

FOUND IN THE
WOODS

LoRee Peery

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Dedication

Dedicated to all those courageous women who have overcome abuse, especially when they are able to give credit to our Lord.

To my wonderful, loved critique partners, Melissa and Yvonne, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work,” — Ecclesiastes 4:9.

Thanks to NRW and PRW members for brainstorming aspects of this story at writers’ retreats.

A special thank you to Sam Wilson, Nongame Mammal/Furbearer Program Manager with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, for answering my wolf questions with thoroughness and patience.

And a profound thank you to Carol Eager, Lead Keeper, at Lee G. Simmons Conservation Park and Wildlife Safari at Ashland, Nebraska. She did much more than answer my questions; she became a friend. One of my 2010 highlights was spending four hours at Wolf Canyon, listening to her “talk” with the pack.

Praise for LoRee Peery

Moselle's Insurance

This is my first experience with Ms. LoRee Peery but I hope it will not be my last. She has a distinct way of writing which absolutely gripped my attention. Her characters are dynamic, vibrant people who love God and, previously had loved each other. This book is a full-length novel which delved into the characters more deeply than shorter stories. She carried us through their deepest depths of despair and their ultimate times of joy. ~ Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio

Rain On My Parade

The terrific plot that pulled daily aggravations, aging, sickness, disability, and family matters all together was beyond my wildest imaginations. The skill it took to make the story seem so real and inspirational I can barely begin to fathom. ~ Marissa, The Fictional Bookshelf

1

You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. — Psalm 32:7

A sudden shuffling outside the cabin heightened all of Beth Phillips' senses to full alert.

Snuggled in her sleeping bag atop an airbed, she admonished her imagination. This wasn't a vast forest inhabited by huge creatures. She was safe in this run-down cabin in the Platte River woods.

But just in case, she secured the flashlight near the edge of her pillow.

Beth pushed up on an elbow and squinted at the lock at the base of the bare window. The flashlight rolled off the mattress and clinked to the floor. She checked her wristwatch time by the moon's reflection. Ten past ten. She was usually asleep by now, but the full moon made it eerily bright.

Outside the window, tree shapes and varied shadows filled her limited view. Nothing swayed in the slight breeze other than branches and bushes. The buds of new leaves stood out in fuzzy relief against the moon.

She stretched higher, searched for movement on the ground, and commanded her pulse to slow. It picked up its pace when she jumped at an intrusive thump. Something unseen hit the back side of the cabin

and shook the whole side wall.

Her breath caught. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

A man's quiet curse came from right outside the bedroom window. She shifted below the sill so she wouldn't be seen through the glass.

Her stomach hardened into a familiar mass of knots. She covered her mouth with both hands to choke back a scream.

Could it be—?

No. He couldn't find her here.

Could he?

She tried to swallow, fought the rising clot of nausea.

What is wrong with me? She'd asked herself that question since she was a child.

Beth refused to give in to the familiar panic.

Not this time. She willed strength to override fear.

Mobilized into action, she slithered out from under the sleeping bag. Her fingers trembled as she searched in vain for her flashlight.

She crouched to her feet and crushed the urge to match the stranger's curses. Once the flashlight was again secure in her grasp, she dared a closer look, keeping her shoulders beneath the windowsill.

Lord, help me, she screamed in silence.

Afraid to make noise, she ordered her trembling fingers to stop rattling against the sill. She focused, as though narrowing her vision could keep her safe. Then she peered out.

Nothing.

The prison authorities promised advance notice when her ex-husband neared release. *Calm yourself. No way can he find me here.*

Visions of who, or what, might be outside the door weighed her down. She felt paralyzed, too scared to move.

Beth clamped her back teeth against the hated, helpless feeling of giving in to an emotion she was so determined to rise above.

A scrape followed the next thud. In front of the cabin, now.

Her body trembled. Her mind screamed in denial at what sounded like a work boot connecting with one of her sawhorses.

She fought the buzzing in her ears. No way would she give in, be blinded by fear. Her mind carried on an argument with her feelings. *This can't be happening. I'm supposed to be safe.*

She grappled with the urge to react as she would have in the past, with her own colorful expletives. She managed to draw in cleansing, calming oxygen, but it hissed from her body.

Oh Lord, forgive me for not thinking of You, first. Please, please, be with me as I cross this room.

Her will to survive felt as strong as iron. Adrenaline popped into action. In two steps she leaped through the bedroom door. In two more running steps she blasted open the front door. Her free hand flipped on the porch light.

A huge, dark shadow dove into a plum thicket.

Beth followed instinct. She dropped the light and grabbed a three-foot-long two-by-four. She heaved it towards the figure crouching in the brush.

“Ooof!” What had hit him in the head? Aiden Holt

rubbed at the lump already forming and lost his flashlight.

