



Invincible

By Diana Palmer

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He's everything she fears...and everything she wants

Mercenary by name and by nature, Carson is a Lakota Sioux who stays to himself and never keeps women around long enough for anything emotional to develop. But working with his friend Cash Grier on a complex murder investigation provides Carson with another kind of fun—shocking Cash's sweet but traditional secretary, Carlie Blair, with tales of his latest conquests.

Then Carlie lands in deep trouble. She saw something she shouldn't have, and now the face of a criminal is stored permanently in her photographic memory...and Carlie is the key piece of evidence that could implicate a popular politician in the murder case.

Her only protection is Carson—the man she once despised. But when she learns that Carson is more than just a tough guy, Carlie realizes she's endangered herself further. Because now her only chance to live means losing her heart to the most dangerous kind of man....

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Editorial Review

Review

"Palmer...is the queen of desperado quests for justice and true love." -Publishers Weekly

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

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

"Diana Palmer is one of those authors whose books are always enjoyable. She throws in romance, suspense and a good storyline." -The Romance Reader on Before Sunrise

"...this is a fascinating story...It's nice to have a hero wise enough to know when he can't do things alone and willing to accept help when he needs it. There is pleasure to be found in the nice sense of family this tale imparts."

-RT Book Reviews on Wyoming Bold

"...lots of passion, thrills, and plenty of suspense... Protector is a top notch read!"

-Romance Reviews Today on Protector

"The dialogue is charming, the characters likable and the sex sizzling..." --Publishers Weekly on Once in Paris

"A delightful romance with interesting new characters and many familiar faces. It's nice to have a hero who is not picture perfect in looks or instincts, and a heroine who accepts her privileged life yet is willing to work for the future she wants." --RT Book Reviews on Wyoming Tough

"Palmer, a romance veteran, knows how to concoct a savory chicken-fried love plot..."-Publishers Weekly on Heartless

"Palmer's latest entry in her Long, Tall Texans series is an intriguing story that blurs the line between good and evil...the romance between the main characters builds nicely with some gentle humor, and the moral dilemmas they face are believable and engrossing." -RT Book Reviews on Protector

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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It was a rainy Friday morning.

Carlie Blair, who was running late for her job as secretary to Jacobsville, Texas police chief Cash Grier, only

had time for a piece of toast and a sip of coffee before she rushed out the door to persuade her ten-year-old red pickup truck to start. It had gone on grinding seemingly forever before it finally caught up and started.

Her father, a Methodist minister, was out of town on business for the day. So there was nobody to help her get it running. Luck was with her. It did, at least, start.

She envied her friend Michelle Godfrey, whose guardian and his sister had given her a Jaguar for Christmas. Michelle was away at college now, and she and Carlie still spoke on the phone, but they no longer shared rides to town and the cost of gas on a daily basis.

The old clunker ate gas like candy and Carlie's salary only stretched so far. She wished she had more than a couple pairs of jeans, a few T-shirts, a coat and one good pair of shoes. It must be nice, she thought, not to have to count pennies. But her father was always optimistic about their status. *God loved the poor, because they gave away so much*, he was fond of saying. He was probably right.

Right now, though, her rain-wet jeans were uncomfortable, and she'd stepped in a mud puddle with her only pair of good shoes while she was knocking corrosion off the battery terminals with the hammer she kept under the front seat for that purpose. All this in January weather, which was wet and cold and miserable, even in South Texas.

Consequently, when she parked her car in the small lot next to the chief's office, she looked like a bedraggled rat. Her dark, short, wavy hair was curling like crazy, as it always did in a rainstorm. Her coat was soaked. Her green eyes, full of silent resignation, didn't smile as she opened the office door.

Her worst nightmare was standing just inside.

Carson.

He glared at her. He was so much taller than she that she had to look up at him. There was a lot to look at, although she tried not to show her interest.

He was all muscle, but it wasn't overly obvious. He had a rodeo rider's physique, lean and powerful. Like her, he wore jeans, but his were obviously designer ones, like those hand-tooled leather boots on his big feet and the elaborately scrolled leather holster in which he kept his .45 automatic. He was wearing a jacket that partially concealed the gun, but he was intimidating enough without it.

He was Lakota Sioux. He had jet-black hair that fell to his waist in back, although he wore it in a pony-tail usually. He had large black eyes that seemed to see everything with one sweep of his head. He had high cheekbones and a light olive complexion. There were faint scars on the knuckles of his big hands. She noticed because he was holding a file in one of them. Her file.

