay, her arms moved in rhythm with her heated thoughts, and only when a car door slammed did she turn. She swiped sweat from her face and watched Jeff walk toward her. She'd known she'd have to face him sooner or later; she would have opted for later. Her heart actually stopped; she could tell because her breath cut off, and she was dizzy. He was still the same with dark good looks set off by deep blue eyes in a sun-weathered face.

*Looks as if you're still being punished, Anne, old girl.* She propped the pitchfork on the stall door and went to meet him. There wasn't one single thing she'd forgotten about Jeff Crandall.

His long strides brought Jeff to her in seconds. He stopped three feet away and said, "Anne." She wasn't fat, he noticed immediately. Nor lazy, either, judging by her work clothes and the beads of sweat she swiped onto a sleeve.

Her eyes. Sad eyes where he remembered mischievous, sparkling green. Thin. Beneath an oversized shirt, she was so slender she looked fragile. As though a strong wind might blow her away.

He wanted, badly wanted, to sweep her up in his arms and protect her. From what? Grady?

*And where is Grady while his wife works like a day laborer?*

Jeff's temper soared. One look at her and he had to fight the urge to yank her into his arms and crush that pale, sensitive mouth.

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One look, and he wanted to grab her and shake sense into her. She'd always been able to make him mad just by turning those wide eyes on him.

*What in hell is wrong with me?*

"Hello, Jeff." Anne took another step and held out her hand.

"Good to see you."

He kept his hands in his jeans' pockets and didn't reach out, so she let her hand drop to her side.

"You look like hell. What have you done to yourself?" He glared at her the same way he had when she was six, then when she was sixteen. His dark blue eyes focused sharply from her head to her feet.

Her lips curved. "Thanks. I'm sure I needed that."

She wore one of Grady's old red plaid flannel shirts in deference to the cool spring morning. The shirttail hung outside jeans faded almost white. It helped to disguise her slender build, but nothing hid the thin face, shadows under her eyes, and the taut line around her wide mouth.

She hiked up the shirttail to hook her thumbs into the back pockets of her jeans. She inclined her head.

"If you want to look at the cattle, we can ride out a ways. The horses are in a different section."

Her entire body was stiff with apprehension. She'd known seeing Jeff wouldn't be easy, but she hadn't realized just how badly she'd missed him. Vivid dreams had faded over the past decade, but reality, seeing him in the flesh, hurt like hell. When he didn't speak, she glanced at him.

His expression hadn't changed. Grim. Anger. She recalled his anger that he'd directed at her a few times. But then they'd always kissed and made up. At least, the few days that he'd been home that last time. Inwardly, Anne winced. *How will I get through this?* She wondered. Somehow. Hadn't she always managed...somehow?

"Where's Grady?" The abrupt question had Anne's heart skittering. He reached out and caught her arm, swung her around to face him. His fingers circled entirely around the small arm. He didn't remember Anne as delicate, but his fingers automatically gentled.

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"You'd better let me talk to Grady before I give in to baser instincts and do what I want to you."

She pushed his hand away and looked straight at him. The expression she surprised there was gone in an instant, but she didn't recognize it. Jeff was the same. Handsome, no doubt about it. Weathered skin emphasized the deep blue of his eyes framed by black curling lashes. She'd always envied him those lashes. Black hair, a bit long and winged back from his face. Wide mouth, lips stretched into a tight line. It was easy to recall how it felt on hers.

"Grady died three months ago," she said. Three months, two days and six hours ago, she could have added.

Shock was his first emotion. "Why the hell didn't you let someone know?" He stepped closer. "Why, Anne?"

"There was no need." She moved toward the stables. "If you want to ride out, you can take Saigon." She motioned to the stall nearest her. She took a bridle from a hook and handed it to him. "Saddle's right there."

"Anne." Jeff took her arm again, gently this time, and turned her to face him. "I'm sorry."

She nodded. "Thanks."