Never mind the flashlight. Why in the world was there a cabin light?

He swiveled on the balls of his feet. Yet at the same time, he felt like a lumbering fool.

When he caught sight of the woman framed in the doorway, he refused to relax. This small woman looked like no threat. But she could have a gun.

"Who's out there?" her husky voice demanded.

Maybe she was a threat. He could only see one hand. The cabin was supposed to be abandoned. He rubbed his fingers against his stinging side where the wood had connected.

"Nebraska Game and Parks, ma'am. Would you show your other hand, please?"

Careful not to become a visible target, he knelt behind a tree trunk and bent to pick up his light. Then keeping the woman within sight, he stepped into the dim glow coming from the porch.

"I'm not a threat." He stood. "See. Only a flashlight in my hand." Aiden swallowed. "I'd feel a lot better, though, if you'd show your other hand."

What a relief when she revealed empty palms.

Then he approached the edge of the narrow porch and took a full look. She appeared no bigger than a minute. Even dressed in bulky sweats, she was too slight for his liking. Her blonde hair went every which way, as though she'd been crawling through a plum thicket of her own. If the room were lit beyond the door he'd be able to tell what color her eyes were.

"What are you doing sneaking around my place in the dark?" she snapped.

"First, I had no idea anyone was staying here. The

cabin appeared empty. Second, who are you, and do you have permission to be here?"

"I'm Beth Phillips. I know who I am. But I don't know you. It's late. Any business you have here will have to wait until tomorrow."

"Oh, I have a reason to come back."

"Tell me why, please."

"I'm here about a reported wolf sighting."

"A wolf? I've never heard of a wolf in Nebraska."

Humor colored her tone.

"I just got into town and wanted to get a sense of where the river runs. I thought I saw an animal tear into the trees about a quarter mile back and decided to investigate." He gave her a shoulder, turned back for a last look. She didn't appear strong enough to stay out here by herself.

"You sure surprised me when you flung that two-by-four. What exactly are you doing?" He swung his arm in an arc. "Place looks uninhabitable to me."

"I'm renovating. And I'd really like to get to sleep."

"Sorry to disturb you. I'll be back tomorrow, then."

Had the Game and Parks guy really chased something, or someone, towards her cabin? *Lord, if I'm not alone out here, I need You more than ever. Be my shelter.*

She paraded snatches of verses from Psalm 91 through her memory. Beth believed He was her refuge. That He kept her sane. *You will command angels to guard me.*

Eventually, she relaxed and lay secure under the

Lord's feathery wings.

And finally, she slept. Only to wake up to an earful of pounding heartbeat.

Not again.

A yowl broke through the deafening quiet of night.

Beth sat up at attention.

The mournful howl traveled down her spine and raised goose flesh.

A wolf? Really? So the guy did have a reason to be looking around.

She lay awake for a long time, listening. She imagined the howl called, "Hello, I'm here, come meet me." No matter, it hung in the air, never wavering in clarity of sound. And eerie enough to dry Beth's throat and draw her inward, while hairs on her arms stood on end.

The howl came again, this time rising and falling and ending as a question of sad, lonely sound. God created magic when he made the wolf sing. The sinuous sound wove its way through the woods and into the cabin. Beth found comfort in its music, soothed, rather than frightened by the unknown.

"Guess you were right, Mr. Game-and-Parks Guy." She hadn't asked the stranger for his name.

The following morning, her jagged nerves interfered with work. It took everything she had not to investigate each and every noise she heard from the woods surrounding the clearing in front of the cabin.

She dumped the last bucket filled with what was left of the front-room flooring into the dumpster. Beth tried not to gag, scolded herself again for sleeping inside before the place was anywhere near ready. There was still so much filth to clear from the cabin.

Not just dirt, but animal leavings and insect carcasses.

She dangled the bucket with two fingers, while wiping her brow with the opposite arm.

“Oh, Lord, did you laugh at me last night when I jammed the two-by-four under the doorknob? Thank You for reminding me that one of the reasons I’m fixing up this cabin in the woods is to see just what I’m made of.”

She ended her little conversation with her friend Jesus and attempted to quiet her mind of the past by concentrating on the improbability of a wolf traveling the banks of the Platte River.

That’s one of the things she’d learned in rehab. And from the Bible. When she focused on her faith, nothing was left to question. Most of the time, though, it proved easier to think about rising above fear, than to put into practice.

She scanned the mixed blue and gray sky revealed through budding tree branches. Last night’s disturbances were wild compared to the night before, when the first room was clean enough for her to stay at the cabin overnight.

Gooseflesh traveled her arms at the recollection of why she woke during the night. But somehow the howls that had reverberated through the woods excited her senses much like an electrical storm did.

