



Wyoming Fierce (Wyoming Men)

By Diana Palmer

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But soon Bodie's the one who finds herself in need of rescuing—only, she's afraid to tell Cane what's really going on. How can she trust someone as unpredictable as this fierce cowboy? When her silence only ends up getting her into even deeper hot water, it's up to Cane to save the day. And if he does it right, he won't be riding off into the sunset alone.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Palmer demonstrates, yet again, why she's the queen of desperado quests for justice and true love." - Publishers Weekly on Dangerous

"Palmer knows how to make the sparks fly...heartwarming."

--Publishers Weekly on Renegade

"Diana Palmer is a mesmerizing storyteller who captures the essence of what a romance should be."

--Affaire de Coeur

"The popular Palmer has penned another winning novel, a perfect blend of romance and suspense."

--Booklist on Lawman

About the Author

The prolific author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A New York Times bestselling author and voted one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

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Bolinda Mays was having a hard time concentrating on her biology textbook. She hadn't slept well, worrying about her grandfather. He was only in his early sixties, but he was disabled and having difficulties paying his utility bills.

She'd come home for the weekend from her college in Montana. The trip was expensive, considering the gas it took to get her back and forth in her beat-up but serviceable old truck. Thank god she had a part-time job working for a convenience store while college was in session, or she'd never have even been able to afford to come home and see about her grandfather.

It was early December. Not too long before Christmas, and she was having final exams the next week. Really cold weather would come soon. But Bolinda's stepfather was making threats again, about turning her grandfather out of the house that had once been Bolinda's mother's. Her death had left the old man at the mercy of that fortunehunting fool who had his fingers in every evil pie in Catelow, Wyoming. Bolinda shivered, thinking how impossible it was going to be for her, trying to pay off her used textbooks that she'd charged on her credit card. Now she was going to have to try to pay for her grandfather's utility bill, as well. Gas was so expensive, she thought miserably. The poor old man already had to choose between groceries and blood pressure meds. She'd thought about asking her neighbors, the Kirks, for help. But the only one of them she knew well was Cane, and he resented her. A lot. It would be dicey asking him for money. if she even dared.

Not that he didn't owe her something for all the times she'd saved people from him in the little town of CateLOW, Wyoming, not too far from Jackson Hole. Cane had lost an arm overseas in the Middle East, after the last big conflict but while he was still in the service. He'd come home embittered and icy cold, hating everyone. He'd started drinking, refused physical therapy, refused counseling and then gone hog wild.

Every couple of weeks, he treed the local bar. The other Kirk brothers, Mallory and Dalton, always paid the bills and they knew the owner of the tavern, who was kind enough not to have Cane arrested. But the only person who could do anything with Cane was Bolinda, or Bodie as her friends called her. Even Morie, Mallory Kirk's new wife, couldn't deal with a drunken Cane. He was intimidating.

Not so much to Bolinda. She understood him, as few other people did. Amazing, considering that she was only twenty-two and he was thirty-four. That was one big age difference. It never seemed to matter. Cane talked to her as if she were his age, often about things that she had no business knowing. He seemed to consider her one of the guys.

She didn't look like a guy. She wasn't largely endowed in the bra department, of course. Her breasts were small and pert, but nothing like the women in those guy magazines. She knew that, because Cane had dated a centerfold model once and told Bodie all about her. Another embarrassing conversation when he was drunk that he probably didn't even remember.

She shook her head and tried again to concentrate on her biology textbook. She sighed, running a hand through her short, wavy black hair. Her odd, pale brown eyes were riveted to the drawings of internal human anatomy, but she just couldn't seem to make her brain work. There was going to be a final next week, along with an oral lab, and she didn't want to be the student trying to hide under the table when the professor started asking questions.

She shifted on the carpeted floor, on her stomach, and tried again to concentrate. Music started playing. Strange. That sounded like the musical ring of her cell phone, the theme from the *Star Trek* movie...

"Hey, Bodie, it's for you!" her grandfather called from the next room, where she'd left her cell phone in her coat pocket.

