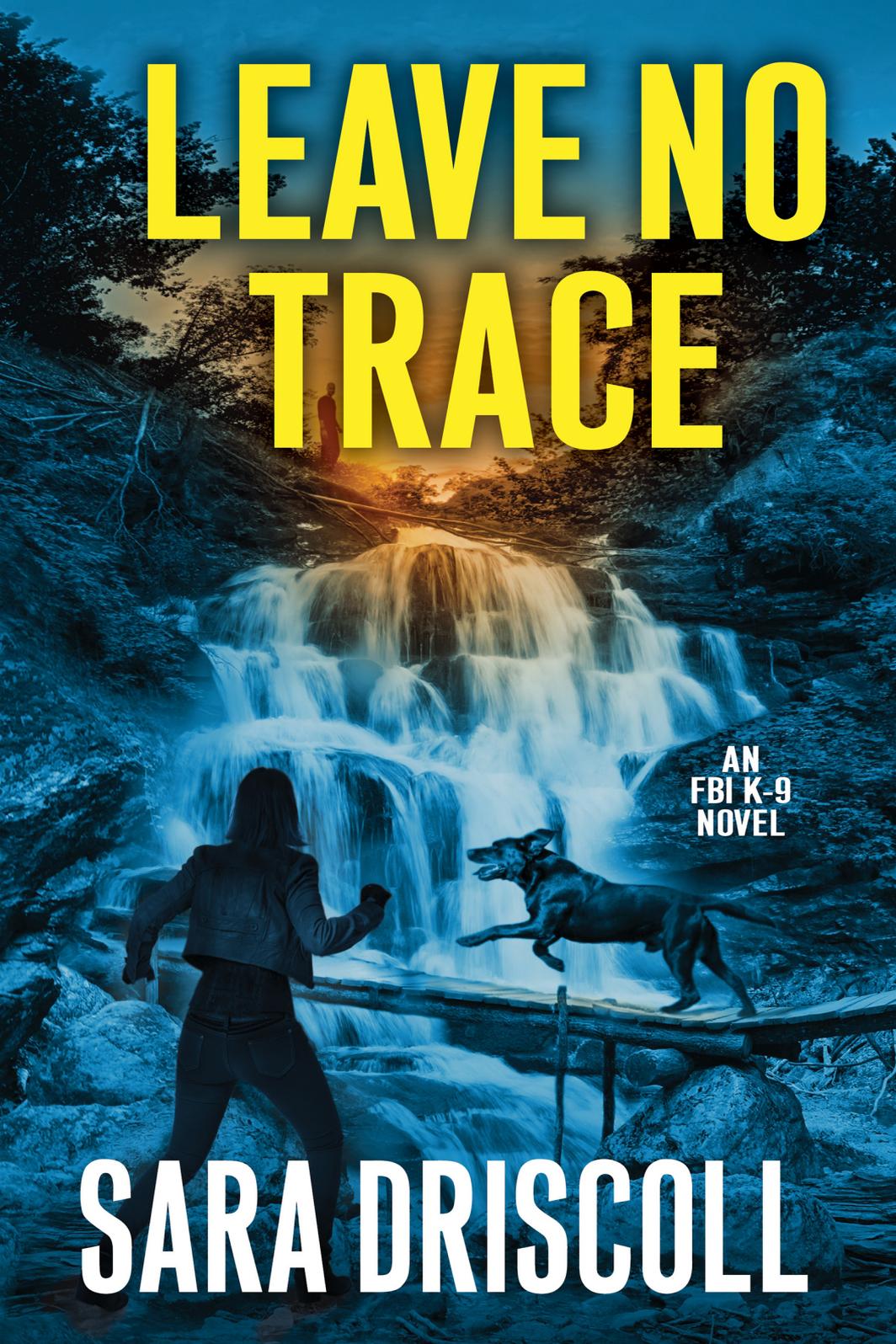


# LEAVE NO TRACE

A woman in a dark jacket and pants stands on a wooden bridge over a waterfall, looking towards the water. A black dog is running across the bridge towards her. In the background, a person in a red shirt stands on a path leading up the waterfall. The scene is set in a forest with trees and rocks. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greens, with a warm orange glow emanating from the waterfall area.

AN  
FBI K-9  
NOVEL

SARA DRISCOLL

# LEAVE NO TRACE

SARA  
DRISCOLL



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# CHAPTER 1

*Flying Head:* An undead monster of Iroquois tribal legend portrayed as a huge, disembodied head that flies through the air pursuing humans to devour.

