



RESCUE

Nancy Darryl

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About the Author

Nancy Darryl writes romantic comedy and suspense. Her debut novel, *Here Lies Love*, is available now at Champagne Books, www.champagnebooks.com in PDF download, CD and trade paperback.

Watch for future releases, *Bad Hair Day* (2006, Treble Heart Books) and *Undercurrents* (2007, Champagne Books).

Nancy lives in Ottawa, Canada.

Visit her at www.nancydarryl.com

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The last camper left at noon.

Slate-gray clouds gathered like an army on the horizon, and I shivered on the rocky ledge behind the house. Sanctuary lay in the dark water rippling below me, but I knew I wasn't strong enough to fall. Not today.

I climbed into the truck and drove away from the bluff, past the cabins, through the grove of birch trees that edged the picnic area. I glanced toward the boathouse where I'd cradled Dustin's head in my lap for the last time. I never go down there now. Fin, my handyman, would be back tomorrow to bring in the wharves.

I picked up the supplies I needed in town, and stopped by Gert's Diner, eyeing the brooding sky to the west as I hopped out of the truck. Thick tendrils of mist curled over the fir treetops, and the air tasted of rain.

"You closed up yet, Annie?" Jake demanded from his perch at the counter.

I smiled. Jake Stiles, owner of the hardware store and renowned town gossip, never greeted anyone. He simply launched into the middle of a conversation.

"Almost," I said, choosing the stool at the end. "The rest I'll leave for Fin."

Gert came over, the creases of her forehead deepening as she studied me. "Annie, you're skin and bone. Are you eating enough these days? Probably not. What can I get you? The meat loaf's nice. I'll slice you up some meat loaf."

Gert talked a lot, and answered her own questions. That was one of the reasons I liked her so much.

"Sounds good," I said. "Make it to go. I'd like to get home before the storm hits."

"You missed all the excitement earlier," Jake said, his eyes dancing with mischief.

"Mounties were here. Manhunt. Murderer on the loose."

"Jake Stiles, you watch too much television," Gert said sternly. "Those RCMP said nothing about no murderer. They were asking about Matt Connor."

Jake wrapped his meaty hands around his coffee mug. “Two folks killed over in Huntsville County last week. Why else would the police be sniffing around?”

“Who’s Matt Connor?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“Used to live around here,” Gert explained. “Joe Connor’s boy. He—”

“A wild one, Matt was,” Jake interjected. “Always in trouble. Probably escaped from jail. Probably he—”

“Oh, hush up Jake,” Gert grumbled. To me she added, “Matt turned out not so bad considering his father was never sober.”

“RCMP want Matt for questioning, that can’t be a good thing,” Jake said with flourish.

I listened to Jake’s take on the world while Gert got my order ready. When she pushed the paper bag at me from across the counter, she frowned. “Don’t like it, you up there all alone. You look tired, more than usual. You sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “It’s been a busy summer. Glad it’s over.”

“If you’re too tired to cook, come here for your meals. You need to put on some weight. You need—”

I nodded while Gert gave me her version of what I needed, and waved goodbye. When you lived in Jackfish, you didn’t need a mother.

By the time I got back home, rain freckled the lake and the wind had picked up, carrying with it the heavy scent of cedar and pine. Cool mist clung to my clothes and curled my already curly hair. I ate my dinner in the empty kitchen, and as I placed the dirty dishes in the sink, the lights flickered. I waited, but they stayed on.

I gathered some candles, matches and a flashlight. Storms wreaked havoc with civilization this far out in the woods, and I knew I’d probably be without power before bedtime. On my way out the door to the cabins, I picked up the phone. Dead. No surprise there, either. I had no one to call.

By dusk I'd cleaned most of the cabins; the rest could wait until morning. I piled the bucket full of cleaning supplies, a mop and a broom onto the back of the truck and paused at the sound of knocking. *Rap. Rap.* The thick brushes of pine next to the cabin behind me swayed frantically back and forth, like a warning. *Rap. Rap.*

I rounded the corner of the cabin and shook my head when I saw the shutter flailing against the shingles. *Rap. Rap.* I grabbed the shutter, secured it firmly. The latches needed tightening. Another job for Fin.

