



Gail Anderson-Dargatz

A CLAIRE
ABBOTT
MYSTERY

**PLAYING
WITH FIRE**

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Gail Anderson-Dargatz



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For Mitch, as always

ONE

My boss, Carol, was already at her desk when I opened our office door. I paused before entering. Crap, I thought. I'd only had a few hours of sleep the night before, and I knew it showed. Carol would undoubtedly grill me for details about my evening with Trevor. The thing is, I had spent most of the night with Matt instead.

Carol sat back, looking amused with me. Her black blazer was a bit too small and pulled at the shoulders. She was chubby from years of sitting at her laptop.

“Claire, you have someone waiting for you,” she told me.

I turned to see Trevor Bragg leaning against my desk. His muscled arms were crossed. I could see the ridges of his stomach muscles under his T-shirt. The guy was a hunk, *really* fit. But then, he had to be. He was a firefighter.

I suddenly wished I had taken more care getting dressed that morning. I had woken up late and grabbed the first clean outfit I could find, a blue T-shirt and jeans.

“Oh, Trevor,” I said. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get to the restaurant last night.”

“Didn’t you two have a date?” Carol asked.

“I never made it,” I told her. “Something came up.”

“Something always comes up,” said Trevor. “Doesn’t it, Claire?”

I felt my face heat up in embarrassment. He was right, of course. I had stood

Trevor up three dates in a row. Each time, I'd had to cover some news story.

I work as a reporter and photographer at the *Black Lake Times*, a weekly newspaper. Our town is so small that Carol and I are the only writers for the paper. I rarely get a full day off.

"Trevor, I meant to call—" I started, but he held up his hand to stop me.

"The chief told me how you saved the Miller girl last night," he said. "I ran into him when I picked up my morning coffee."

He meant Jim Wallis, our town fire chief and a family friend.

Trevor pushed himself up from my desk. "Jim said you had some kind of vision that led you to find Amber in the woods," he said.

He stepped so close to me I could smell him. Boy, did he smell good, and not just of shampoo. He smelled like a *man*. The night before, I was ready to tell him that we were

over. Now all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

Trevor clearly wasn't in the mood. "I also heard you and Matt Holden were pretty cozy over at Big Al's burger joint last night," he said.

Matt was the search-and-rescue manager for our area. He had headed up the search for Amber Miller the night before. After I tracked down Amber, Matt saw me in a different light. He was interested in me now in a way he hadn't been before. I wasn't about to tell Trevor that.

"We were hungry after the search."

"You were at Big Al's until two o'clock in the morning."

"Matt and I were *talking*, that's all," I told Trevor. "He wanted to know about my vision, how it worked."

"Me too," said Carol. "You've got the town buzzing. Everyone at Tommy's Café was talking about you this morning."

Tommy's Café is the hangout for cops in our town. Fire Chief Wallis was there most mornings. Matt was often there too. If I wanted to find news, Tommy's Café was the place to go. I had avoided the café that morning, however. I knew *I* would be the topic of gossip.

"I hear you knew Doug Connor had kidnapped Amber before anyone else," Carol said. "Did you really see all that in a vision?"

"Yeah, but my vision didn't tell me Doug would throw my camera bag into a gulley." I was still mad about that. My wallet was in there.

Carol raised her eyebrows to me, asking me to explain.

"I don't know how visions work," I told her. "Last night was the first time I had one."

"Your mom has them all the time, though, right? Or she thinks she does."

I felt my face flush in embarrassment. Mom had claimed she had visions for years. I had thought she was a flake. The whole town thought she was a little nutty. Now I was sure they thought I was crazy too.

I'd always had hunches, but I kept them to myself. I often followed that gut feeling to the scene of an accident. That's how I ended up standing up Trevor so often. I would be on my way to a date with him and would *know* someone was in trouble. Like last night. I had felt driven to help Amber.

"I *am* sorry about last night," I told Trevor.

He brushed my hair off my shoulder. "Maybe you can make it up to me later."

"Knock, knock." I turned to see Matt Holden standing at the door to our office. He paused, taking in Trevor's hand still on my shoulder. Then he offered me a coffee.

"I kept you up most of the night," he said. "I figured the least I could do was bring

you coffee.” I got the impression he was talking as much to Trevor as to me. He was telling Trevor to back off, that I was his girl.

Trevor ran a thumb across his manly chin. “Claire missed her date with me last night because of you,” he said. “Seems to me you owe *me* a little something.”

Matt faced Trevor. “Well, maybe there was a reason she chose to spend the night with me instead of you,” he said.

Both men were so tall I had to look up at them. I found myself between them as they stared each other down. I have to admit, their attention was thrilling. I’d never had two men fight over me before.

“Okay, boys,” said Carol. “Take it outside. We’ve got work to do.”

In the near distance, I heard the wail of the firehouse siren, calling the volunteer firefighters. “Shit,” said Trevor. “Sounds like I’ve definitely got work to do.”

Trevor gave my arm a squeeze before he pushed past Matt. Carol and I watched him swagger out the door.

Matt cleared his throat to get my attention. "I guess I'd better get going too," he said. He took my hand. "I would like to see you again," he told me.

"I'd like that too."

"Maybe dinner tomorrow night?"

"Dinner would be great."

"I'll call you later." He paused before leaving. "You aren't going to stand *me* up, are you?" he asked.

I laughed. "No, I won't stand you up."

"Good."

"Matt's cute," said Carol after he left.

"Rugged," I said. "Not cute." With his day-old beard, I could picture Matt in a log cabin. He was comfortable in the wild. As the search-and-rescue manager, he had to be. Our town was surrounded by mountain forest.

Carol eyed me. "Trevor is cute too."

I collapsed into my office chair, exhausted. "What are you getting at, Carol?"

"You will have to make a choice, you know."

I rubbed my forehead. "I just want to get to know them both a little better first."

"Matt is more mature," Carol said. She played with a curl of her perm. "But then, Trevor has really big feet." She was right. Trevor wore size thirteen boots.

"So?" I asked.

"You know what they say about men with big feet." She winked at me. "Men with big feet have really big—"

"Egos," I said, finishing her sentence. "I think Trevor likes being a firefighter, maybe a little too much."

"Of course he does," she said. "*You* like that he's a firefighter." Then she gave me a stern look. "Speaking of firefighters, don't you have somewhere to go?"

“Bed?” I said.

“The fire?” she asked.

“Of course. Sorry. I’m so tired I’m not thinking straight.” I grabbed one of the office cameras. Then I jumped in my car and followed the smoke to the fire.