

BEFORE IT'S
TOO LATE

Also by Sara Driscoll

Lone Wolf

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SARA
DRISCOLL



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To my mother, Edith Danna, who opened up the magic of the creative arts for all her children by showing us the joy of books and music from our very first days. Our successes are only possible because of the gifts you gave us.

CHAPTER 1

Opening Volley: The first shots fired in a war.

The hound dog mix was found wandering alone on N Wakefield Street. Sporting a service dog vest, she dragged her leash behind her as she staggered down the sidewalk, her head sweeping from side to side as if searching for her owner. One of the neighbors, a dog owner herself, spotted the dog and lured her closer with a treat before catching her leash. It was only by chance that she noticed the note peeking out from the small plastic bone containing waste bags:

*To: Meg Jennings, Forensic Canine Unit, FBI:
IMHFL HVVGJ RVYUL HHCGW FSGGX
RAUUL LRAVS QWBQY VICPE OIRCR
GVCCX KIWNS FOCUX LGEKR JSHJI UPCHI*

The FBI's Cryptanalysis and Racketeering Records Unit wasted no time running the code through their big computers while special agents discovered the identity of the missing woman: Ms. Sandy Holmes, a veteran of the Second Iraq War who suffered from occasionally debilitating bouts of PTSD, and never went anywhere without her dog. To find the dog alone was a significant concern.

6 *Sara Driscoll*

An hour later, the cryptanalysts confirmed her disappearance as they revealed the real message behind the string of eighty capital letters addressed to the FBI search-dog handler: “Find her before she dies. Come to Washington’s House in Alexandria. The clock is ticking on her life.”

Monday, May 22, 9:44 PM
Forensic Canine Unit, J. Edgar Hoover Building
Washington, DC

“Washington’s House? Do they mean Mount Vernon?” Brian Foster asked.

Craig Beaumont nodded. The supervisory special-agent-in-charge of the Human Scent Evidence Team, part of the Forensic Canine Unit, cast his gaze around his team of handlers and dogs gathered in the bullpen. “That’s what the CRRU cryptanalysts are saying. Mount Vernon is near the city of Alexandria, and they think Ms. Holmes is being held on the property. I don’t know what we’re looking at, so I want you all to go. Scott, we’ve got the dog’s leash, so you’ll be able to use that for tracking.”

Scott Park laid a hand on the head of Theo, his lanky, droopy-eyed bloodhound. “Nothing he loves more than a good hunt.” To punctuate Scott’s words, Theo gave a huge ear-slapping head shake, his jowls flapping in concert.

Meg Jennings stared down at the driver’s license photo of the missing woman, which she gripped in one white-knuckled hand. “Craig, is there anything that indicates why he sent the message to me? I don’t even know this woman.”

“Nothing so far, and I really don’t like the fact that one of my team has been specifically named in this. Stay in pairs for now. I don’t want anyone on their own until we

know what's going on. The last thing I need is my people brought out to a site, only to be picked off."

The teams doubled up—Brian and his German shepherd, Lacey, with Meg and her black Labrador, Hawk; Scott and Theo partnered with Lauren Wycliffe and her border collie, Rocco—and set out. The drive was just a half hour down the George Washington Parkway, but they'd only been on the road for ten minutes when Meg's phone rang through her SUV's audio system.

"Jennings."

"Meg, we've got a problem." Craig's voice boomed through the speakers.

Meg and Brian exchanged a sideways glance. "More than our missing victim?"

"We might be sending you to the wrong place."

Meg checked her mirrors and then smoothly pulled into the right-hand lane. "The Beltway is coming up. Do I need to redirect?"

Craig paused as if weighing his decision. "Get off, go west, and then circle back north on I-395."

"Where are we going?" Brian asked.

"Arlington."

"The county or the cemetery?" Meg shot them down the exit ramp and then merged into Beltway traffic. "What happened to George Washington's house?"

"The coded message never said, 'George,' just 'Washington.' One of the cryptanalysts wanted to make sure we weren't missing anything obvious, so he ran the message by a buddy of his, a history professor at Georgetown University, without telling him why the information was important."