Well, really, the chief's file, that had been lying on her desk, waiting to be typed up. It referenced an attack on her father a few weeks earlier that had resulted in Carlie being stabbed. Involuntarily, her hand went to the scar that ran from her shoulder down to the beginning of her small breasts. She flushed when she saw where he was looking.

"Those are confidential files," she said shortly.

He looked around. "There was nobody here to tell me that," he said, his deep voice clear as a bell in the silent

room.

She flushed at the implied criticism. "Damned truck wouldn't start and I got soaked trying to start it," she muttered. She slid her weather-beaten old purse under her desk, ran a hand through her wet hair, took off her ratty coat and hung it up before she sat down at her desk. "Did you need something?" she asked with crushing politeness. She even managed a smile. Sort of.

"I need to see the chief," he replied.

She frowned. "There's this thing called a door. He's got one," she said patiently. "You knock on it, and he comes out."

He gave her a look that could have stopped traffic. "There's somebody in there with him," he said with equal patience. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"I see." She moved things around on her desk, muttering to herself.

"Bad sign."

She looked up. "Huh?"

"Talking to yourself."

She glared at him. It had been a bad morning altogether and he wasn't helping. "Don't listen, if it bothers you."

He gave her a long look and laughed hollowly. "Listen, kid, nothing about you bothers me. Or ever will."

There were the sounds of chairs scraping wood, as if the men in Cash's office had stood up and pushed back their seats. She figured it was safe to interrupt him.

Well, safer than listening to Mr. Original American here run her down.

She pushed the intercom button. "You have a visitor, sir," she announced.

There was a murmur. "Who is it?"

She looked at Carson. "The gentleman who starts fires with hand grenades," she said sweetly.

Carson stared at her with icy black eyes.

Cash's door opened, and there was Carlie's father, a man in a very expensive suit and Cash.

That explained why her father had left home so early. He was out of town, as he'd said he would be; out of Comanche Wells, where they lived, anyway. Not that Jacobsville was more than a five-minute drive from home.

"Carson," Cash said, nodding. "I think you know Reverend Blair and my brother, Garon?"

"Yes." Carson shook hands with them.

Carlie was doing mental shorthand. Garon Grier was senior special agent in charge of the Jacobsville branch of the FBI. He'd moved to Jacobsville some time ago, but the FBI branch office hadn't been here quite as long. Garon had been with the bureau for a number of years.

Carlie wondered what was going on that involved both the FBI and her father. But she knew that question would go unanswered. Her father was remarkably silent on issues that concerned law enforcement, although he knew quite a few people in that profession.

She recalled with a chill the telephone conversation she'd had recently with someone who called and said, "Tell your father he's next." She couldn't get anybody to tell her what they thought it meant. It was disturbing, like the news she'd overheard that the man who'd put a knife in her, trying to kill her father, had been poisoned and died.

Something big was going on, linked to that Wyoming murder and involving some politician who had ties to a drug cartel. But nobody told Carlie anything.

"Well, I'll be off. I have a meeting in San Antonio," Reverend Blair said, taking his leave. He paused at Carlie's desk. "Don't do anything fancy for supper, okay?" he asked, smiling. "I may be very late."

"Okay, Dad." She grinned up at him.

He ruffled her hair and walked out.

Carson was watching the interplay with cynical eyes.

"Doesn't your dad ruffle your hair?" she asked sarcastically.

"No. He did lay a chair across it once." He averted his eyes at once, as if the comment had slipped out against his will and embarrassed him.

Carlie tried not to stare. What in the world sort of background did he come from? The violence struck a chord in her. She had secrets of her own from years past.

"Carson," Garon Grier said, pausing at the door. "We may need you at some point." Carson nodded. "I'll be around."

"Thanks."

Garon waved at his brother, smiled at Carlie and let himself out the door.

"Something perking?" Carson asked Cash.

"Quite a lot, in fact. Carlie, hold my calls until I tell you," he instructed.

"Sure thing, Boss."

"Come on in." Cash went ahead into his office.

Carson paused by Carlie's desk and glared at her.

She glared back. "If you don't stop scowling at me, I'm going to ask the chief to frisk you for hand grenades," she muttered.

"Frisk me yourself," he dared softly.

The flush deepened, darkened.

