

Long, Tall Texans Vol. III: Ethan & Connal

By Diana Palmer

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ETHAN

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CONNAL

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Long, Tall Texans Vol. III: Ethan & Connal By Diana Palmer Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #501136 in Books
- Published on: 2014-11-25
- Released on: 2014-11-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.57" h x .96" w x 4.21" l, .41 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 384 pages



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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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Arabella was drifting. She seemed to be floating along on a particularly fast cloud, high above the world. She murmured contentedly and sank into the fluffy nothingness, aware somewhere of a fleeting pain that began to grow with every passing second until it was a white-hot throb in one of her hands.

"No!" she exclaimed, and her eyes flew open.

She was lying on a cold table. Her dress, her beautiful gray dress, was covered with blood and she felt bruised and cut all over. A man in a white jacket was examining her eyes. She groaned.

"Concussion," the man murmured. "Abrasions, contusions. Compound fracture of the wrist, one ligament almost severed. Type and cross-match her blood, prep her for surgery, and get me an operating room."

"Yes, Doctor."

"Well?" The other voice was harsh, demanding. Very male and familiar, but not her father's.

"She'll be all right," the doctor said with resignation. "Now, will you please go outside and sit down, Mr. Hardeman? While I can appreciate your concern—" and that was an understatement, the physician thought—"—you can do her more good by letting us work."

Ethan! The voice was Ethan's! She managed to turn her head, and yes, it was Ethan Hardeman. He looked as if they'd dragged him out of bed. His black hair was rumpled, apparently by his own fingers. His hard, lean face was drawn, his gray eyes so dark with worry that they looked black. His white shirt was half-unbuttoned, as if he'd thrown it on, and his dark jacket was open. He'd all but crushed the brim of the creamy Stetson in his hand.

"Bella," he breathed when he saw her pale, damaged face.

"Ethan," she managed in a hoarse whisper. "Oh, Ethan, my hand!"

His expression tautened as he moved closer to her, despite the doctor's protests. He reached down and touched her poor, bruised cheek. "Baby, what a scare you gave me!" he whispered. His hand actually seemed to be trembling as he brushed back her disheveled long brown hair. Her green eyes were bright with pain and welcome, all mixed up together.

"My father?" she asked with apprehension, because he'd been driving the car.

"They flew him to Dallas. He had an ocular injury, and they've got some of the top men in the field there. He's all right, otherwise. He couldn't take care of you, so he had the hospital call me." Ethan smiled coldly. "God knows, that was a gut-wrenching decision on his part."

She was in too much pain to pick up on the meaning behind the words. "But...my hand?" she asked.

He stood up straight. "They'll talk to you about that later. Mary and the rest will be here in the morning. I'll stay until you're out of surgery."

She caught at his arm with her good hand, feeling the hard muscle tighten. "Make them understand...how important my hand is, please," she pleaded.

"They understand. They'll do what can be done." He touched her cracked lips gently with his forefinger. "I won't leave you," he said quietly. "I'll be here."

She grabbed his hand, holding it, feeling his strength, drawing on his strength for the first time in recent

memory. "Ethan," she whispered as the pain built, "remember the swimming hole...?"

His expression closed up. He actually flinched as her face contorted. "My God, can't you give her something?" he asked the doctor, as if the pain were his own.

The doctor seemed to understand at last that it was more than bad temper driving the tall, angry man who'd stormed into the emergency room barely ten minutes ago. The look on those hard features as he'd held the woman's hand had said everything.

"I'll give her something," the doctor promised. "Are you a relative? Her husband, perhaps?"

Ethan's silver eyes cut at him. "No, I'm not a relative. She's a concert pianist, very commercial these days. She lives with her father and she's never been allowed to marry."

The doctor didn't have time for discussion. He settled Ethan with a nurse and vanished gratefully into the emergency room.

Hours later, Arabella drifted in and out of the anesthesia in a private room. Ethan was there again, staring angrily out the window at the pastel colors of the sky at dawn, still in the same clothes he'd been wearing the night before. Arabella was in a floral hospital gown and she felt as she probably looked—weak and wrung out.

"Ethan," she called.