"Unless the buddy is an idiot, he's going to question his FBI friend asking such a left-field question," Brian muttered under his breath.

8 *Sara Driscoll*

“What?” Craig’s echoing voice filled the passenger compartment.

“Nothing,” Meg said, shooting Brian a look that clearly said, *Behave*. “What did the professor say?”

“He said Washington could also be George Washington Parke Custis, Martha Washington’s grandson and the father-in-law of Robert E. Lee.”

“Lee’s mansion on the grounds of Arlington Cemetery. You think that’s the clue?”

“This guy does. He says Arlington County used to be called Alexandria County, but the name was changed in 1920 because it was too confusing also having a city in Virginia named Alexandria. He said Custis’s mansion went to his daughter and therefore, upon Custis’s death, to Lee. Mount Vernon never occurred to this guy.”

“But it could still be right,” Brian reasoned.

“It could, which is why Lauren and Scott are still headed there. Scott’s got the leash, which means you won’t have anything on hand to provide scent, so I know this makes it a bigger challenge for you—air-scenting and tracking an unknown target. Get to Arlington. Emergency Services is waiting to let you in. Move fast. As the note says, ‘the clock is ticking,’ and we just lost time.” The line went dead.

Meg flicked a glance at Brian, seeing the unease she felt reflected in his eyes, and pressed down harder on the accelerator.

*Monday, May 22, 10:23 PM
Arlington National Cemetery
Arlington, Virginia*

They arrived at Arlington National Cemetery hours after it had officially closed. The grounds of the cemetery were dark, lit only by the light of a full moon; however,

the main entrance was ablaze with lights. Several Arlington Emergency Services vehicles lined the main driveway. They ushered Meg's SUV through the main gates and then jogged over to meet the K-9 handlers as they let their dogs out of the SUV's special compartment and shouldered their search-and-rescue packs.

"Jennings and Foster?"

"That's us." Brian snapped Lacey's lead onto her FBI vest. "What are we looking at here? Are we expecting any one inside the grounds?"

"We've cleared the cemetery of all emergency personnel. Professional military mourners who attended today's burials, as well as grounds and admin personnel who were in during regular hours, went home hours ago. The only person who should be on the premises is the officer on duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Please try not to disturb him, unless absolutely necessary."

"We'll let the dogs lead us," Meg said. "But if they don't go in that direction, we won't interfere." She turned to Brian. "You and Lacey go north, and then circle around to the west and then south. I'll go south first and then circle around from there."

The handlers were of equal rank, but because of Meg's past experience as an officer with the Richmond PD, she naturally took the lead, which suited Brian just fine. "Check. Lacey, come." Brian jogged off, disappearing into the gloom outside the circle of lights surrounding them. Meg saw him pause inside the far gate by the gold shield of the US Marine Corps as he unclipped Lacey's leash. He flipped on his small, powerful flashlight; then he bent down to her, giving her the command to search, and she was off, Brian following at a light jog.

"Is there anything we can do?" the officer asked as Meg turned back to Hawk.

"Just stay out of the grounds for now. We need to find

the only other person inside, except for the officer at the Tomb. We'll let you know if we need assistance. Hawk, come."

They walked away from the lights and officers and into the darkness. As Brian had done, she paused by the massive wrought-iron gates and removed Hawk's lead. She ran a hand down his back and met his gaze. "Find her, Hawk. Find Sandy." Hawk tipped his nose into the cool evening breeze momentarily, and then trotted down the road, into the darkness. She turned on her flashlight and followed.

Meg followed Hawk, pacing herself, knowing this could be a long search, if they were even in the right place. The cemetery was over six hundred acres—just less than one square mile—but packed with over four hundred thousand graves, monuments, outbuildings, an amphitheater, and a mansion. They might have to cover all that ground two or three times over in pursuit of an elusive wisp of scent, just to start the search proper.