I had the feeling I was being watched. I thought about what Jake had said, about the murderer on the loose, and wondered if it was true. I waited for the ripple of fear, the twinge of anxiety. None came. When you've lost everything, there's nothing left to be afraid of.

Shadows crept across the porch as I entered the house. I didn't bother to lock the door. Lonesome Pines Campground and Cabins was situated on the most barren peninsula in the province, next to a wilderness park. But as remote as it was, it was where I felt safest. Where Dustin and I had lived and breathed, laughed and loved. I knew people in town thought me crazy to stay here.

You're too young to be a widow. At thirty-two, you should go back to the city, make new friends, a new life.

I didn't want a new life. I wanted the old one.

The grief was part of me now; I'd wrestled with the pain and had finally come to terms with it. A flame of anger flickered and flared every now and then too, but it was the loneliness I struggled with the most. It carved a hollow, empty hole inside of me that got deeper every day.

I heard another noise, from the kitchen. A scraping sound. I followed it and stopped dead in my tracks. A man was leaning over my kitchen table, his hands spread wide, blood dripping from his right upper arm onto the white table cloth.

I backed up and slammed into the wall. My heart lashed out at my ribs, like a trapped bird.

“I need a phone,” the man said.

He was tall and lean, and his hair needed cutting. Black waves of it fell into his eyes, blue eyes glazed with pain and fatigue. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, but his eyes were those of a much older man. A man who had seen too much and wished he hadn’t. His angular jaw was dark with stubble, and he wore a torn flannel shirt and dirt-splattered jeans. A gun stuck out of his waistband.

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I stared at the gun, and he must have noticed, because he added, “I won’t hurt you.”

I finally found my voice. “Who are you?”

“My name is Matt Connor. Look, I’m sorry to scare you like this, I...”

He fell forward onto the table, his eyes closing as he collapsed on one elbow.

Concern jarred me out of my trance, and I grabbed a chair, positioned it behind him, and eased his six-foot frame onto it. “You’re hurt,” I said, stating the obvious.

I opened a cupboard, stood on tiptoe and grabbed the first aid kit.

“I...need a phone,” he repeated.

His shirtsleeve was soaked with blood. I hesitated only briefly before easing the shirt off his shoulders. He had pine needles in his hair. I resisted the urge to pick them out of the dark, damp strands. “The phones are out.”

He tensed at the news and looked up at me. Something warm stirred in the pit of my stomach. “Cell phone?”

The wound was deep, with a steady stream of dark red blood oozing from torn flesh. “Cells don’t work up here. How’d you get hurt?”

He ignored my question, and muttered to himself. “I have to get to a phone.”

“You won’t get far,” I said, my gut churning at the sight of so much blood. I had first aid training, and didn’t mind watching those hospital reality shows on television, but faced with the

real thing, I wasn't sure where to start. "You're bleeding, badly. How long have you been like this?"

"Hours. Look, I need to borrow your car."

"I'll drive you to town. You need a doctor. Just let me clean it first, and try to stop the bleeding."

Matt's sharp intake of breath told me the peroxide stung like hell, but I didn't stop until the wound was as clean as I could get it. I wrapped his arm with gauze, and covered that with pieces of cut up sheet, tying the ends as tightly as I dared.

I watched in disbelief as a bright red stain spread over the stark whiteness of the material in an ever-widening circle. I wrapped another layer on, but knew time was running out. Sooner or later, the blood would soak through that, too.

* * * * *

Maneuvering the truck down the winding, rutted road seemed to take twice as long, and every time we lurched over a pothole, Matt winced in pain. The aspirin I'd offered him hadn't helped much. It rattled me, seeing him dressed in my husband's clothes. The shirt was my favorite, soft blue denim. He wore Dustin's hooded windbreaker.

"Somebody shot you, didn't they?" I could feel his eyes on me. In spite of the cool night air filling the cab, I felt myself growing hot.

He didn't answer. I tried again. "The Mounties were looking for you. Did you know that?"

That got his attention. "They were here?"