*Monday, April 8, 11:10 AM*  
*Georgia State Route 515*  
*Blue Ridge, Georgia*

“**T**ake the next exit.” Meg Jennings pointed to the sign on the shoulder indicating the turn for Old US 76 ahead before scanning her map app. “This says we’re about ten minutes out.”

She twisted around to peer through the mesh divider separating the canine compartment in the rear of the SUV from the driver and passenger. Two sets of eyes blinked back at her—Hawk, her black Labrador, and Lacey, Brian Foster’s German Shepherd. The dogs were lying side by side in companionable ease, both wearing their navy and yellow FBI K-9 work vests.

“They okay back there?” Brian asked, glancing toward the compartment.

“Keep your eyes on the road. They’re doing fine, but they won’t be if you look away the moment a deer runs into our path. And neither will we.” Meg playfully jabbed

her left elbow lightly against his upper arm. “Crazy male driver.”

Brian tossed her a mock glare. “You see those dogs?”

“Better than you can.”

“Those dogs are the picture of relaxation. They know they’re in capable hands and don’t have a care in the world.” He risked another sideways look at Meg. “Which is more than I can say for you. Why are you so tense?”

“Your driving’s enough to make anyone tense.”

“You’re a riot.” He shook his head in feigned disgust, then pushed back the dark hair that fell over his forehead. “You were tense before we got in the car. Actually, it’s been since we got off the plane and you turned on your phone. You’ve had this whole ride to spill your proverbial guts to me. And yet you haven’t.” He curled his fingers several times in a give-it-to-me gesture. “Go.”

“What if I’m feeling apprehensive about this case?”

Brian’s bark of laughter earned him a slit-eyed glare from Meg. “Try again,” he said. “It’s me. You know you’re going to tell me sooner or later, anyway, so why not now? You’ll feel better. . . .” He singsonged the last.

“What are you, my shrink?”

“You don’t need a shrink when you have me. Now, spill it, girlfriend. Before we have to get in the zone on this case.” He shot a glance at the map on her phone, crawling forward with their progress. “In ten minutes.”

Meg sighed and rolled her eyes. “Not going to let this go, are you?”

“I’m like a dog with a bone. Just ask Ryan. He can’t ever keep a secret from me.” Brian took the turn onto Old US 76. “Save yourself the trouble and tell me.”

“Fine.” Meg slumped down in her seat and stared out the window as the forest flanking them on both sides for the last hour and a half gave way to cabin rentals on one side and a car dealership on the other. “Todd texted me.”

When the silence dragged on for more than five seconds, Brian tapped her knee twice. “And . . . ? Getting a text from lover boy should be a good thing, not bad. Or are you fighting?”

“We are *not* fighting. Well . . . not exactly.”

“Now we’re getting to it. What are you not exactly fighting about?”

“Remember when I told you Todd wants us to move in together?”

“Of course.”

“Well, he keeps trying to find places.”

“This is good.”

“Unless none of them suit.”

“None of them? Not a single one?” Incredulity rang in Brian’s tone.

“We have specific needs. Todd needs it to be close to downtown so it’s convenient to the firehouse. I need a backyard for Hawk. We need it to be local to a green space for exercise and training. I’d like to still be close to Cara.” She paused for a moment. “And I need to be able to afford it. Turn right here on Industrial.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He took the turn, the SUV angling higher as they wound up the hill. “The money could be the hardest part with those requirements. Although the other points don’t make it easy, either, not in DC. As far as staying close to your sister, that’s kind of going to depend on her, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And the fact that my moving out means she’s now forced to be in the housing market is also weighing on me. She’ll have to carry the whole cost of a house on her own. That was the original point of us buying a house together—individually we couldn’t afford anything much, but together we could manage something nice in Arlington. It’s not downtown DC, but it works for us.”

“You’re dragging your feet because you’re feeling guilty

about leaving Cara behind. Why isn't she shacking up with McCord? Surely the *Washington Post's* crack investigative reporter must be pulling in a decent salary."

"Because he hasn't asked her."

"You do realize it's not 1950, right? She can ask *him*."

"She almost did, but she doesn't want to rush their relationship because of finances. She's afraid he might see it as angling for his paycheck versus him if she asked him now."

"McCord would get it. He's a pretty down-to-earth guy. I mean, not as down to earth as Todd, but firefighters are a breed unto themselves." He flashed her a saucy grin, his green eyes laughing as he wiggled his eyebrows. "Thank God for that."

Despite her grim mood, she chuckled. "Only you would say that."

