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## Fierce Love

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## ***FIRECE LOVE***

KENNETH B. VON ESCHEN

I walked out of the cabin at first light. The air was cold, smoke coughed from the chimney. To the west, the Sawtooth Mountains were purple and blue, like cold steel. I saddled Ned, tied on my bags, scabbard my rifle. He's a full seventeen hands tall and only kicked me once, when I gelded him. I mounted up and followed the buckboard tracks back to the pasture and forest beyond to look for my daughter's body.

Pa gave me a Colt revolver when I was ten years old.

"You take care of this, and it'll take care of you, Finley,"

He was third generation Smith to ranch this ground on the high plateau of Western Idaho. Later, I paid cash for a big bore hunting rifle. Hard-earned money from selling steers. I practiced shooting every chance I got. I got real good. Pa was proud of me.

After I got my guns, Ma gave me a Bible. A big one with gold edges; real fancy.

"Use this," she said, "when those guns won't fix your problems."

"I will, Ma," I promised. I put that Bible under my bed and took it out only twice since then; once to Pa's funeral; the other to Ma's. I didn't take it to the third.

When Pa died, I took over the ranch. Run fifty head of mixed breed cows and put up hay twice a year. I built a cabin on the home place from trees I felled and skinned. Made a fireplace from flat rocks hauled from Sawtooth Creek running nearby. Cemented them together with mortar bought from the General Store down in Stanley. I don't like town much; stayed away from it most of the time.

After I built the cabin, I married Irem. She was an Indian. When Jeb McMaster got tired of her, he burned her face, and other parts I can't talk about, and kicked her out into the street. Nobody wanted her. I took her in. I ignored the scars. She had hair like black silk, passionate eyes, mixed with a faraway sadness. I loved the way she smelled when we worked side-by-side; strong, womanly.

Irem was good for me. She gave me a daughter, Emily, born with golden ringlets that turned dark as she grew up. She was beautiful. She looked like her mother without the scars. When Emily was four, I hitched Ned to the buckboard and took my family to town. Stanley had one street, lined with clapboard buildings; a bank, the General Store, Dr. Pfister's place where he worked on people and animals. There was a saloon next to the store and a church at the end of the street. It was raining, the day as grey as two week old stew meat. Mud in the streets.

"Irem, stay here with Emily. I'm going to the store for supplies."

Irem held the horse as I walked past the saloon towards the store. The smell of day old beer and cigarettes came out of the doors. Never drank in that place with whores and rummy cowboys. I drank my liquor alone.

Behind me, the doors opened and Jeb McMaster stepped out. His spurs jingled a tune known only to rich men.

"Hey Smith!" he bellered at me. "Don't see you in town much. You afraid to show off that pretty wife of yours? Well, at least she used to be pretty." His face was flushed with booze.

Jeb McMaster had broad shoulders, a big face. He owned the largest ranch in the county, running a thousand head of cows. He hired Mexicans and Indians to work for him; paid dirt-poor wages. He abused his help, especially the women. He took a hot branding iron to Irem when she was younger.

"McMaster, I got nothing to say to you. You're drunk. Go back inside. You don't want to start no fight with me." I turned back towards the store.

"Whoa!" he hollered. "Heard you got a new baby girl. Maybe I'll go fix her up a little, like I did her momma."

McMaster struck a match, lit a cigar and blew on it, ember red.

"Stop," I said, word hissed like venom.

"Stop?" he said, sullen now. "You going to stop me, Smith?"

A double-barreled Derringer was tucked in his waist band. His hand moved toward the grip. Before he got his gun out, I drew my Colt and leveled a slug right between his eyes and out

the back of his head. He fell, blood and brains mixed with the mud.

The Sheriff said it was self-defense. Told me to get back home. I went to the store, got my supplies and turned Ned out of town. Irem stayed close to me the whole way. Emily stayed close, too.

I heard it took four men to hoist McMaster's body up top his horse. One man led him home, tongue hanging purple. When they dumped him on the ground, heard Mexicans and Indians spat on him.

Ma was still alive when I shot McMaster.

"Gracious Finley," she said, "I never seen a man who loved so fiercely. Man or beast is just stupid to mess with your family."

She died shortly after that. I took that Bible to her funeral; haven't looked at it since. I think she was glad to be dead. She missed Pa. Now, she could join him, either up or down as God saw fit.