"No, I heard it in town. They were asking for you by name." I glanced at him. "What do they want you for?"

His mouth curved into what resembled a smile. "What do you think they want me for?"

Manhunt. Murderer on the loose.

I ignored Jake's theory. I found it odd that Matt Connor didn't try to defend himself, pronounce his innocence, make up a story that would convince me he wasn't dangerous.

Maybe he didn't care if I thought he was dangerous.

He continued to watch me. "What's your name?"

"Annie Wilcox."

Rain sprinkled the windshield. I turned on the intermittent wipers just as a flash of lightening lit the horizon.

"Wilcox. I used to know the guy who owned this campground. Dustin Wilcox. You related?"

"I'm his wife."

"That's why I don't remember you. You're not from around here." When I shook my head, he added, "Lucky you."

"Were you and Dustin friends?"

Matt laid his head back on the seat. "No. Went to the same school, but didn't hang with the same crowd. Dustin was good. I was bad. He used to let me fish in the lake. I liked it here, it's nice."

Jake's words echoed in my head. *A wild one, Matt was. Always in trouble. Probably escaped from jail.*

"What do you mean, bad?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions, Annie Wilcox."

My name on his tongue felt strange and intimate at the same time. The rain fell harder, pelting the windshield. I eased up on the gas pedal. "You broke into my house and scared the hell out of me. I think I have a right to ask questions."

"You weren't scared. Just surprised. Why aren't you afraid of me?"

“Not much scares me anymore.”

I looked over at him and saw a subtle nod of recognition. Maybe nothing much scared him, either.

We’d reached the bridge, but as I geared down, I saw a strange, dark shape in front of me. I braked and peered out of the windshield, but couldn’t see much with the wipers flapping back and forth.

“What *is* that?” Matt asked.

I got out of the truck to find out. To my surprise, Matt staggered behind me, using the truck’s hood to prop himself up. The dressing on his arm would get soaked, but somehow I knew he didn’t care.

A large cedar tree lay across the road, blocking access completely. The choppy water of the lake surged in the distance, and the faint lights from town twinkled like stars on the opposite shore. With thick forest on either side, driving any further was impossible.

“Sonuvbitch,” Matt muttered.

I’d never seen a storm do anything like that, and I’d lived at Lonesome Pines for seven years.

Matt disappeared into the gloom.

“Where are you going?” I called after him.

“Just need to check something.”

He returned a few moments later, and we got back in the truck. I wiped the rain from my face.

“I guess the storm took the tree down. Some of these trees are over a hundred years old.”

“Or someone took a chain saw to it,” Matt said. “I tried to get a better look at the tree trunk, but the brush is too thick.” At my skeptical look, he added, “You *do* have a chain saw at home somewhere, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “But why would someone do that?”

“To keep me from a phone. How long have the phones been out, anyway?”

“A few hours.” I gazed at him. “Are you saying someone cut the phone lines, too?”

His expression was unreadable. “Maybe.”

He wasn’t kidding.

“You want to tell me what’s going on here?”

Matt rubbed the dressing and stared at his hand. Even in the darkness of the cab I could see his hand was shiny with blood.

I turned the truck around and started back up the hill.

* * * * *

Matt made me lock the doors and windows. He refused to lie down, preferring to sit at the kitchen table. I suspected he was afraid if he laid down, he’d never get up again. He watched me heat up a can of soup. He’d already downed the glass of milk I’d given him, so I knew he was hungry. I watched him as he ate, and saw with relief the blood hadn’t saturated the new dressing. I’d tied it tighter this time.

Sitting across from him felt familiar. I wondered at the sadness that hovered at the edge of my thoughts. I hadn’t felt sadness in a long time, only gut-wrenching grief. Dustin had been the last one to sit with me like this, eating food I’d prepared for him. Matt ate slowly, staring at me as though somehow I was part of the meal. I tucked a curl behind my ear, suddenly aware how scraggly I must look.

“I’m not a killer, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Matt pushed the bowl away, his color somewhat improved. “Thanks for the soup,” he added lamely.

He’d mistaken the reason behind my discomfort. “That wasn’t what I was thinking,” I said.