She pulled away, opened Caesar's stall, and led him out. From across the broad back of her stallion, she watched Jeff saddle Grady's favorite horse, Saigon. He swung into the saddle, his back straight, and a dark gray Stetson pulled over the deep waves of hair.

She had no defense against her feelings. *Heaven help me. I still love him. And even worse, he doesn't like me at all.* Not that she was in any position to blame him. She had a moment's time to regret, to recall her impossible dreams. To imagine what could have been. Blanking her mind had become second nature to her, so she used that ability now. She touched Caesar with her knees and led the way toward the fence line they would follow to find the cattle she had for sale.

Jeff brought Saigon alongside Caesar. "Are you selling the ranch, too?"

"Yes." She couldn't tell him how it hurt to sell the land Grady loved so much. Treasured because it had belonged to him. Because more than a century ago, his ancestors had rode these hills and valleys



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and forded the streams, fought tribal wars and the white man. It had been a part of Grady, this land.

"Any offers?"

"Not yet." The small amount she'd get clear wouldn't make her rich, but it would help her start somewhere else. Oregon. Washington. Montana. Anywhere she didn't have to think about Grady. Or Jeff. Or Rocca. Her lips pressed together at the last thought.

They rode on in silence, Jeff's eyes taking in the sweeping land, distant mountains, and a sky so blue it hurt the eyes. "Well kept." He drew Saigon to a halt. "Why, Anne?"

"There are a lot of debts and..."

"I'm not talking about the ranch. I'm talking about you. Why the hell did you leave like that without a word to me?"

She looked at the man, rangy build, and strength in his hands and legs and in his eyes. He'd been her lover. Such a short time, and such a heartbreakingly long time ago. Seeing him again was a mistake. Her heart, that traitorous heart, simply gave up without a fight, still Jeff's, after all this time.

*Why did I think it would be different? How could I have known the old torturous longing would come back, tenfold? God, haven't I been punished enough?* Hiding her pain, hiding her feelings as she'd long since learned to do, she said, "It was a long time ago, Jeff."

"Dammit, Anne."

She could feel the hostility, the anger, but she couldn't justify her actions of years ago. She refused to even try to explain what had happened ten long years in the past.

"I was a child, Jeff."

"Not too much of a child to make love to me," he said. "Then you run off with Grady." Jeff took a deep breath to control his temper. "I knew you never had a serious thought in your head, but what you did was stupid. You knew I'd be back, and I'd expect you to be there."

Her heart jumped as his words brought back memories, painful memories she tried hard to avoid. She wanted to hug herself, put protection between her and Jeff. Instead, Anne spread her hands.

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Yes, he would have come back, possibly married her and been stuck with an unwanted wife and child. Or so she thought at the time. She knew of his plans to take over the ranch, his studies he worked so hard at, how proud his parents were of him. They expected Jeff to be a full partner to Mr. Crandall. An unmarried partner. Especially, they wouldn't want him married to a woman he was obligated to marry. And she had known that Jeff and his parents would have felt total obligation. To her. For her parents.

She shivered at the thought that Jeff would've married her because he *had* to.

"It's been a decade, Jeff. Let it go."

She was tired, hurt, and angry at her inability to solve her present problems, frustrated by Jeff's accusations and misunderstanding. She'd love to blurt out the whole story, but at this late date, it wouldn't help anyone.

Her chin lifted, and she made her voice all business.

"The thoroughbreds are for sale as are about two hundred head of prime Herefords."

"You could have sold those for a good price. If you needed money badly."

She gave him a hard look.

"Ever heard how men deal with women in cases such as mine? They think they can pay minimum prices, and I'll be glad to get it." She shook her head. "I don't know a lot about ranching, but I do know I have valuable livestock, and they're not going for less than they're worth." She shot a quick grin at him. "I figure you'll pay at least what they're worth."

He hadn't thought about a woman alone having to deal with unscrupulous men. No, he hadn't. And he should have. Maybe she's not such an airhead after all.

"I'll pay a fair price," he said.

"I know," she said. "The horses are in the far corral. The cattle are farther into the northern corner. I'll ride over there with you."