Four years later a disease laid hold of Irem and wouldn't let go. Made her sickly for weeks, then put her in bed. She gurgled when she breathed; coughed day and night and turned white as yesterday's ashes. Her lungs filled with water; she was drowning from the inside. I put my mouth over her nose and tried to suck the water out, but did no good. Doc Pfister came out and gave her morphine for the pain.

"What can I do?" I said.

"Dig her a hole," was his only answer.

She died the next day. No more coughing, no more fever; her scarred face peaceful in the dullness of death. Emily and I buried her under a pine tree. I put up a wooden marker and Emily laid wildflowers on top. I didn't bring my Bible to Irem's funeral. Didn't need to. She was Indian and had spirits of her own.

Emily grew up fast after that. She went to school and learned to read and write. She was a good rider. We worked cattle together.

"Daddy," she spoke timid to me one evening, "Momma told me you killed a man once."

"I did," I said, "but took no joy in doing it."

"Was he trying to hurt you or Momma?"

"No child. He was looking to hurt you."

"Oh," said my daughter, sad-like and thinking.

She walked away, then turned back towards me.

"Thank you, Daddy," was what she said.

Spring came late to the Sawtooth plateau this year. She-bitch winter kept the ground frozen, covered with ice and snow with no grass for the cows. They were calving and needed food. Emily was twelve. Twice a day we loaded hay and Ned pulled us out to feed. Bears from the high country came low looking for food. We saw lots of sign near the cows, foraging on afterbirth, but not taking down any live animals.

Emily sat on the buckboard holding reins on the horse. I was pitching out hay when Ned stopped short, stomped his feet, nostrils flared.

“Whoa there Ned. What’s wrong with you? Careful, Emily. He’s smelling something.”

I dropped the fork and reached for my rifle. From behind a clump of grass, a big she-bear came right at us, with two cubs close behind. I fired a quick shot. The slug missed her but hit one cub that dropped dead on the spot.

Ned screamed. Emily held tight.

The grizzly hit the side of the buckboard, knocked the rifle out of my hands and sent me into the hay. She landed a paw on Emily’s shoulder and hoisted her up like a stick figure. I smelled bear stink; rotten, fermented. Before I got back on my feet, that sow shoved Emily into her jowls, dropped to the ground and lumbered into the pines and darkness, the other cub following behind. Emily never screamed, never cried out, never said nothing. She was surely dead.

I walked the pasture and scrub forest for hours, called for Emily but got no response. Didn’t find her body, either. In pitch dark I went back to the cabin. I didn’t sleep that night. Spent it getting ready for the morning. I sharpened my big knife with bear oil mixed with spit. Cleaned my pistol and rifle and put pemmican, stale crackers, and coffee in my saddle bag. Sat by a low fire, smoking and waiting for dawn to bust. That she-bear took my daughter. Grabbed her right off the buckboard, jaws flapping and a blizzard of snot flying.

At first light, I saddled Ned and tied down my gear. Kicked him hard as I set out to find Emily’s body and kill the bear that took her. Rode past the cows and picked up the bear’s trail, leading towards the mountains. Cows stood around, dumb-faced and chewing their cuds. One old mamma was bawling, moving frantically, looking for her lost calf.

I followed the tracks west; big bear in front, cub behind. Drops of blood were on the snow. Ned stepped lightly with bear stink still in the air. I rode across the plains and foothills and into the mountains. Tracks and blood went in a straight line; she-bear knew where she was going. Didn’t see any other sign of Emily. There weren’t any drag marks either. That bear kept her lifted up above the frozen ground as they moved west.

I followed those tracks all day. Stopped once to chew pemmican and gave Ned a couple of sugar cubes. He nuzzled me for more, but I had none left. The country was harsh with big pines and boulder outcroppings. The tracks led to the base of the Sawtooths. Trees swayed in a strong wind; weather was changing. The air was cold.

I pulled my horse up, stood off him and tied him short to a pine tree. Night was coming faster than I wanted, but it wasn't up to me to tell the night when to come. I built a fire and made coffee with melted snow. It was bitter. I had no appetite. Gave Ned stale crackers for his feed.