When she first fought through slumber, she’d thought the wolf was a coyote, but when she didn’t hear more yips, or hear the pack move as coyote packs do, the lone, intriguing cries had kept her awake off and on through the rest of the night.

And now that someone was looking for the wolf, would it be safer or more endangered? She tried to picture a lone wolf wandering through the trees,

following the river. Was it a male or female? Why was it alone? Maybe it was a fledgling alpha that proved a threat to the leader of the pack.

Somewhere from the recesses of her mind she remembered reading that a wolf howls over prey, rather than baying at the moon. So he must have filled his belly and feasted by moonlight. There were plenty of turkey and deer around. But that didn't mean Beth wanted to meet the wolf in the middle of any night.

Something moved across the clearing in the brush. And just like that, there it was. A wolf in broad daylight.

She wanted to paint the moment.

For it is He who delivers you.

Thank You, Lord, for Psalm ninety-one.

Tawny, intelligent, close-set curious eyes returned her stare.

"Were you around the cabin last night?" she murmured. She straightened to meet the wolf's dignified stance.

Neither human nor slanted-eyed animal blinked. A ray of light made the wolf's golden eyes glisten.

Beth waited, mesmerized. The creature stood mute and motionless, gaze remaining fixed. She tipped her head and took note of details from ear to tail. The wolf was male. Myriad colors made up his coat. Would the touch be bristly or soft? Mighty power lay in the jaws and muscular legs, but at the same time the creature called out for a cuddle.

"Someone came looking for you."

No response, nothing so much as a twitch of an ear or blink of an eye. He sure could stare, though.

She questioned her calm acceptance of its presence. She saw no reason to feel alarmed or

intimidated. Or afraid.

Then she somehow identified with the curiosity and self-sufficiency of the creature, a far cry from feeling like quarry.

Beth couldn't help but remember scary childhood wolf stories, like those her grandmother had read from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. She pictured herself living out the life of Little Red Riding Hood around the Big Bad Wolf. Only her grandmother was in heaven, now.

And any wolves Beth had met in real life, before now, were the two-legged kind.

Like the man who had stepped out of the moonlit woods last night. Was he really who he claimed? He'd neglected to give her his name. And she hadn't asked.

She scanned the trees, feeling unduly exposed in the clearing. She remembered the guy said he'd return. The only vehicle she'd heard all morning had come from the road off in the distance.

She glanced at the wolf again. Silence surrounded them. Even the breeze held its breath with an expectant air. Unable to look away, she kept her gaze locked on the somewhere-between-honey-and-butter eyes, yet concentrated on the wolf's body as a whole. Her pulse beat triple-time, but it was energized rather than caused by fear.

The yellow-eyed wolf lowered its nose, twitched as though sniffing the air, while still watching her from eyes that now appeared lost in hooded lids. The pads of both huge front feet were planted wide apart so its long tail was visible through the strong legs.

Beth took a step. The wolf feinted in retreat. She had the temptation to dance to the left and right, just to see what he would do, but she resisted.

"Maybe another time. I have to get back to work.

Too bad you can't lend me a hand." She adjusted her mask against the smell and disgust of moldy earth, animal, and rodent filth; and returned inside to the dirty job.

When she finished dumping the next bucket of debris, the wolf no longer stood next to the fallen tree trunk. She took a moment to appreciate spring's undergrowth, beginning to paint a touch of green life to dormant bushes and trees. In contrast, the wretched state of the cabin looked dark and dreary.

No sign of the wolf.

Around four p.m., when bottled water no longer satisfied, she realized she had worked through lunch. She stopped to eat a sandwich.

And then Beth saw him. The wolf once again blended in with the perfect camouflage of the surrounding woods. On some level, she envied his nonsense oneness with nature, the way he belonged. She'd never felt like she belonged anywhere.

"You're back." Looking beyond her initial trepidation, she studied the large male wolf.

Intrigued by his awesome gold eyes, she figured his prey froze when caught by his stare. Beth's lack of fear made no sense. Then she remembered. While in the safe house, she'd read three books on wolves, and Internet material that belonged to a student who was sheltered at the same time. Thus began her enchantment with the species.

She'd seen pictures of wolves in various colors: black, white, gray. Nothing compared to seeing this fellow's shades of gray, hint of tan, streaks of charcoal and black, and white underbelly.

The wolf cried out to her on such an emotional level, she made a mental note to buy a journal. She

wanted to record the way his presence quickened her pulse, along with the alertness of all her senses. He appeared as curious about her as she was about him. He deserved an honorable name, but at his unwavering gaze, Beth fought the temptation to laugh at his comical expression.

She needed something to bring a smile to her face. Her relatives accused her of taking herself too seriously.