"Any gay man or straight woman with eyes in their head would say that. Now that I've lightened your mood, continue."

"Todd texted he's found yet another place he'd like me to look at."

"How many would this make?"

Meg's shrug accompanied a vague hand gesture. "I don't know. Twelve? Fourteen?"

Brian winced. "If he thinks you're stalling, I can see his point. And that's definitely what it looks like. He asked you to move in together last November. You're pushing five months now."

"I'm trying to find the right place. And yes, before you point it out again, because I know you will, I *am* feeling guilty about leaving Cara behind."

"You're not leaving her behind. She's a thirty-year-old woman; she can live on her own. She had to know your living situation wouldn't last forever. But fess up, you're also feeling guilty about Hawk. He loves living with Saki

and Blink. You're worried about him getting lonely on his own."

Meg thought back to that morning before the call came in—Hawk, curled up on the dog bed in a pile with Saki, Cara's mini blue-nose pit bull, and Blink, her retired brindle racing greyhound. "Yeah, I am. We could always get another dog for Hawk. But then I'd be leaving that dog alone every day when Hawk and I went to work, and that's not fair, either. Take this right." Knowing they were getting close, Meg gathered her long black hair into a twist, wound it into a loose bun, and pulled a hair elastic off her wrist to secure it. "Then the next right after it onto Snake Nation Road."

Brian's lip curl paired with a shudder nearly made her laugh again.

"Seriously? Snake Nation? Maybe Lauren and Scott would be better suited to this case," Brian said, referring to the other two members of the FBI's Human Scent Evidence Team, along with their dogs, Rocco and Theo. "It's not too late to give them a call."

"No such luck. It's all you and me."

"Is that really what it's called? You're not trying to distract me from your tale of housing woes with snakes?"

Meg scanned the surrounding forest, a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees that hinted at their altitude in the Blue Ridge Mountains. "It's springtime and we're headed up into the wilderness at the peak of Rocky Mountain. I'm not sure snakes are going to be our biggest threat here. I think a bigger risk will be all the moms out there with their babies. Bears, bobcats, coyotes, foxes. We're going to have to steer clear of those, especially now."

"You're not making me feel any better. So, did you answer Todd's text?"

"Not yet. I'm running out of excuses to say no, aren't I?"

“You are. You told Todd your concerns?”

“Yeah. And he’s trying to take it all into account.”

“You may have set the bar too high. It sounds like Todd’s been more than patient, but he won’t wait forever.” He gave her forearm a comforting squeeze. “Seriously, you know I give you a hard time because I can and because it’s fun, but don’t blow this one. He’s a good man, and you’re lucky to have him. To have each other. Make it work. Find a way to compromise and meet him halfway. You won’t regret it.”

“Is that how you and Ryan do it?”

“Hell, no. It’s my way or the highway, babe.” He laughed, belying his own words. “Of course we do. It’s not always comfortable, even after five years of marriage. But in the end, we’re better for it.”

“Okay, okay. I hear you. Thanks, Dr. Foster.”

“Anytime. I want my best girl living her best life. And on that note, bring on the snakes and the black bears.”

“That is *not* living my best life.”

“You’re telling me. Are we getting close?”

“Your next left is Grandeur Drive. That’s where we’re headed. We’re looking for number 2301.” Meg leaned forward to peer out the windshield. Stands of trees flew by as they drove higher into the hills, only broken periodically by a driveway on either side. Then, the forest abruptly opened up on their right side to a long stretch of grass, leading back toward a sprawling ranch-style house. “That’s it there.”

Brian whistled as his eyes locked on the line of cars in the driveway. “I thought we’d have a few officers, but I didn’t think there would be this many.” All levity was gone from his tone.

A quick scan told Meg they had all levels of law enforcement in attendance: A white cruiser from the Blue Ridge Police Department. A white and gold Fannin County Sher-

iff's Department SUV. A bright blue cruiser with the insignia of the Georgia State Patrol. And a single black SUV that Meg would bet her next paycheck was the FBI agent they were to meet for the case.

When the murder victim was a cop, it was all hands on deck. No matter the day-to-day interagency squabbles, when one of their own was lost, law enforcement wrapped a thin blue line around the case and held firm.

Now Meg, Brian, Hawk, and Lacey would close that circle.

They were silent as they pulled into the driveway behind the black SUV. Getting out of their vehicle, they circled around to the back hatch to retrieve their go bags—the knapsacks they wore on every search that contained everything they or the dogs might need for safety, first aid, hydration, or sustenance to fuel their efforts. Meg ensured her Glock 19 was safely secured in the holster on her right hip and then clipped her can of bear deterrent on her left.

