



fierce HEARTED

LIVE FULLY,
LOVE BRAVELY

HOLLEY GERTH



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Holley Gerth, *Fiercehearted*

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a fierce
HEARTED
WOMAN . . .

looks life in the face and says, "You can't beat me."

Knows *love* is risk but reaches out anyway.

Understands *kindness* takes real courage.

BELIEVES THE IMPOSSIBLE.

Fights like she's unstoppable.

Dares to find beauty in a ragged soul.

Scandalously picks warm over cool.

Tastes life as a brief, salty-sweet miracle.

Skins her knees, has scars that bear witness.

Defends like a warrior and weeps like a girl.

Makes gentle the new strong, small the new big,
ordinary the new extraordinary.

Sees wrinkles on a face as lines in a victory story.

NEVER GIVES IN, NEVER GIVES UP, NEVER LETS GO.

Chases Jesus with a tender, world-changing wildness.

Lives in your neighborhood or not even on your continent.

Looked back at you from the mirror this morning . . .

and has yet to fully see the force her star-scattering,
mountain-moving, water-walking *God created her* TO BE.

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Introduction

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God is a storyteller. He's a mad scientist and a father and a magician, and certainly, he's a storyteller. And I don't know if there's anything better in the world than when we lay ourselves wide open and let his story become our story, when we screw up our fists and our courage and start to tell the truest, best stories we know, which are always God's stories.

—Shauna Niequist

.....

I TRIED NOT TO WRITE THIS BOOK.

And before you decide to be part of it, I must warn you: there's a bit of blood on these pages. Some sweat drips and salty tearstains, the kind that might not come out with the washing. Laughter that tastes like homemade vanilla ice cream churned on the patio. The ricochet of questions against the walls. Bareness and discomfort and beauty like a turquoise sky. There is not neatness or propriety, proper religion or safe phrases. This is not an undertaking for the faint of heart.

If this doesn't frighten you, if you're curious or restless or longing, then sit beside me in a coffee shop with white brick walls so I can tell you how I, how we, really got to this moment.

Ragged, beloved guitar notes flow from unseen speakers and the scent of my almond milk latte sways like a gypsy woman somewhere above us. I hear the swirl of conversations, some laced with joy and others with frustration, making the edges of the words rough. The chair I'm in is dove gray and welcomes backsides like a mama putting babies on her lap. There's a twin of this chair right across from me, and I imagine you sitting in it. You might have coffee in a chipped white mug or a teapot on a simple, elegant tray. Maybe you have a lemon scone or a blueberry muffin, and I'm hoping you'll pass me a bit of it (this is always what I'm hoping with baked goods). We talk for a while and I listen hard. Then we come to that place in the conversation where you might ask, "So what about you?"

This is the scariest question in all the universe to me. The one that makes me duck and weave like an amateur boxer in the answering. I will give you my attention all the livelong day and hardly whisper of my own life.

I thought I might like to write a book in this way. I had the title picked out and the topic selected. Yet every time I sat down to sensibly, safely write, I couldn't bring forth a word. I decided I needed to research and went to find commentaries and articles. I spent time in the library and clicking around the internet. I pulled out an impressive full-color map of Israel, complete with the Hebrew names of midnight-blue rivers and khaki mountains.

Finally, in frustration one day while sitting in this very chair, I began to simply type what was actually pulsing in my heart and ringing in my ears. I wrote about fear and brokenness. I talked about savoring life like the strange, sugary center of white honey-suckle. Fighting the doubts that sometimes wore black ski masks when they rattled my doorknobs late at night. How kindness takes courage. I told the truth about some things I'd rather keep hidden

under the couch cushions with the dirty pennies. I admitted to both struggles and victories. I didn't make so many statements. I told more stories.

This felt wild and scandalous to me. Vulnerable and beautiful. Like the only thing I could birth into the world right then.

And as I began to talk with other women, I realized *I am not the only one*. I am not the only one who has ever felt unsure. I am not the only one who wants to treat today like that last glorious bite of whipped cream and chocolate pie you scrape the plate to get. I am not the only one who is looking for purpose and passion and sometimes swats depression and anxiety away like flies on a picnic table.

When you get to the end of these pages, I want you to also be able to say with certainty, "I'm not the only one." I want all of us to feel less alone and more comfortable in our God-sewn skin and a little surer that we are a force to be reckoned with in this world.

When I stepped into this book, I crossed a line. I found myself in a new place of living more fully, loving more bravely, and showing up as I really am in ways I hadn't quite dared before. This, I discovered, is the vast and wild and beautiful territory of the fiercehearted.

It is who we are, who we've been all along. Where we belong. Come with me?



Unexpectedly *fiercehearted*

.....
Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but
they're never weakness.

—Brené Brown
.....

THE NEWS CAME ONE FALL AFTERNOON. The leaves had just started acting like that neighbor woman who always wore the plain housecoat until showing up at the block party in the audacious dress everyone talked about for weeks. Reds and oranges and flashes of gold. Perfume bittersweet as the edge of a burnt marshmallow.

I was driving to my in-laws' house when I heard the news. I wanted to push the gas pedal into the floor until it snapped and I hurtled like a loose bull down the highway. I wanted to slam the brakes so hard my tires would write my broken heart on the pavement in ugly skid marks.