Beth managed to choke down the last bite of deli turkey and Swiss under the wolf's watchful glare, wondering again where in the world he had come from. And why her curiosity overrode her fear.

Fear. The wolf exhibited no fear of her. She wondered what he would be afraid of. She answered her own question. Hunters, or vehicles. Surely, the wolf was too clever and elusive to place itself in danger from humans.

"So what do we do about this guy, this Mr. Game-and-Parks man?" A chuckle burred. Beth believed the wolf had raised an eyebrow. "Would you look at me? Talking to a wolf as though you know what I'm all about."

They were alone out here, after all, except for birds and insects and spring coming to life. A robin bursting into song intruded on the moment. The wolf blinked an eye and twitched an ear.

She tossed the double-crust corner of her sandwich his direction. The scrap landed a couple inches from one front paw. The wolf sniffed the air, still watching her, and gave one tail swish. Then faster than she could blink, scarfed up the bread.

Beth couldn't hold it back. Laughter gurgled in full eruption. She marveled at the way he moved without

making a sound. Had he been watching her work on recent days? He probably knew about her long before she was aware of him. He seemed more at ease with her than she was with him.

What could he want from her? Company, or a simple hand out?

The wolf cupped his ears then flattened them. Before she could register what he may have heard, or decide if she should speak again, there was no time to be afraid or try to approach the wolf.

A trunk of a man stepped into the clearing.

The man growled in greeting.

The wolf jumped straight up as though his four legs were attached to springs and circled in the air before bounding off.

Beth screeched at the combination of sudden movements and the man's unexpected appearance, confused that a noise she associated with the wild beast had come from the big man.

Then she couldn't make another peep as she tried to take in the visage that haunted her.

Tree trunks framed his broad shoulders, and a trick of shaded light created an outline as though he was stepping through a doorway.

Everything stalled, except her hammering heart.

How did he get out early? How had he found her?

She froze.

No. Impossible.

She felt the blood leave her face and imagined her color as white as Kansas limestone. She trembled, yet somehow her body remained rigid.

Beth found herself right back where she'd been when she lived with her ex-husband. She couldn't control her erratic senses, let alone retaliate.

Or escape.

The wide-shouldered guy turned the direction the wolf had retreated, as if ready to follow.

She tried with all her might not to freak when she caught sight of the worn leather jacket. The back of that distressed leather caused a frenzied impulse to run. It *was* him!

Beth choked. She refused to heed the light-headedness. A scream died in her throat. Trapped and helpless, she finally gasped. Simple survival response overrode conscious thought.

At the sound of her whooshing exhalation, the huge man pivoted to look at her.

And her worst nightmare came to life. She superimposed Barton's face onto this stranger's.

Emotions took over. She couldn't formulate a straight thought. Her mind fought against thinking his name, fought for clarity.

No. Take hold of your imagination.

She went on full alert, concentrated on details. This man's shape and looks, so like Barton's, eventually took on a distinction that confirmed the stranger wasn't who she thought him to be.

Not blond. No scar on his left cheek. Not her ex-husband.

This man's hair was a rich brown, and his eyes were lighter brown mixed in with some gray and a touch of cinnamon. No matter. She didn't care for big men who used their size to intimidate and manipulate. At first glance, she wanted nothing to do with the brute.

She inhaled, drew her shoulders up, and wrapped protective arms across the front of her body. Distant memory reminded her blows could hurt.

Beth let out the breath, hoping she put on a brave front. This guy put her on guard, when the wolf hadn't.

Still fighting to hold herself together, she raised her chin. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" She hoped the slight tremor in her voice didn't make him think she was weak.

"We met last night, remember?" He swept his arm in a wide arc. "Are you really staying here? The place looks like it needs a match."

She recognized the voice from the previous night. Some of his words sounded funny. He wasn't from Nebraska. "I am. And I told you last night, I'm fixing up the cabin."

"Seems I've startled you twice, now. I apologize, ma'am." The man whipped out a small notebook. "Could you spell your name for me, Ms. Phillips, just so I get it right?"

She shook her head to clear the wild emotions. He remembered her name. She hadn't asked him for his name last night. And it didn't look like he was in uniform now, so was he for real?

Real was the size of the guy, now looming closer than any kind of comfort. Big enough for her to dislike him on sight. "I need to know you're who you claim to be. So how about some identification?"

The lines around his eyes crinkled, as though he was trying not to grin.

She broke their connection to study the road beyond her drive. "Again, I'm asking who you are?"

She finally heard the Minnesota accent in the man's voice.

It somehow softened his size, because she had the urge to smile. But that didn't mean she'd let down her

defenses.

“P-H-I-double-L. Beth Ann Phillips. Or Beth Todd.
Or Beth Littlefield. But it’s Phillips, now.”