He turned immediately, going to the bedside. He did look terrible, all right. His face was white with strain and bridled anger.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Tired and sore and groggy," she murmured, trying to smile at him. He looked so fierce, just as he had when they were younger. She was almost twenty-three now, and Ethan was thirty, but he'd always been worlds ahead of her in maturity. With Ethan standing over her, it was hard to remember the anguish of the past four years. So many memories, she thought drowsily, watching that dear face. Ethan had been her heart four years ago, but he'd married Miriam. Ethan had forced Miriam into a separation only a little while after they married, but she'd fought Ethan's divorce action tooth and nail for almost four years. Miriam had given up, at last, this year. Their divorce had only become final three months ago.

Ethan was a past master at hiding his feelings, but the deep lines in his face spoke for themselves. Miriam had hurt him dreadfully. Arabella had tried to warn him, in her own shy way. They'd argued over Miriam and because of it, Ethan had shut Arabella out of his life with cold cruelty. She'd seen him in passing since then because she and his sister-in-law were best friends, and visits were inevitable. But Ethan had been remote and unapproachable. Until last night.

"You should have listened to me about Miriam," she said groggily.

"We won't talk about my ex-wife," he said coldly. "You're coming home with me when you're able to get around again. Mother and Mary will look after you and keep you company."

"How's my father?" she asked.

"I haven't found out anything new. I'll check later. Right now, I need breakfast and a change of clothes. I'll come back as soon as I've got my men started at home. We're in the middle of roundup."

"What a time to be landed with me," she said with a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Ethan. Dad could have spared you this."

He ignored the comment. "Did you have any clothes in the car with you?"

She shook her head. The slight movement hurt, so she stopped. She reached up with her free hand to smooth back the mass of waving dark brown hair from her bruised face. "My clothes are back in the apartment in Houston."

"Where's the key?"

"In my purse. They should have brought it in with me," she murmured drowsily.

He searched in the locker on the other side of the room and found her expensive leather purse. He carried it to the bed with the air of a man holding a poisonous snake. "Where is it?" he muttered.

She stared at him, amused despite the sedatives and the growing pain. "The key is in the zipper compartment," she managed.

He took out a set of keys and she showed him the right one. He put the purse away with obvious relief. "Beats me why women can't use pockets, the way men do."

"The stuff we carry wouldn't fit into pockets," she said reasonably. She lay back on the pillows, her eyes open and curious. "You look terrible."

He didn't smile. He hardly ever had, except for a few magical days when she was eighteen. Before Miriam got her beautiful hands on him. "I haven't had much sleep," he said, his voice sharp and cutting.

She smiled drowsily. "Don't growl at me. Coreen wrote to me last month in Los Angeles. She said you're impossible to live with these days."

"My mother always thought I was impossible to live with," he reminded her.

"She said you'd been that way for three months, since the divorce was final," she replied. "Why did Miriam finally give in? She was the one who insisted on staying married to you, despite the fact that she stopped living with you ages ago."

"How should I know?" he asked abruptly, and turned away.

She saw the way he closed up at the mention of his ex-wife's name, and her heart felt heavy and cold. His marriage had hurt her more than anything in her life. It had been unexpected, and she'd almost gone off the deep end when she'd heard. Somehow she'd always thought that Ethan cared for her. She'd been too young for him at eighteen, but that day by the swimming hole, she'd been sure that he felt more than just a physical attraction for her. Or maybe that had been one more hopeless illusion. Whatever he'd felt, he'd started going around with Miriam immediately after that sweet interlude, and within two months he'd married the woman.

Arabella had mourned him bitterly. He'd been the first man in her life in all the important ways, except for the most intimate one. She was still waiting for that first intimacy, just as she'd waited most of her adult life for Ethan to love her. She almost laughed out loud. Ethan had never loved her. He'd loved Miriam, who'd come to the ranch to film a commercial. She'd watched it happen, watched Ethan falling under the spell of the green-eyed, redheaded model with her sophisticated beauty.

Arabella had never had the measure of self-confidence and teasing sophistication that Miriam had. And Miriam had walked off with Ethan, only to leave him. They said that Ethan had become a woman-hater because of his marriage. Arabella didn't doubt it. He'd never been a playboy in the first place. He was much too serious and stoical. There was nothing happy-go-lucky or carefree about Ethan. He'd had the responsibility for his family for a long time now, and even Arabella's earliest memories of him were of a quiet, hard man who threw out orders like a commanding general, intimidating men twice his age when he was only just out of his teens.