I did neither. Instead, I just kept going. *Isn't that the way with us?* But inside me something invisible and fragile and essential had shattered. *Trust.* A friend had hurt me in a way I'd never expected. Normally, I'd just say, "Oh, that's okay." I tried. I gave the speech in my mind a thousand times. But it wouldn't make its way to my lips or fingertips, and I felt panicked. Because I am a woman who has always hated conflict. I would rather go under the drill at the dentist than have an argument. Yes, doctor, I'll take that root canal over exchanging tense words with someone I love. To avoid conflict I would simply try very hard to be agreeable, and when that didn't work, I'd pretend to be fine anyway. Please pass the salt and potatoes even though your fork is in my back.

Let me pause and confess I full-out know better. I have a master's degree in counseling, for goodness' sake. One of the phrases I remember most from my training is, "Conflict is the way two become one." I loved that when I heard it and thought it was quite brilliant and beautiful. But it was like loving how caviar looks all glittery and shiny at the fancy party, then realizing what's on your plate is cold and slimy and you'd rather have the cheap fish sticks the kids are eating, thanks.

I'm starting to understand there are two kinds of knowing in this world. The first is in your head, where everything makes sense and is as pristine as a laboratory. The other is the kind where Scripture says things like, "Adam *knew* Eve."¹ We used to blush and giggle in Sunday school at that one because we guessed what it *really* meant. But aside from the sexy talk, I think what that word *knew* expresses is experiencing something fully—with not only our minds but also our souls and hearts and bodies. And at the time when this hurt happened, I didn't know a thing about real, healing conflict on that kind of deeper level.

Looking back, I think I was just scared. Conflict seemed like making yourself bare and putting your whole vulnerable heart out there. I didn't appreciate the idea of my soft spots showing like a spring breaker's on the beach. And, honestly, I was afraid

of what I might be capable of doing to someone else in that wary state. Better to stay buttoned up under the umbrella with my SPF 1000.

And that's actually a reasonable enough strategy until something happens and there's no backup plan. Then we're in the very place we swore we would never be, feeling all the feelings, unable to undo it.

I remembered how we're told to not let the sun go down on our anger. I'd always taken that literally, but as I thought about it more, I began to realize perhaps what that really means is not letting our anger slip into utter darkness, into bitterness and hardness.² I knew my only hope of that was to give my heart space to quit hissing like a terrified, trapped tomcat.

I got on a plane the day after I heard the news and stared out the window at an offensively clear evening sky as I considered my options. I wanted with every part of me, down to my boot-covered toes, to slam the door of my heart. Not just on this person but all people. I wanted to put a sign in the yard that said, "Trespassers will be shot." I wanted to board up the windows and put a mean dog on the porch. I wanted to be done with all humans everywhere for always and always.

Except I knew I still was one. And if I made this choice, I would suffocate in my own safety. Everything beautiful would become dusty. All that was alive inside would die because I couldn't let the light in. And I sensed Jesus—very kind and tender and knowing far more than I what it is to feel crucified, waiting quietly for me to decide what to do.

I pulled out something to write on and cried in the dark while the flight attendant passed out crackly packages of peanuts. I sniffled into my too-small napkin and worried about scaring my seatmate. But I couldn't stop. Because this wasn't just about this one time, this one thing. And I knew once I finished my scribbling I could never go back to who I was or how I lived before. This was my map and declaration and manifesto:

fiercehearted

A fiercehearted woman . . .

looks life in the face and says, "You can't beat me."
Knows love is risk but reaches out anyway.
Understands kindness takes real courage.
Believes the impossible.
Fights like she's unstoppable.
Dares to find beauty in a ragged soul.
Scandalously picks warm over cool.
Tastes life as a brief, salty-sweet miracle.
Skins her knees, has scars that bear witness.
Defends like a warrior and weeps like a girl.
Makes gentle the new strong, small the new big,
ordinary the new extraordinary.
Sees wrinkles on a face as lines in a victory story.
Never gives in, never gives up, never lets go.
Chases Jesus with a tender, world-changing wildness.
Lives in your neighborhood or not even on your continent.
Looked back at you from the mirror this morning . . .
and has yet to fully see the force her star-scattering,
mountain-moving, water-walking God created her to be.

The wheels touched ground, and when we unloaded, I left some of my baggage on the plane. I left the part of me who had been nice out of fear, who had agreed because it was easier, who had silenced her own voice.

The next week I started going to counseling. The week after that I sent the person who wounded me a note. I told the truth. Of my hurt. Of my hopes for parts of our relationship becoming different. Of how much I loved her. Since then we've been making our way back toward each other again. But I'm not rushing. I'm not forcing the next step. That is both incredibly difficult and down-deep healing all at once.

I still hate conflict. But I have also come to see that it is not all "bad." That rough exterior hides gifts. Like showing us what we really want and who we really are. It threw cold water on my

face and woke me up. And while I sputtered and protested at the beginning, I'm now grateful because that house I so wanted to protect was actually on fire—a slow, deceptive burn—and I didn't know it. My refusal to ever have conflict with others meant I was in conflict with myself. And every time I refused to speak the truth in love, I lit another match.

This story has no perfect, pretty ending. The relationship is still being restored, brick by slow brick, surer and stronger replacing shaky and crumbled down. The temptation to be a peacekeeper instead of a peacemaker in my everyday life is still there all the time. And I'm practicing not "getting over" things but instead walking through them—an amateur tightrope artist who wishes for wings. But I know I've made a decision to live differently. I wouldn't be here with you if it had gone the other way.

So here's to whatever brings us to the point where we can no longer stay the same. Here's to keeping the front door open. Here's to doing the brave, hard thing.

Here's to being fiercehearted.