“Where’s Dustin?”

“He’s dead.”

His eyes widened, and he shot me a look of fierce sympathy that only comes when you lose someone special. I fought the tears that burned the back of my eyes.

“When?”

“Two years ago. A brain aneurysm.”

He digested that news. “And you live here alone?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a bitch,” he said.

“Which? Being husbandless, or living alone?”

“Both.”

We sat, each with our own thoughts, listening to the wind beat against the windows like a wild beast.

“Why do you carry a gun?” I asked finally. “Are you a cop?”

Matt heaved a tired sigh. “Jesus, now I really know you’re not from around here. Imagine mistaking me for a cop.”

“Okay. Then you’re...”

“Ex-military.”

“And this ‘someone’ with a chain saw?”

“Probably my imagination.” Matt frowned. “But I really shouldn’t be here. I could be putting you in danger.” He saw my look and added, “I know, you’re not scared of anything. But I’d feel guilty, you know?”

“Guilty about what? The madman with a chainsaw mutilating me? Is he the one who shot you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He told me then, watching me closely for signs of doubt, or mistrust. When he saw neither, he kept talking. Six months in Afghanistan, Special Ops. The Canadian government denied the presence of any of their soldiers there, but they were there all the same. Arriving home, disillusioned with military life and the scarcity of jobs, he’d found work in security.

“Except I have about as much luck as a one-legged man at a butt kicking contest,” Matt said. “Two months on the job, I notice something fishy about one of the warehouses on my beat. Some bastard’s hiding weapons and shipping them overseas. And one night I got caught looking. They chased me, two men on foot, they took pot shots at me.” Matt rubbed his arm. “I made it to my old Chevy, but one of them followed in a truck. I lost him briefly, made a phone call to the RCMP, got the run around. The guy found me again, followed me for miles, until I ran out of gas. So I started out on foot.” He sat back in the chair, shaking his head. “I thought for sure he’d give up by then. These mountains are damned intimidating.”

“But you don’t think he gave up?”

“No.”

“But if he’s close enough to cut phone lines and saw down trees, why isn’t he shooting the door down?”

“All he has to do is keep me trapped here until the weapons are shipped. Then clean up the place and call me a liar.” His eyes met mine. “I was discharged, you know. Mental breakdown. Depression. I doubt I’d make a believable witness.”

“So as long as you’re stuck here, you don’t pose a threat?”

“Something like that.”

The lights flickered again, then went out, plunging us into darkness.

* * * * *

Matt's eyes, smudged by dark circles, met mine in the flickering candlelight, the only thing between us and pitch black. He summoned up a rueful smile.

"Are you scared yet?"

I clutched the flashlight tighter. "The storm finally pulled the power lines down. The lights have been going on and off for hours."

"Whatever you say, Annie Wilcox."

I pointed the flashlight to his arm and saw that the dressing was still white, not red. "You still think there's a maniac out there somewhere?"

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be the first time I've made a mistake. Mistakes are my specialty."

"You need to lie down," I said. "Just for a little while. My bedroom's across the hall."

He shook his head. "No. I need to be where I can see the front door. Is there another way out of here?"

"There's a back door off the den."

"That'll do."

He reluctantly allowed me to help him to the couch in the den. He lay propped up against a pillow, where he had a good view of the front door at the opposite end of the hallway. He refused to lie flat, and wouldn't let go of his gun. I left the flashlight with him and headed out of the room.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I'll be right back."

I retrieved the candles and matches from the kitchen.

"No murderer in the house, at least not yet," I quipped when I returned.

I lit the candles and set them on the coffee table, then sat on the edge of the couch, surprised to find Matt staring at me with a haunted look.

“What is it with you?” he asked. “You may think all of this is no big deal, but I don’t. Unlike you, I *do* get scared. I’m scared of dying. I came close once too many times. There’s too many things I want to do first before I let some terrorist bastard nail me.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, feeling like I’d done something wrong, but not knowing what.

“You really don’t care if you die, do you?”

My mouth went dry. Matt took my hand in his.

“I recognize the look. I’m just like you. A ghost.” He reached up and brushed the hair from my forehead.