Meg found herself studying Hawk's gait, looking for any impairment. He'd only been back on the job a few weeks, after being shot during their last case. It was only a flesh wound, but the hairless white scar arrowing over his hindquarter was a constant reminder of how close she'd come to losing him. She'd already lost one K-9 partner in her career; she was not about to lose another. But Hawk was strong and healed quickly, showing no sign of weakness as he loped along.

Hawk suddenly cut to the right, off the pavement of Roosevelt Drive and onto grass. As he arrowed between the pale, ghostly rows of headstones, Meg's eyes were drawn to the distant lights parting the darkness. Ahead, John F. Kennedy's eternal flame danced on its stone base in ever-shifting tones of red and orange. Above it, high on the hill keeping watch over the dead below, General Robert E.

Lee's majestic columned mansion shone, lit by both spotlights and moonlight.

Come to Washington's House in Alexandria.

She turned back to her dog and the task at hand. "Find her, Hawk," Meg encouraged. She was very conscious of the fact she had to let Hawk lead, but the house was right there. She could help keep his spirits up and spur him on to—

He suddenly cut left, crossing back over Roosevelt Drive and then onto grass again. Meg cast one last look at the Greek Revival mansion and then turned her eyes back to her dog. *Trust him. He knows what to do.*

They ran through the moon-tipped granite headstones, and under the spreading boughs of trees, some hundreds of years old. Hawk's breath was coming louder now, but his gait was steady, only occasionally slowing to scent the air, then speeding back up again as if he understood the press of time.

To the west, the Memorial Amphitheater glowed at the top of stark white steps. Meg couldn't see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but she'd been there in person enough times to picture the solitary soldier on his march, his rifle on his shoulder, his steps sure. Honoring the dead and their memory every hour of every day.

Ahead, Hawk started to zigzag between the rows of stones, and Meg focused sharply on his body language. Up to now, he'd been running in a fairly straight line in search of scent. But now as his pattern changed and he wove back and forth, Meg knew he'd found part of a scent cone and was trying to distinguish the outer limits of the cone and the strengthening concentration as they closed in on the source. She praised him quietly, but hung back to let him work without distraction. Time was dripping away and every second could mean the difference between life and death.

As Hawk crossed Eisenhower Drive, his search became

more focused, his body tense, his movements more sure and directed. In the peripheral light of her flashlight, Meg noticed the sharpness of the engraving in the headstones and, slowing down, shone the light on several nearby stones, noting the recent death dates. Meg pulled the radio off her belt. "Brian?"

A moment's pause, then, "I'm here. Found something?"

"I think so. Hawk's caught a scent. Where are you?"

"Lacey circled us behind Arlington House, but there's nothing here. Maybe this isn't the Washington House the guy meant. Where are you?"

"Heading into section sixty, due east of the Memorial Amphitheater. From the look of things here, this is where the recent burials are. I've seen several from this year and last. Just wanted to give you a heads-up. I may need you."

"I'll be there. We'll stay on this until you say otherwise. I know where you are and can be there within a few minutes."

"Thanks. Over and out."

Hawk ran faster now, his nose skimming the ground, and Meg had to scramble a bit to catch up. Then, all of a sudden, he angled to the right, straight toward a fresh grave. Clearly, it was from a funeral earlier that day; even in the diffuse light of the flashlight beam, the grass was pressed down on both sides of the grave as if trampled by many feet. While dirt filled the grave to the grass line, it had yet to be turfed over. Out of respect, Meg started to circle around the grave, not wishing to disturb whoever had been freshly laid to rest. But she jerked to a halt when Hawk gave a single sharp bark and launched himself directly at the grave, landing at one end, his front paws already furiously digging.

She's in the grave? Buried alive?

Meg frantically scanned the area, her gaze coming to rest on a landscaping truck, twenty feet away, parked at

the side of the road. The groundskeeping team had likely run out of time to close the grave completely before dark and had left everything in place to finish up tomorrow. She sprinted across the grass, darting between headstones, her gaze locked on the shovels standing upright in the truck bed. Snatching a shovel, she raced back to the grave, pulling her radio free.

“Brian, come in.” She didn’t even give him a full second before she barked his name again. “Brian!”