She muttered something and got to her feet. "Who is it, Granddaddy?"

"I don't know, sugar." He handed Bodie's cell phone to her.

"Thanks," she whispered. "Hello?" she said into the phone.

"Uh, Miss Mays?" came a hesitant voice over the line.

She recognized who was calling immediately. She ground her teeth together. "I won't come!" she said. "I'm studying for a biology test. I've got a lab, to boot.!"

"Aw, please?" the voice came again. "They're threatening to call the police. I think they'll do it this time. The newspapers would have a field day."

There was a pregnant pause. Her lips made a thin line. "Oh, damn!" she muttered.

"Darby says he'll come get you. In fact," the cowboy added hopefully, "he's sitting right outside your house

right now."

Bodie stomped to the window and looked out the blinds. There was a big black Kirk ranch truck parked in the driveway, with the lights on and the engine running.

"Please?" the cowboy asked again.

"All right." She hung up in the middle of his

"Thank you!"

She grabbed her jacket and her purse and slipped into her boots. "I have to go out for an hour. I won't be too long," she told her grandfather.

Rafe Mays, used to the drill, pursed his lips. "you should get combat pay," he pointed out.

Bodie rolled her eyes and walked out the door. "I hope I won't be long," she said before she pulled it shut.

She got into the truck. Darby Hanes, the Kirks' longtime foreman, gave her a wistful smile.

"I know. I'm sorry. But you're the only person who can do anything with him. He's tearing up the bar. They're getting tired of the weekly routine." He pulled out into the road, after making sure she had her seat belt on. "He had a date last night up in Jackson Hole. Ended badly, I'm guessing, from all the cussing he did when he got home."

She didn't reply. She hated knowing about Cane Kirk's girlfriends. He seemed to have a lot of them, even with his disability. Not that it made any difference to her. Cane would still be Cane no matter what. She loved him. She'd loved him since she graduated from high school, when he presented her with a bouquet of pink roses, her favorite, and a bottle of very expensive floral perfume. He'd even kissed her. On the cheek, of course, like a treasured child more than like an adult. Her grandfather had worked for the Rancho Real until his health failed and he had to quit. That had been while Cane was still in the military, after the second Gulf War, before the terrible roadside bomb had robbed him of most of his left arm, and almost of his life.

She supposed Cane was fond of her. It wasn't until last year that everyone had discovered her almost magical ability to calm him when he went on drinking sprees. Since then, when he went on benders, Bodie was recruited to fetch him home. There had been a brief period of time when he'd gone to therapy, been measured for a prosthesis and seemed to be adjusting nicely to his new life.

And then it had all gone south, for reasons nobody knew. His bar crawls had become legendary. The expense was terrible, because his brothers, Mallory and Dalton, had to pick up the expense. Cane got a monthly check from the army, but nobody could entice him to apply for disability. He went to show cattle, with a cowboy who handled the big bulls for him, and he was the idea man for the Kirk ranch. He was good at PR, worked to liaison with the national cattlemen's lobby, kept up with current legislation that affected the cattle industry and generally was the spokesman for the Kirk ranch.

When he was sober.

Lately he wasn't. Not a lot.

"Any idea what happened?" Bodie asked curiously, because Darby would know. He knew everything that went on around the Rancho Real, or "royal ranch" in Spanish, named by the original owner, a titled gentleman from Valladolid, northwest of Madrid, Spain, who started it way back in the late 1800s.

Darby glanced at her and grimaced. It was dark and very cold, even with the heater running and the old but serviceable coat Bodie was wearing.

"I have an idea," he confessed. "But if Cane ever found out I told you, I'd be standing in the unemployment line."

She sighed and fiddled with the fanny pack she wore in lieu of carrying around a cumbersome purse. "She must have said something about his arm."

He nodded faintly. "That would be my guess."

He's really sensitive about it. Funny," he added solemnly, "I thought he was getting better."

"If he'd get back in therapy, mental and physical, he'd improve," she replied.