Ethan was watching her, but his scrutiny ceased when she noticed him standing beside the bed. "I'll send someone to your apartment in Houston for your things."

"Thank you." He wouldn't talk to her about Miriam. Somehow, she'd expected that reaction. She took a deep breath and started to lift her hand. It felt heavy. She looked down and realized that it was in a small cast. Red antiseptic peeked out from under it, stark against her pale skin. She felt the threat of reality and withdrew from it, closing her eyes.

"They had to set the bones," Ethan said. "The cast comes off in six weeks, and you'll have the use of your hand again."

Use of it, yes. But would she be able to play again as she had? How long would it take, and how would she manage to support herself and her father if she couldn't? She felt panic seeping in. Her father had a heart condition. She knew, because he'd used it against her in the early days when she hadn't wanted the years of study, the eternal practice that made it impossible for her to go places with her friends Mary and Jan, Ethan's sister, and Matt, his brother whom Mary had later married.

It was astonishing that her father had called Ethan after the wreck. Ever since Arabella had blossomed into a young woman, her father had made sure that Ethan didn't get too close to her. He'd never liked Ethan. The reverse was also true. Arabella hadn't understood the friction, because Ethan had never made any serious advances toward her, until that day she and Ethan had gone swimming at the creek, and things had almost gone too far. Arabella had told no one, so her father hadn't known about that. It was her own private, special secret. Hers and Ethan's.

She forced her mind back to the present. She couldn't let herself become maudlin now. She had enough complications in her life without asking for more. She vaguely remembered mentioning to Ethan that day she and he had gone swimming together, when she was eighteen. She hoped against hope that he'd been too worried to pay attention to the remark, that she hadn't given away how precious the memory was to her.

"You said I'd stay with you," she began falteringly, trying to make her mind work. "But my father.?"

"Your uncle lives in Dallas, remember?" he asked curtly. "Your father will probably stay there."

"He won't like having me this far away," she said doggedly.

"No, he won't, will he?" He pulled the sheet up to her chin. "Try to sleep. Let the medicine work."

Her wide green eyes opened, holding his. "You don't want me at your house," she said huskily. "You never did. We quarreled over Miriam and you said I was a pain in the neck and you never wanted to have to see me again!"

He actually winced. "Try to sleep," he said tersely.

She was drifting in and out of consciousness, blissfully unaware of the tortured look on the dark face above her. She closed her eyes. "Yes. Sleep..."

The world seemed very far away as the drugs took hold at last and she slept. Her dreams were full of the old days, of growing up with Mary and Matt, of Ethan always nearby, beloved and taciturn and completely unattainable. No matter how hard she tried to act her age, Ethan had never looked at her as a woman in those early days.

Arabella had always loved him. Her music had been her escape. She could play the exquisite classical pieces and put all the love Ethan didn't want into her fingers as she played. It was that fever and need that had given her a start in the musical world. At the age of twenty-one, she'd won an international competition with a huge financial prize, and the recognition had given her a shot at a recording contract.

Classical music was notoriously low-paying for pianists, but Arabella's style had caught on quickly when she tried some pop pieces. The albums had sold well, and she was asked to do more. The royalties began to grow, along with her fame.

Her father had pushed her into personal appearances and tours, and, basically shy in front of people she didn't know, she'd hated the whole idea of it. She'd tried to protest, but her father had dominated her all her life, and she hadn't had the will to fight him. Incredible, that, she told herself, when she could stand up to Ethan and most other people without a qualm. Her father was different. She loved him and he'd been her mainstay when her mother had died so long ago. She couldn't bear to hurt her father by refusing his guidance in her career. Ethan had hated the hold her father had on her, but he'd never asked her to try to break it.

Over the years, while she was growing up in Ja-cobsville, Ethan had been a kind of protective but distant big brother. Until that day he'd taken her swimming down at the creek and everything had changed. Miriam had been at the ranch even then, starting on a layout with a Western theme for a fashion magazine. Ethan had paid her very little notice until he'd almost lost control with Arabella when they started kissing, but after that day he'd begun pursuing Miriam. It hadn't taken long.

Arabella had heard Miriam bragging to another model that she had the Hardeman fortune in the palm of her hand and that she was going to trade Ethan her body for a life of luxury. It had sickened Arabella to think of the man she loved being treated as a meal ticket and nothing more, so she'd gone to him and tried to tell him what she'd heard.

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