Longing stirred in me, intimate and warm like a long forgotten memory. I’d lived with a ghost for two years. Now I was sitting beside one. A clap of thunder rattled the house, startling both of us. I trembled and tried to pull away, but he held on to me.

“Don’t go,” he urged me in the darkness. “It’s too dangerous. I need you where I can see you.” He moved his body over and patted the space beside him. “Come on, lie down. You look tired.”

When I stretched out next to him he circled his good left arm around me. I hesitated, then allowed him to press my head against his chest. I could hear his heart beating. When my knee came too close to his thigh, I froze.

This man was no ghost. He was living and breathing. He was also a complete stranger. What would Gert say if she could see me now?

I felt Matt relax into the cushions, and after a while I relaxed, too. We listened to the storm outside, listened to our breathing. His body heat covered me like a warm blanket.

After a time I thought maybe he’d fallen asleep. I raised my head. I was wrong. He was wide-awake, looking at me. He stared at my mouth, and I knew he was going to kiss me. I could have pushed him away, slipped off into the darkened house, but I didn’t. Even though the dangers lurking out there were nothing compared to the one facing me.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” he whispered. “For me, too.”

He kissed my forehead, then moved his right hand tentatively onto my hip, ever so slowly, waiting for me to protest. Maybe he was surprised when I didn’t, but maybe not. Maybe he was a spirit who staggered into lonely women’s houses for a living, displaying his physical injury, his bruised soul, until their will softened to his.

Our mouths met, and the terror began. Hairline cracks in a block of ice. He fumbled with the buttons of my shirt using his injured hand, so I undid the buttons for him. The clasp of my bra was in the front, so I undid that, too.

He fondled my breasts, his mouth picking up where his fingers left off. I found the zipper of his jeans and slipped my hand inside. When he tugged at my pants I took them off. His fingers pushed away my underwear until they found what they were looking for.

Every so often we paused, listening for the maniac with the chain saw. He never showed. So we undressed each other by candlelight, and Matt kept his gun close by, just in case it wasn’t the storm that had stolen the lights and the phones and destroyed the tree.

I worried about his arm.

“You do the work then,” he whispered into my ear, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

So I was careful, and we made love with an exquisite slowness, and the hairline cracks became huge chasms, and the ice began to melt. Each time he entered me I knew fear again, and along with it, joy, and I didn’t know whether to love him or hate him for reminding me of what I’d been missing.

The maniac never showed.

Morning came, and with it the phones and the lights. Matt got through to the Mounties, who cleared the road and brought along an ambulance. They talked a while, until they had what they needed to make a decision about the warehouse full of weapons. They searched the campground and found no one. Then the medics stepped in to take Matt away. He held them all off long

enough to pull me into an empty room and kiss my face again.

“You look different,” he said. “Not so much like a ghost.”

I kissed him back and watched him leave from my front porch. The land was freshly washed, the trees impossibly green. I wandered out to the back of the house, to my rocky ledge.

I’d always figured the ledge was my biggest hurdle. That if I could gather the courage to fall, my reward would be peace. But I realized that morning that my hurdle was living, not dying. And in the stormy darkness a stranger had shown me what it was to live again. And I’d found the strength to embrace it, and to embrace him.

Word got out around town that Matt Connor was a hero. He’d almost single-handedly foiled a terrorist weapon-smuggling operation. Even Jake was impressed, and took great pleasure in telling anyone who would listen.

I was pulling the dead leaves out of my perennial garden when Matt returned. He wrapped me in his arms and kissed me senseless. He assured me he was strong enough to do most of the ‘work’, so we skipped into the house and fell, tangled together, onto the bed.

“I quit my job,” Matt said when the sweat on our bodies had cooled. “I was thinking maybe I’d fix up my Dad’s old place. The town’s not so bad when people decide they like you.”

“But you said you liked it *here*.”

Matt grinned. “I do.”

“Well, my handyman could use some help,” I said. “And I’m sure I could find a few jobs for you.”

He nuzzled my neck and I giggled.

“I’ll stay if you keep me busy.”

Matt told me that I saved his life that stormy night. But I know it was the other way around.