"Sure, but he won't even talk about it. He's sinking into himself," he added quietly.

"There goes that theoretical physics mind working overtime again," she teased, because most people didn't know about Darby's degree in that field.

He shrugged. "Hey, I just manage cattle."

"I'll bet you sit around in your room at night imagining the route to a new and powerful unified field theory." She chuckled.

"Only on Thursdays," he said, laughing out loud. "At least my chosen field of study doesn't leave me covered in mud and using shovels and trowels in holes around the country."

"Don't knock anthropology," she said firmly. "We'll find the missing link one day, and you can say you knew me before I was famous, like that guy in Egypt who's always in documentaries about pharaohs' tombs." She lifted her rounded chin. "Nothing wrong with honest work."

He made a face. "Digging up bones."

"Bones can tell you a lot," she replied.

"So they say. Here it is," he added, nodding toward the little out-of-the-way bar that Cane frequented. Out front was a stop sign that local drunks often used for target practice when they went driving around in four-wheel-drive vehicles late at night. Now it said "S... .p." The two middle letters were no longer recognizable.

"They need to replace that," she pointed out.

"What for? Everybody knows it means stop," he said. "Why waste good metal and paint? They'd just shoot it up again. Not much in the way of entertainment this far out in the country."

"Got a point, I guess." She sighed.

He parked in front of the bar. There were only two vehicles out there. Probably those of employees. Everybody with any sense would have left when Cane started cursing and throwing things. At least, that was the pattern.

"I'll keep the engine running. In case somebody called the sheriff this time," he mused.

"Cane and the sheriff are best friends," she reminded him.

"That won't stop Cody Banks from locking him up if someone files a complaint for assault and battery," he stated. "The law is the law, friendship notwithstanding."

"I guess. Maybe it would knock some sense into him."

He shook his head. "That's been tried. Mallory even let him stew in a cell for two days. Finally bailed him out, and he went back and did it again that same weekend. Our black sheep there is out of control."

"I'll see what I can do to rein him in," she promised.

She got out of the truck, ran a hand through her short black hair and grimaced. Her brown eyes were somber as she hesitated on the porch for just a minute, and then, finally, opened the door.

The mess was bad. Tables knocked over. Chairs everywhere. One was upside down behind the bar in a pile of glass, and the place smelled like whiskey. This was going to be an expensive mess, too.

"Cane?" she called.

A thin man in a Hawaiian shirt peered over the bar. "Bodie? Thank God!"

"Where is he?" she asked.

He pointed to the bathroom.

She went toward it. She was almost there when it slammed open and Cane walked out. His long-sleeved beige Western shirt with the fancy embroidery was stained with blood. Probably his own, she thought, noting the caked blood around his nose, which was bruised, and his square jaw. His sensual mouth had a cut just at the corner, where blood was also visible. His thick, short, slightly wavy black hair was mussed. His black eyes were bloodshot. Even in that condition, he was so attractive that he made her heart pound. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with long powerful legs encased in tight jeans; his big feet in boots that still had the mirror polish on them despite his exploits. He was thirty-four to her twenty-two, but right now, he seemed much younger.

He glared at her. "Why do they always bring you?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "My unusual ability to subdue charging tigers?" she suggested.

He blinked. Then he chuckled.

She went forward and took one of his big hands in hers. The knuckles were bruised and swollen and smeared with blood. She couldn't tell if it was his or somebody else's. "Mallory's going to be mad."

"Mallory isn't home," he said in a loud whisper. He even grinned. "He and Morie went to Louisiana to see a bull. They won't be back until tomorrow."

"Tank won't be happy, either," she added, using the nickname that family used for Dalton, the youngest brother.

He shrugged. "Tank will be knee-deep in those old Tom Mix silent cowboy movies he likes. It's Saturday night. He makes popcorn, takes the phone off the hook, locks himself in and saturates himself with black-and-white cinema."

"That's what you should be doing, instead of wrecking bars!" she muttered.

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