“I’m here. What’s going on?” he gasped with a panting breath. “Lacey, hold.”

“Get down here. I think Hawk’s found her. He zeroed in on a fresh grave here in section sixty. He’s digging, trying to get her out.”

“She’s *in* the grave? Holy sh—” He cut off his own profanity and she could hear the sound of his footfalls speeding up. “Lacey, come! I’ll be there as soon as I can. Keep your flashlight on hand to guide me in.”

“Will do.” Meg cut the transmission, dropping her radio and flashlight onto the damp grass and dug in with her shovel as fast as she could, tossing spadefuls of earth out on the grass. Beside her, Hawk kept his head down, digging faster, a cloud of dirt flying out from between his back legs. Every once in a while, he’d tip his nose down as if to reconfirm the scent and then would be back at it, if possible with even greater urgency.

Meg’s head shot up when she heard Brian’s call and turned to see light bobbling about fifty feet away. She picked up her flashlight and waved it at him. “Over here.” Brian jogged closer and she jabbed an index finger in the direction of the truck. “Grab a shovel.”

Brian tore off toward the pickup as Lacey jumped in to join Hawk, immediately starting to dig. Returning, Brian dropped his flashlight on the grass, light spilling into the slowly deepening hole. For a full five minutes, there were

no words, just the scrabble of paws and the repetitive stab of shovels.

Thump.

Meg and Brian froze as his shovel made contact with something solid with a hollow echo.

“Finally,” he muttered. “Lacey, time to get out, girl.”

“Hawk, out.” Meg motioned for him to jump out. “You’re awesome, but this job is for us.” She patted a grimy hand on the grass at the edge of the four-foot hole. “Good boy,” she praised as he leapt out, Lacey on his heels. She met Brian’s eyes. “Let’s finish this.”

The relatively unpacked dirt allowed them to work quickly, revealing the top of the dark wood coffin. Brian cleared the hinges on one side, while Meg worked on the other, digging back far enough for them to perch on a narrow band of dirt to open the box.

They tossed their shovels on the grass, crowding together at the side of the coffin.

The silence around them and at their feet made Meg’s stomach clench nervously.

Together they bent down, curling fingers under the rim of the coffin lid to heft the heavy lid upward. Hinges protested slightly, the dirt-caked hardware jamming briefly, but then they yielded and the lid lifted smoothly.

The wash of illumination from the flashlights at the edge of the grass fell over the inside of the coffin where a woman lay limp. Meg dropped to her knees into the dirt, pushing aside clothing and torn strips of a satiny material, searching frantically for a pulse. Her shaking fingers slid across flesh that was still warm, smearing splotches of blood as she pushed in further.

Nothing.

“Let me try.” Brian shouldered in beside her, his hands sliding in under hers.

Meg pulled back, horrified, taking in the contents of the coffin, as Brian desperately looked for signs of life.

There were two bodies in the coffin. A soldier buried in full dress blues, complete with shiny brass buttons and devices, light blue cord, and a starched white shirt. Above the shirt was nearly translucent skin on one side of the face and catastrophic burns on the other. Here was a man, clearly lost in the fury of battle, meant to finally rest in peace in his solitary grave, surrounded by countless row upon row of his fellow soldiers.

Solitary no more.

The woman from the picture Craig had showed them lay on top of him, jammed into the small space below the lid. She wore black yoga pants, sneakers, and a hooded sweatshirt—exactly what you might wear on a cool spring evening while walking your dog. Exactly how Meg herself dressed to walk Hawk more times than she could count.

“Goddamn it.” Brian sat back on his haunches beside Meg, his shoulders drooping, his head bent. “She’s gone.”

“She’s still warm.” Meg’s words were hoarse, forced through a throat thick with emotion.

“Not fully. I’m no expert, but we didn’t just miss her. We were close, but not that close. Maybe a half hour ago. Possibly less.”

Meg shifted back to sit on the edge of the grass. “He buried her alive. She was a pawn in his game. A disposable pawn.”

