

## THELMA AND ED.

By Linda Hurdwell

It is midsummer and Thelma ambles through the Pine Forest. It is a beautiful spot but she is lonely. Idly she picks some pink wild flowers inhaling the sweet aroma, remembering their wedding; was it only one year ago; and the lovely flowers her three sisters made into a bouquet for her. Now it is rare to see anyone to laugh with or even speak to. She is shrouded by silence. Her husband decided to work on the Pacific railway, building a way through the Rocky Mountains, and the work is hard and he is shattered by the evening. She feels utterly alone. Few women have joined their men and those that have live in shacks on the far side of this prairie.

Suddenly she hears the clip clopping of horses and men's voices, then finally two gunshots. Thelma trembles in spite of the warm sunshine, and nervously peers through the pine trees, beginning to detest this lonesome prairie. Suppose they shot at her, who would find her here in this wilderness?

"We got him for sure," drawls a gruff voice and Thelma watches as a large beefy cowboy sling a black bear across one of the horses guffawing, so pleased with their catch.

She waits until the two men ride away into the distance and nervously walks around the patch. The poor bear has done nothing, why did they kill it? Sadly she turns to go home but something stops her. Listening she hears a snuffling sound. Could be another bear and that would mean trouble for her, but, as she walks on, she stops in her tracks, for beside the huge boulder a newborn is whimpering for his Mother.

"Oh you poor baby. I guess it was your Mama they killed." Thelma bends and picks up the cub, dropping her flowers on the dusty path. He snuggles up to her and her heart swells with love for this tiny abandoned creature.

"I'll care for yer," she croons knowing Ed will surely be angry at her yet she can't leave a newborn here alone. Tenderly she kisses his black fur so soft and yet resembling Ed's moustache when they used to kiss.

Thelma runs back to her shack. The chickens scat at the scent of a bear. Hastily Thelma finds some rubber to attach to an old bottle and cuts a small hole, and pours milk from their goat into it. The bear leans against her breast as he suckles the milk, grunting with satisfaction.

It is dark when Ed returns home, tired out and hungry, but there is no smell of stew to greet him only the smell of the wild. He fails to see the happiness in Thelma's bright eyes but merely glares at her.

"What you gone and done, woman?" He flops into the chair beside the table staring at his wife with amazement as she cuddles the tiny bear cub.

"Why Ed two cowboys darned gone and shot his Mama. I couldn't leave him there alone." She sees him bang the table as he continues,

"That's a wild animal, won't stay a cute cub for long, and you can't trust a grown bear."

"No Ed. He's a baby and needs me to care for him." Kissing the furry face she gently lays him on an old blanket beside their bed that's in the corner of the shack.

"I guess I'll heat up yer meal now Ed," she adds while her eyes are filled with love for this cub. She needs one of her own, but knows Ed is too exhausted for married life.

The weeks fly by as Thelma successfully rears the cub. She sings a childhood song to the furry baby and they have soon bonded. He follows her everywhere, and he is a joy to her. As she saws the wood for their log fire, cub leaps on top of the pile hunting for insects. The chicks, sheep and goat are used to him being around now mostly ignoring him. Soon be winter and Christmas, their first Christmas here in the wild.

That means the snow will gently tumble down, making most passage ways impassable, and finally some time off for the railroad men. Ed can't wait. Thelma is not so sure. The cub has grown rapidly, may not be with them at Christmas.

While Thelma is by the river washing, she spies Ed taking her cub on a leash across the prairie. Maybe he noticed the graze on his wife's arm. The bear is becoming bigger and more powerful. Will he have to go? Thelma hears her husband's voice yell in the distance;

"Go on boy, back to the wild." Thelma now returns to the shack and slumps to the floor crying bitterly missing bear's ponderous ways already. That night Ed turns towards his wife and gives her a rare hug.

"You know he needs to go now he is bigger." She merely nods leaning into him as she yearns for some love, but Ed merely turns away and sleeps.

Ed leaves for work early in the morning and Thelma resolves to return home to her family before the snow is too deep. She will await the mail wagon and leave when that arrives. She quickly fills a bag with some of her clothes ready for the journey home; should be here in a day or two.

It is late in the day, the sun almost gone when the hens begin squawking and fly into their coup. She hears a rattle on the door as the latch moves. Thelma trembles with fear and takes the shotgun from the shelf ready to attack the intruder. Then she spies a dark shadow across the window and begins to laugh hysterically throwing open the door.

“You came back you son of a bitch.” She hugs cub to her but he is mighty strong and bruises her arms causing her to wince with pain. She lets him stay the night though, forgetting all about listening for the mail wagon.

Ed is home later and eats his meal in silence. She is filled with trepidation scared that her man might just end up shooting her beloved bear, but for now she is playfully dancing and singing with her long blond hair flowing about her pert breasts and realises that her man is suddenly aroused. That night the pair are coupling with desire.

“Should spend more time with you,” Ed murmurs now sated.

“Yeah. You were dog tired though.” She sighs. “Maybe the bear has helped us.”

“Maybe.”

The both sleep soundly wrapped in each other’s arms while the bear lay beside the crackling log fire.

Morning and the snow is silently falling from the sky. They can barely open the door for Ed to go out to work as the world is now a thick, cold, white area. The bear snorts restlessly and paces the floor.

“I guess he wants a mate also,” Thelma observes before opening the door to feed the chicks, sheep and goats. She keeps them in their pens away from the icy weather. The sky has become a heavy white blanket ready to envelope them all. An occasional call of a bird is the only sound to be heard.

It isn’t long before Ed is back as work has stopped for a while. The snow is laying fast, soon be impassable. Snow drifts are everywhere.

He stands in the doorway. Thelma is aware of him watching her lean over a chair beside the log fire. Her cheeks are rosy and she has her hair down again.

“Bear’s gone,” she smiles. Now she has her man of last year back her blue eyes are filled with renewed love. “Needs a mate,” she adds coyly.

Ed nods. She smiles and lets him untie her pinafore after he has shrugged off his overcoat and boots, excited to see his loins filled with desire.

“I guess he does.” His voice is husky. The scent of his woman arouses him. She notices beads of sweat on his forehead as absently he pushes back his thick brown hair.

Thelma laughs at the snow stuck to his long dark beard. She squeezes the snow from his beard playfully and kisses him and tastes his icy breath

Thelma knows the mail wagon won’t get through now, but no matter. Suddenly this isolated Christmas is becoming something to look forward to.

“Just you and me together,” Ed drawls, “After Christmas may-be a newborn.”

Thelma kisses her man again.

“Maybe,” she whispers.

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