"Let your foreman do it. No need for you to go." A cold voice accompanied his scowl. Dammit, he wanted to talk about Anne. He wanted answers.

Anne laughed. "Foreman? Grady and I and old Joe Endicott are the only people who ever worked here. Neighbors helped when they could. Joe's arthritis has been bothering him, and he doesn't ride much anymore. He's down near Douglas visiting his brother. If you don't want to search hell's half acre looking for the cattle, then you'll have to put up with me."

"You're here alone. No one on the place with you?"

"No. Unless you count Tonto."

"As in Kemo Sabe?" She surprised a wry grin on his face.

"In this case he's a white German Shepherd Joe brought me a couple of years ago. He's pretty good company. Right now, he's at the vet's to get several stitches in his throat after a run-in with a badger."

"Nasty little things," Jeff said.

"But cute." She turned her head to smile at him.

Jeff caught his breath. How much she looked like the girl he'd made love to so long ago. The one he'd expected to be waiting for him when he graduated from college and returned to Rockaway Ranch. Anne hadn't had the tenacity to stick it out.

She's free now, his thoughts ran on. He frowned. She didn't look free. She looked...cornered. That was the look Jeff recognized, and now, just as ten years ago, he wanted. He still wanted Anne Fabian Walker, craved her like a drug, her body drew him like a magnet. *Dammit to hell.*

He checked his thoughts and gazed around them.

The cattle were well cared for. The fences he'd seen, some patched over, were expertly mended. Nothing rundown about the ranch or the corrals. He watched Anne's slender figure as she dismounted and walked, hands thrust into back pockets of her jeans and wondered how she'd accomplished so much. Alone.

"You're a widow, Anne," he said. "You can get help from cattlemen organizations. Grady was a Vietnam veteran. His benefits should be yours."

She shook her head and kept walking. No need to tell Jeff how she'd tried. There had been half-hearted attempts with negative results by the Veterans Administration. Grady was an Indian who had never fit into the white man's world or the Indian's. Most of all, she wasn't a widow; she was known as Grady's woman.

*Tempting Offer*

"You're just quitting then?" Jeff's voice vibrated with anger. "The Anne Fabian I knew would never quit at anything. You chased me until you caught me, then ran." He was silent a beat, an ominous silence. "On second thought, maybe I should think of you as a quitter." He wanted her to deny it, to tell him to go to hell, say anything rather than mildly disagree with him.

He didn't see the seething hurt and disgust inside Anne. He didn't, couldn't, know all the dirty details. She wanted out from under the killing responsibility of Grady's long illness, the evil of Reverend Monty Rocca, the debts, and the worry. She passed her hand over her face to rid it of all expression.

She didn't look at Jeff as her narrow shoulders moved in a shrug. "You know what I'm asking for the animals, Jeff. Is that an outrageous sum? You want to make me an offer?"

"It's a fair price, extremely so. You could get more."

She didn't speak. Jeff watched her, wanted to see beyond that wall she'd flung up between them. He figured he was out of his mind for what he was thinking, but what the hell? Anne had always been able to drive him crazy.

Anne leaned against Caesar, stared down the canyon walls at a small stream of water. Her shoulders were straight, but she was tempted to slump. She was exhausted and just wanted to get the deal over with so she could recuperate. Somehow. For so long she'd held herself militarily stiff, but her strength was running out. If she could complete the sale, get something for the piercing headache followed by grinding nausea that had hung on for days, and sleep a week.

The silence grew. Finally, Anne turned to Jeff. "I'm listening." She didn't want any counteroffer, but it seemed she had no choice. Jeff held the purse strings. The bargaining hand was his.

He faced her across Saigon's broad back and watched her closely as he spoke. He was an idiot of the highest order, he realized, but that didn't keep him from what would surely be a fatal error. For him.

"I'll buy your property, your livestock, and pay off the bills. You come to live at Rockaway Ranch."

Anne must change her life whether for better or worse.

### **Tempting Offer**

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