The storm screamed down the East slope of the mountains like a banshee witch coming out of Hell. A spring storm that kills men and horses. No chance for me to keep a fire going, so I hunkered down on the leeward side of a boulder. Ned switched around so his butt faced into the wind and sleet. It was going to be a long night. Not sure if we'd be alive by morning.

Then that old sow grizzly appeared, lumbering towards us in the fading light, apparitional. Probably smelled my earlier fire. Didn't have a cub beside her and no Emily in her mouth. Same ugly bear, though. She rose up on hind legs, stood twice as high as me, and bellered. Ned panicked, pulled back, but the rope held. I grabbed my rifle. Levered a round into the chamber.

The bear walked towards me. The wind howled through the trees, sleet pelted down, the bear's face contorted and angry with jaws snapping and spit spewing out of her mouth. Touched off my first round and hit her squarely in the shoulder, spun her backward. She turned back around and moved towards me, one arm slumped down, busted and useless. My second shot hit her between the eyes and knocked her onto her back with four paws reaching up to the dark sky. I moved beside her and shot her twice in the heart.

Ned whinnied and peed himself, and then settled down. I moved away from the bear and wretched on the ground. My hands were shaking, but not from the cold.

I did what I had to do. I needed to know. I slit her open from neck to arse and pounded the knife through the rib bones with a flat rock. I cut her throat tube loose and pulled everything out. The innards, stretched on the ground, were pale yellow and covered with slime. Her stomach lay there, big and swollen from the things she'd eaten. I stripped away the greasy tripe. My hands smelled like fat. Her guts continued to move, still trying to digest something. I sliced open her stomach and gagged at the smell when I reached in. Chunks of something slipped through my fingers and then I felt a skull, crushed and broken. I closed my eyes and brought that skull out; lifted it up to my face. I opened my eyes.

A calf's head, wet and mangled, looked back at me. Maybe it'd been still born or maybe

she took it alive. I threw the skull back on the gut pile and fell to my knees. Stayed that way until the cold forced me to move and think about surviving the night.

I wrapped my oil slicker tight around me and crawled next to the bear's body. Smelled metallic, like something from a blacksmith's shop. Her insides were still warm. I huddled next to that dead body all night. At first light, I stood up stiff and cold, blood and slime on my slicker and hat. The storm had passed.

Ned was alive, too. Still tied up, head hanging low.

Up slope and to my left, a bear cub whined. Took my rifle and walked towards the sound. On the other side of a thicket, two boulders butted together with an opening at their base. A second, pitiful whine came from this cave. I got down on all fours and crawled into the opening, rifle out front.

Dim morning light filtered into the cave. The cub was there, sitting on its haunches, rubbing its eyes with both paws. I raised my rifle, placed my sights on its head. I cocked the hammer, but before I shot, I saw Emily's body stretched out on the other side of the cave. Blood stained her shoulder and hip. Hair matted down across her face. In that dim light, she had no color; somebody's child yesterday.

I turned back to the cub, held steady and tightened down on the trigger.

Then Emily moved. I lowered my rifle and went to her. She moaned.

I extracted her from that cave and brought her into the light of a new dawn. Like Jesus coming from the tomb. The bear had bit her on both shoulders and laid open some skin on her hip. She was semi-conscious, delirious. I took off my slicker, wrapped her up and carried her to the horse.

"Let's take her home Ned."

I turned him east, rode out of the mountains and towards the ranch. Cradled Emily in my arms. Looking back, I saw the cub come out of the den, lick his dead momma's face, and then went to following us, she-bear's blood now mucoid on the slicker covering Emily.

We got back to the cabin at dusk. Emily didn't wake up, but I felt her breathing. The air was warmer, the first hint of spring. That damn cub followed us the whole way.

I stepped off Ned and laid Emily in her bed. She had good color; her eyes fluttered open once in a while. I'd get Doc to come by to clean and bandage her wounds. Like her momma, she'd have scars.

As Emily slept, I went outside, unsaddled Ned and brushed him down. He drank a lot. I

gave him extra hay and two sugar cubes from the pantry. Threw a loop around the little bear and tied him tight to the corral. I pulled my rifle from the scabbard, walked over to the critter, and nearly blew its head off with one shot. While it was still twitching, I gutted the animal and hung its innards over the fence.

In the morning, I fried onions, potatoes, and eggs. The cabin smelled good. The pan hissed and popped when I threw in some fresh bear's liver. Food to make my Emily strong again.