“You realize that wearing this stuff is like daring Mother Nature to send us a bear,” Brian said, putting on his own holster of bear spray.

“No, not wearing the stuff is like daring Mother Nature to send us a bear. Bringing it along probably guarantees we won't see one.”

“Suits me.”

They let the dogs out, snapped on their leashes, and started up the thin strip of driveway not occupied by police cars, the dogs heeling easily at their knees.

As they approached the house, Meg realized what looked like a long, rambling bungalow was actually a two-story dwelling built into the side of the hill with the entire lower level hidden from the front of the house. As they topped the rise, they saw a cluster of men and one woman gathered at the end of the driveway.

The only person not in uniform turned at their ap-

proach. A man with light bronze skin, dark hair and eyes, and wearing a navy-blue suit that instantly pegged him as a federal agent broke away from the crowd, holding out his hand. “Special Agent Sam Torres, out of Atlanta. You must be Beaumont’s team,” he said, referring to Special Agent-in-Charge Craig Beaumont, who ran the FBI’s Human Scent Evidence Team as part of the Forensic Canine Unit out of the J. Edgar Hoover Building in DC.

“We are. I’m Meg Jennings and this is Brian Foster.” Meg held out her hand to Torres and he shook it with a firm grip before repeating the action with Brian. “These are our search-and-rescue dogs, Hawk and Lacey. Can you bring us up to speed so we can get started before the trail gets any colder?”

Torres started introductions around the group. Meg studied the officers, quickly intuiting how close-knit law enforcement must be in this rural area. Each and every one of them displayed some reaction to the death—from fury to devastation to determination. Clearly, Noah Hubbert had been a valued member of this community, and his death touched them all.

Craig had given them the bare bones of the case before they left DC—Hubbert, a sergeant in Troop B of the Georgia State Patrol, had been shot and killed that morning outside his home as he was about to leave for his shift at Post 27 in Blue Ridge. What made the killing unusual was that the murder weapon wasn’t a bullet, but an arrow. By the time his wife realized his car was still in the driveway and her husband was dead, the shooter was long gone.

Despite the regional law enforcement presence, because the case concerned the death of a state police officer and because of LEOKA—the federal Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted program—the case had been bumped up to the FBI field office in Atlanta.

Craig had been brought into the picture shortly after the

case had landed on Torres's desk because when Torres had learned about the case, he had immediately connected it with a similar death just ten days earlier. One death in the state at the hands of a bowhunter during turkey-hunting season was an accident. Two deaths in ten days started to look like anything but. Being familiar with the varied terrain of the Blue Ridge Mountains and knowing how a good hunter could disappear into the forest, Torres contacted Craig at the Forensic Canine Unit to see if they could send out a dog team or two to track the killer.

Hours later, Meg and Brian were on-site and ready to start.

"This is Officer Howard," Torres said. "She responded to the nine-one-one call from Sergeant Hubbert's wife."

A slender brunette with her hair tied back in a severe knot under her peaked cap nodded in response. She stood beside an older man whose collar insignia marked him as the Blue Ridge Police Chief. "I responded to the call at oh-seven-fifty this morning. When I arrived here at the house, I found Sergeant Hubbert down the hill lying in the grass." She pointed down the slope to a grassy area cordoned off with police tape. The crimson stain drenching the grass was unmistakable. "Sergeant Hubbert was already deceased. At first glance the entry wound looked like it was from a rifle, but Mrs. Hubbert said she didn't hear a shot. That's when I realized it was an arrow strike. But I couldn't find the arrow until I put together that he was hit when he was about to get in his car up here on the driveway. The arrow passed clean through his body, and he fell and rolled downhill."

"So where is the—" Brian cut himself off as he turned to look behind, only to spot the arrow embedded in a tree. "Holy . . ." His voice trailed off as he studied the arrow. "That thing must be close to three feet long. And it passed through him?"

Brian's tone radiated the horror Meg felt.

"Yes. Depending on the draw weight, the amount of force behind an arrow, especially one with that kind of arrowhead, is significant," said Fannin County Sheriff Don Maxwell. "It would also leave a hole several inches wide behind because it's a mechanical, expandable arrowhead."

"Meaning . . ." Brian prompted.

"When the arrow is shot, the blades of an expanding broadhead are folded back so the arrow is aerodynamic. But when it hits the target, the mechanical blades snap out, slicing through anything in the way. Remember an arrow spins when it flies, so it would be like getting hit by a three-inch high-speed drill. It would simply carve a tunnel through soft tissue."