Brian pushed to his feet, stepping clear of the grave. “I’m going to call Craig. And the Evidence Response Team.”

“We need to bring Lauren and Scott back in.”

Brian’s hand dropped to land briefly on Meg’s shoulder. “Craig will know what to do. Climb out of there. Nothing more we can do for her now, and the crime scene team will

already be put out that we disturbed the scene as much as we did.”

Meg clambered to her feet to stand beside the grave as Brian moved away, but she couldn't take her eyes off the woman. The black-and-white driver's license photo had given her some idea, but now the shock hit her full force: pale skin; dull, staring blue eyes; long, straight black hair. Black Irish, just like Meg and her sister, Cara.

It was like looking down at her own corpse.

The combined light of their flashlights told a tale of terror in horrifying detail: from the woman's fingertips, nails cruelly ripped off, the ends of her fingers worn to stumps and studded with splinters of wood, bloodied flesh torn away to reveal the ghostly glint of bone; to the crimson droplets splattered over face and clothes; to the ragged gouges in the lining of the coffin, right through to the wooden lid.

They'd come too late. She'd died while they wasted precious time.

A soft whine drew her gaze down to the black Labrador at her side, restlessly shifting his weight. Hawk, still in his dirt-caked navy-and-yellow FBI vest, looked up at her with sad eyes. He'd come to find life, but all they'd found was death. For a search-and-rescue dog, nothing was more devastating.

She crouched down beside him, slinging an arm around him to tip her head against his. “I know, bud, I know. You tried so hard and did everything right. We let you down too. I'm sorry.” Her gaze slid across the open slice of earth to fall over tumbled black hair and deathly-white skin. “I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Footsteps sounded behind her. “Craig's bringing Lauren and Scott back in. And agents and Evidence Response are on their way.”

She turned to find Brian standing behind her. Even in the dim light, his green eyes seemed even more luminous than usual, highlighted by the paleness of his skin beneath his untidy dark hair. He held out his hand, as filthy as hers, and met her eyes. They'd worked, side by side, as part of the FBI's Human Scent Evidence Team for so long, tracking suspects and rescuing the lost, that words weren't needed. They could read each other like open books, and Meg knew instinctively Brian was suffering as much as she.

She slid her hand into his, fingers clamping tight, and let him pull her to her feet. But once upright, he didn't release her hand. Shoulder to shoulder, they stood with their dogs, trying vainly to fathom the unfathomable.

Meg finally broke the silence with the question that had haunted her for hours, but now only grew more complex and horrifying. "Why me?"

"I don't know." Brian rubbed his free hand over his forehead, unmindful of the dark smudge his fingers left behind.

"I don't just mean the coded message. *Look* at her."

His gaze flicked sideways at her, then down into the grave, but he remained silent.

"Am I crazy? Am I the only one seeing it?" she pushed.

Suddenly he turned on her, the anger from a night gone badly wrong glinting in his eyes and in the punch of his words. "You need me to say it? That he not only sent you a message to find her, but she looks like you as well? That he sent you in search of your own death?"

Meg expected his words to compound the darkness crowding her, but instead, to her surprise, the gloom lightened fractionally. *I'm not crazy*. She gripped his hand tighter. "I knew you'd be with me on this."

Solidarity met her grip, strength for strength. "Always." Anger washed away under the weight of the same guilt

and exhaustion she felt, and his voice was calmer now. “This scares me. Assuming it’s a guy, what the hell is he trying to prove?”

“I don’t know. But we have to find out before he takes someone else.”

“You think he intends to take more?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I have a bad feeling. He goes to all this trouble, leads us on this kind of wild-goose chase, and plans on only killing once? No. He’ll strike again, and intuition tells me he won’t wait long.”

Thirty minutes later, Meg and Brian stood under the spreading boughs of a nearby massive white oak in the diffuse wash of spotlights when they heard a familiar voice call out to them. They turned to find Lauren, blond and statuesque, striding toward them; Rocco was trotting at her side. Not far behind slouched the tall, lanky form of Scott, with Theo heeling beside him.