His black eyes narrowed, because he knew innocence when he saw it; it was that rare in his world. "Clueless, aren't you?" he chided.

She lifted her chin and glared back. "My father is a minister," she said with quiet pride.

"Really?"

She frowned, cocking her head. "Excuse me?"

"Are you coming in or not?" Cash asked suddenly, and there was a bite in his voice.

Carson seemed faintly surprised. He followed Cash into the office. The door closed. There were words spoken in a harsh tone, followed by a pause and a suddenly apologetic voice.

Carlie paid little attention. Carson had upset her nerves. She wished her boss would find someone else to talk to. Her job had been wonderful and satisfying until Carson started hanging around the office all the time. Something was going on, something big. It involved local and federal law enforcement—she was fairly certain that the chief's brother didn't just happen by to visit—and somehow, it also involved her father.

She wondered if she could dig any information out of her parent if she went about it in the right way. She'd have to work on that.

Then she recalled that phone call that she'd told her father about, just recently. A male voice had said, simply, "Tell your father, he's next." It had been a chilling experience, one she'd forced to the back of her mind. Now she wondered if all the traffic through her boss's office involved her in some way, as well as her father. The man who'd tried to kill him had died, mysteriously poisoned.

She still wondered why anybody would attack a minister. That remark of Carson's made her curious. She'd said her father was a minister and he'd said, "Really?" in that sarcastic, cold tone of voice. Why?

"I'm a mushroom," she said to herself. "They keep me in the dark and feed me manure." She sighed and went back to work.

She was on the phone with the sheriff's office when Carson left. He went by her desk with only a cursory glance at her, and it was, of all things, placid. Almost apologetic. She lowered her eyes and refused to even look at him.

Even if she'd found him irresistible—and she was trying not to—his reputation with women made her wary of him.

Sure, it was a new century, but Carlie was a smalltown girl and raised religiously. She didn't share the casual attitude of many of her former classmates about physical passion.

She grimaced. It was hard to be a nice girl when people treated her like a disease on legs. In school, they'd made fun of her, whispered about her. One pretty, popular girl said that she didn't know what she was missing and that she should live it up.

Carlie just stared at her and smiled. She didn't say anything. Apparently the smile wore the other girl down because she shrugged, turned her back and walked off to whisper to the girls in her circle. They all looked at Carlie and laughed.

She was used to it. Her father said that adversity was like grit, it honed metal to a fine edge. She'd have liked to be honed a little less.

They were right about one thing; she really didn't know what she was missing. It seemed appropriate, because she'd read about sensations she was supposed to feel with men around, and she didn't feel any of them.

She chided herself silently. That was a lie. She felt them when she was close to Carson. She knew that he was aware of it, which made it worse. He laughed at her, just the way her classmates had laughed at her in school. She was the odd one out, the misfit. She had a reason for her ironclad morals. Many local people knew them, too. Episodes in her childhood had hardened her.

Well, people tended to be products of their upbringing. That was life. Unless she wanted to throw away her ideals and give up religion, she was pretty much settled in her beliefs. Maybe it wasn't so bad being a misfit. Her late grandfather had said that civilizations rested on the bedrock of faith and law and the arts. Some people had to be conventional to keep the mechanism going.

"What was that?" Sheriff Hayes's receptionist asked.

"Sorry." Carlie cleared her throat. She'd been on hold. "I was just mumbling to myself. What were you saying?"

The woman laughed and gave her the information the chief had asked for, about an upcoming criminal case.

She cooked a light supper, just creamed chicken and rice, with green peas, and made a nice apple pie for dessert.

Her father came in, looking harassed. Then he saw the spread and grinned from ear to ear. "What a nice surprise!"

"I know, something light. But I was hungry," she added.

He made a face. "Shame. Telling lies."

She shrugged. "I went to church Sunday. God won't mind a little lie, in a good cause."

He smiled. "You know, some people have actually asked me how to talk to God."

"I just do it while I'm cooking, or working in the yard," Carlie said. "Just like I'm talking to you."

He laughed. "Me, too. But there are people who make hard work of it."

"Why were you in the chief's office today?" she asked suddenly.

He paused in the act of putting a napkin in his lap. His expression went blank for an instant, then it came back to life. "He wanted me to talk to a prisoner for him," he said finally.

She raised both eyebrows.

"Sorry," he said, smoothing out the napkin. "Some things are confidential."

"Okay."

"Let's say grace," he added.

Users Review

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