



A CLAIRE  
ABBOTT  
MYSTERY

# SEARCH AND RESCUE

Gail Anderson-Dargatz

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*For Mitch, who remembers me when...*

# ONE

I felt that familiar ache in my stomach as I drove to my date. I knew something was wrong. More than that, I *knew* I had to head down Pine Road.

The restaurant where my date Trevor waited for me was in the other direction, on Lakeshore. Still, I followed my instincts and turned right. Like it or not, my mother had taught me to take that gut feeling seriously. I was glad I did. When I drove into that quiet suburb, I saw a car burning. The hood was up, and flames burst from the engine.

A young guy stood several yards away, staring at the fire, scratching his head. His eyes were red, like he was about to cry. That beater on fire was likely his first car.

I pulled over and opened my car door. "You okay?" I called across the road.

"I guess," he said. "My car is trashed though."

I got out of my Honda Civic, embarrassed that I showed too much leg. I was dressed for my date, not work. My red skirt was short, cut well above my knees. My high heels made my legs seem even longer.

The kid paused to take me in as I stood. Then he recognized me. "Hey, you're that reporter. You took pictures of my soccer team at the high school this fall."

"That's me," I said. I hunt down stories for our weekly newspaper, the *Black Lake Times*. Today was supposed to be my day off, but here was news.

“Shit,” the guy said. “Just my luck. Bad enough this happens. Now everybody will know about it.”

He was right. A photo of this car on fire would make the front page.

I grabbed my camera and notepad. Then I slipped on my coat as I walked toward the burning car. We were well into November, and the evening air was cold.

The kid didn’t wear a jacket, just jeans and a T-shirt. He shivered. I held out my hand to shake his. “I’m Claire Abbott.”

“I know,” he said. He wouldn’t take my hand. “I see your name in the paper all the time.”

I clicked my pen and got ready to jot down his name. “And you are?”

“You can get my name from the cops.”

I shrugged off his rude behavior. People often snubbed me. A person in an accident didn’t want his photo in the paper. I understood, but this was my job. I had to fill the

newspaper every week. In a town as small as Black Lake, that was tough.

I aimed my camera and took a shot of the guy's burning car. "Have you phoned for a fire truck?" I asked him.

"Of course I have," he said. "You think I'm stupid?" He held up his cell phone. "They're on the way."

"If you need anything—"

The teen turned his back on me, not letting me finish.

I waited for the fire truck by my car. I knew I'd get a better photo when the firefighters arrived. I didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, the fire truck wailed down the street and stopped behind the burning car.

The fire chief, Jim Wallis, jumped out. His team of volunteer firefighters followed, all of them wearing their gear. They hooked the truck hoses to the nearest hydrant. With that water, they quickly put



out the fire. I got my front-page shot of the firefighters hosing down the flames.

Once the men had the fire under control, the chief crossed the road to see me.

“So Radar strikes again, eh?” Jim asked. “You always have to be the first at a fire, don’t you, Claire? You’re making the fire department look bad, you know.”

Jim called me Radar after that character on the old TV show *M\*A\*S\*H*. Radar was the kid with the teddy bear. He knew what was happening before anyone else did. Like Radar, I was often the first on the scene when someone was in trouble.

Jim shook his head and chuckled. “You’re just like your mother.”

I cringed. My mother was convinced she was a “remote viewer.” She thought she could see with her mind events that were happening far away. Mom often called up the police with “tips” to help them solve their cases.

I knew the cops thought she was a crackpot. Jim was about the only emergency worker in town who took her seriously. Then again, I think he was still a little in love with her. He'd dated Mom after she divorced Dad.

"Believe me," I told him. "I'm nothing like my mother."

Jim gave me a look like he knew better. We both turned back to the young man's blackened car. Smoke and steam still billowed from the engine.

"You hear about the Miller girl?" Jim asked me.

"Helen Miller? The woman who owns the bakery on Lakeshore Road?"

"No, her daughter, Amber." Jim took off his helmet and ran a hand through his hair. "She's missing. She went for a jog on the wilderness trail and got lost. She never came home."

I felt a chill run through me. I *knew* something about that story wasn't quite right.

“She’s seventeen,” I said, trying to shake off the feeling. “Girls that age forget to phone home. She’s likely just hanging out with her boyfriend.”

“You mean Doug Conner?” Jim shook his head. “My granddaughter told me they aren’t dating anymore. Amber broke up with him a couple of weeks ago. She had a basketball game scheduled for this afternoon. Her mom and her teammates said she’d never miss it.”

I hugged myself. “She shouldn’t be out in this weather. We’re getting snow this evening.”

“Exactly,” said Jim. “Amber won’t last the night in that forest. Search and Rescue is trying to find her now. They’ve got a camp set up at the foot of Little Mountain.”

I felt that familiar tug in my stomach again. “I’ve got to get over there,” I said. I turned away from Jim and opened my car door.

“Hey, what about Trevor?” Jim asked. “He took the day off for your date. I had to scramble to get a replacement.”

Trevor was a firefighter, a member of Jim’s team. We’d met at a house fire a couple of months earlier. I was first to arrive that time too.

“I’ll phone him,” I said. When Jim gave me *that* look, I said, “I will. I promise.”

Jim knew I’d forgotten to call Trevor when I missed our last date. That time, my gut feeling led me to a car that had just smashed into a power pole. I waited with the driver until the ambulance arrived, then went to the hospital with her. I couldn’t leave her alone in that emergency room. She didn’t have family.

“There’s no point in going to the search-and-rescue camp now,” Jim told me. “You’ll be one of the first to hear what’s happened.”

Jim was right. Matt Holden was the search manager for the area. He would

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send me a press release in the morning. I would use that to write up the story for the paper. Even so, I knew I *had* to get to that search-and-rescue base. I got in my car.

“Matt won’t want you there,” Jim called through my closed window. “He hates reporters snooping around when they’re searching.”

I knew that too, but the feeling I had now was stronger than I’d ever had before. I rolled down my window. “I’ve got to get over there,” I told Jim. “If I don’t, that girl won’t leave that forest alive.”