“Craig filled us in, but neither of us could just go home. We needed to come, to see the end of this.”

Meg’s gaze traveled across the thirty feet separating them from the grave, now surrounded by Evidence Response Team members in white Kevlar suits, brilliantly lit by a half-dozen portable spotlights. “We’re staying out of their way while they’re collecting evidence and the body.”

“Craig told us some of it. She was buried in a soldier’s grave?”

“Arlington’s executive director came in when he heard what was happening and he stopped by and shared some information with us. The US Army officer in the grave, Lieutenant Henry Ranger, was buried this afternoon in a ceremony with full honors. He was one of twenty-three burials today and the groundskeeping team filled the grave, but it got dark before they could seal the grave with

turf. They left the truck to come back first thing tomorrow morning to finish up.”

“And in the meantime, someone got into the cemetery with the victim. How? The gates would have been locked.”

“They were. But the cemetery is bounded by a three-foot fieldstone wall. The front sections of the cemetery have four feet of wrought-iron spikes for additional security, but the back sections of the cemetery are just the original wall. You can't drive in, but you can get close, park off the street, and hop right over the wall. Our perp would have done it with the victim tossed over his shoulder or in some sort of bag to disguise her. If she was unconscious and still, no one might have thought twice about it. And assuming he went in after sundown, no one would have seen him.”

“The cemetery is closed at dusk,” Brian added, “but they know sometimes people are in there when it's closed. They rarely have any problems because of it, and if Emergency Services finds them and asks them to leave, they usually do without any fuss. But this time, nobody saw anything.”

“So he came in with the victim,” Scott said, “found an open grave by chance, dug it up, put her in, and closed it again?”

“If he scouted out the area at all, then he would get a feel for how funerals work here.” Meg looked out into the darkness away from the blinding spotlights. “He'd know where the majority of recent burials are, and he'd know this section is where most of the War on Terror burials are located. He'd know how they handle closing the graves and how often graves are unfinished at the end of the day. He could just look like a mourner coming later in the day and leaving just at closing time, but he'd be scoping out his surroundings and making plans. If he took her from somewhere nearby, he could have confirmed the open

grave before the cemetery closed tonight, and then doubled back later with the victim.”

“Convenient of the grounds staff to leave that truck right there overnight.” Lauren studied the truck and the landscaping equipment protruding from the back. “Although you have to think, he must have had a backup plan.”

“Any folding shovel would have done the job, but why use something like that when you have professional landscaping tools right there? It wouldn’t have taken him that long if he worked fast. And I suspect we’re looking at someone with a certain amount of strength to be able to kidnap victims and carry them around like this.”

“It took you and me, what . . . around seven or eight minutes in total?” When Meg nodded, Brian continued. “One guy, relatively strong, maybe fifteen minutes max to dig it out and less to put it back. I never noticed traces of dirt on the grass around the grave, but you were already into digging when I got there, and no one cared where the dirt went except out. Did you notice?”

“No. Hawk and I were so focused on digging, we didn’t have time to take in our surroundings in detail.” She sighed, discouragement riding heavily on the mournful sound. “Maybe we’d have more information if we had.” She sagged back against the tree trunk. “I just can’t help but feel we could have done better. But how? If we’d found the dog earlier? Solved the riddle faster? Figured out its meaning right from the start? How could we have stopped this?”

“We couldn’t.” Meg looked up sharply, but Lauren kept her voice level and calm. Lauren was always the least emotional of the group, but Meg could sense she was shaken nonetheless. “We worked as fast as we could with limited information. And when that information was inconclusive, we split up to better our chances.”

“If we’d gone for Arlington right off the bat, we might have gotten here in time.”

“You can second-guess yourself through every step we took tonight, but that’s not going to bring her back.”

“Lauren’s right,” Scott agreed. “Everyone did the best they could. The only thing we can do now is figure out how to do better the next time.”

“Because there will be a next time.” Brian’s tone was grim as his eyes traveled back toward the grave where death, old and new, lay. “Whoever he is, he’s not even close to being done.”