Brian shuddered and exchanged a disgusted look with Meg.

"He didn't live long afterward," Maxwell finished.

"I guess not," Meg murmured. She cleared her throat to raise her voice. "So, what you're telling us is caution is warranted and we're dealing with a very dangerous suspect."

"Without a doubt."

"Hawk, come." Meg strode to the tree and studied the arrow. The narrow black shaft was embedded in the tree at a slight downward angle. Four colored plastic fletches circled the base of the arrow. The arrowhead was barely visible in the tree trunk, but as she leaned in, Meg could just see the expandable blades Maxwell described. She straightened and turned back to the men. "Neither of us are hunters. Can someone tell us what we're looking at? It may give us some insight into the suspect."

Maxwell looked over at a stout man in a powder-blue uniform shirt, gray trousers, captain's bars on his shoul-

ders, and wearing the flat-brimmed hat of state patrol. "Wilcox, you know more about this than the rest of us."

"Yup, been bowhunting for over thirty years." Captain Wilcox moved to stand on the other side of the arrow from Meg.

Meg stared pointedly at Brian and gave a head jerk. *Get over here.*

He grimaced, but called Lacey over to stand with him beside Meg.

"This here's a custom-made carbon fiber arrow," Wilcox began.

"You can tell just by looking at it?" Meg asked.

"Sure. I can tell you, these components are top of the line. And most arrows, certainly all the commercial ones, have only three fletchings. This one has four."

"That gives the shooter an advantage?"

"Makes the arrow quieter. And with four vanes, you can make each one lower profile, which minimizes wind drift. Gives the arrow extra stability."

"Like if you're making an extra-long shot and want to ensure the accuracy?" Brian asked. "And you don't want your target to hear the arrow coming."

Wilcox nodded. "That's right. Granted, at three hundred feet per second on an average seventy-pound draw, even if you hear it coming, you won't actually have time to get out of the way."

"So we're looking at someone who's making their own arrows. How common is that?"

"Not unusual for serious hunters. But most don't put this much money into it. As I said, these are top-of-the-line components. Not from around here; none of our shops carry anything this fancy. These were ordered by someone and shipped in."

"Could the materials be traced?"

“Something to look at, but a lot of serious hunters and archers across the country make their own arrows. We’ll most likely find the materials were mass-produced and are nearly impossible to trace.”

Meg turned and followed the path the arrow must have flown over the hollow behind the house and over the rise as it climbed up the mountain. “Can you estimate where the shot came from?”

“Based on the direction of the arrow, I’d put the shooter”—Wilcox extended an arm and pointed toward a small, open space inside the forest line—“right about there.” He squinted at the spot, glanced at the arrow, and then returned his gaze to the tree line. “That must be about a hundred yards, maybe a little more.” He swiveled back to face Meg and Brian. “We’re talking about an expert shot. You’re going to need to be extremely careful. If you get close, this is someone who could take you out. Or your dogs. And there’s no way they’d survive a shot like that.”

Meg dropped her hand down to rest on Hawk’s sun-warmed head and tried to tamp down on the wave of fear that rose at his warning. She’d already lost one canine partner during a suspect chase. She wasn’t sure she’d survive it a second time. She took a deep breath to settle suddenly raw nerves.

Brian was still standing with his hands on his hips, staring at the break in the trees as if he’d missed the warning altogether. “Wouldn’t the shooter be visible over there?” he asked. “I mean, if the shooter can see the victim, then wouldn’t the victim be able to see the shooter?”

“Probably not,” Wilcox replied. “Most serious hunters go out in camo so they blend in and can’t be spotted. What works for deer and bears also works for people.”

“And that’s legal?”

“For bowhunting.”

“Good to know. So how armed do you think this guy is? He’ll be carrying a quiver with a dozen arrows? Two dozen?” Brian stopped dead when the officers around him chuckled or rolled their eyes. “What?”

“Definitely a city boy. As I said, this person is an expert shot,” Wilcox said. “An expert shooter can go out with only one arrow and have a successful day hunting. This isn’t like carrying ammunition. You’re not looking for someone who has an unlimited supply of arrows. They won’t need that. They might be carrying three or four at most. When you can aim like that, you don’t need many.”

“No?” Brian glanced sideways at Meg, and she could read the caution in his eyes.

“No, a single, well-placed shot is all this guy will need. So be aware—if you get within three hundred feet of him, that will be all he needs to take you out permanently.”