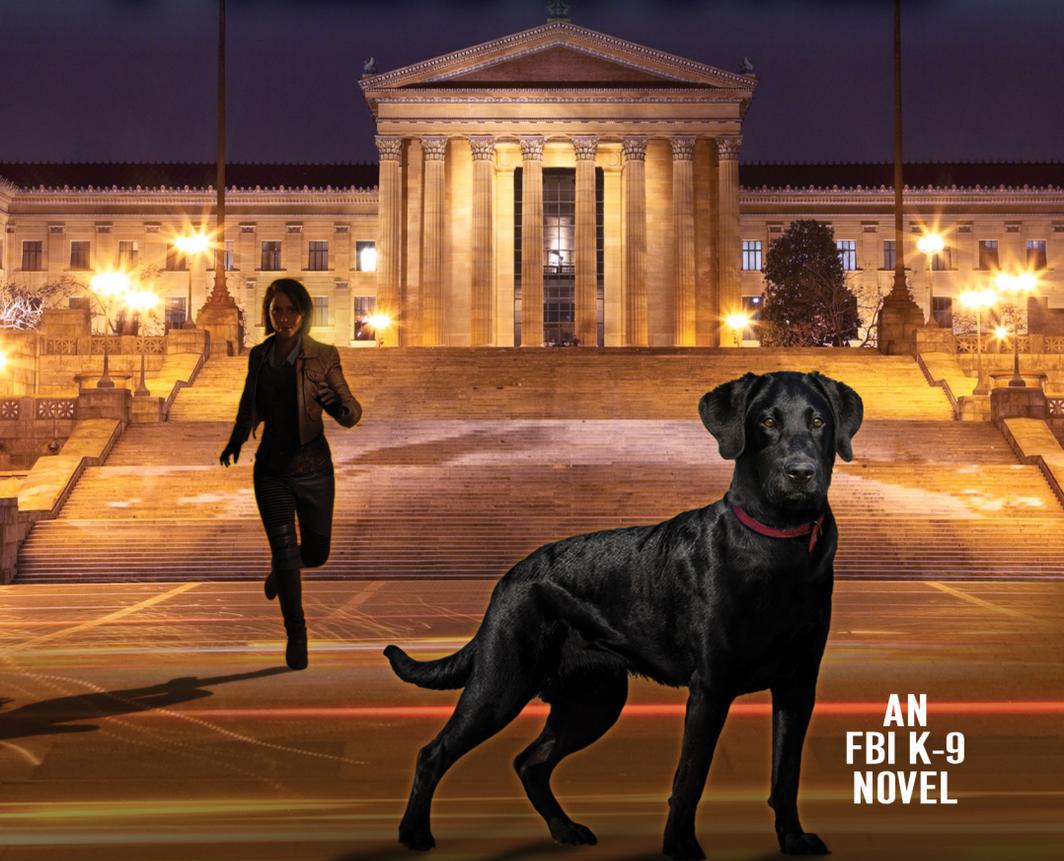


# UNDER PRESSURE



AN  
FBI K-9  
NOVEL

# SARA DRISCOLL

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**SARA DRISCOLL**



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# CHAPTER 1

*Eye Clean:* A jeweler's term for a gemstone that has no flaws visible to the naked eye.

*Saturday, July 27, 1:43 PM*  
*Jennings/McCord residence*  
*Washington, DC*

“**W**hat's this thing made of? Lead?” Stepping back from the staircase, Meg Jennings studied the two men maneuvering a massive wardrobe up the stairs. The strangled question had come from her partner, Todd Webb, on the lower end of the wardrobe and taking the brunt of the weight, while Clay McCord balanced the top and steered them up the flight of stairs.

“Oak.” McCord's voice was slightly breathless. “Been in my family for two generations. They don't build them like this anymore. It'll outlast me.”

“It'll outlast me when it slips out of my hands and crushes me on the way down,” Webb grated.

Meg took a step forward, already calculating whether she could slip in beside Webb to carry some of the weight, when he glanced sideways and winked at her. She relaxed, realizing that while the piece of furniture was heavy, to a firefighter/paramedic who routinely wore sixty pounds of

gear and carried another hundred pounds of hose to run headlong into a roaring fire, this wasn't as much of an effort as he was making out.

"Can't fool me," McCord retorted. "You have to work out for a living. Us journalism nerds have nothing on you big, brawny firefighters. All we have to lift is a keyboard."

"I figured that's why I got the heavy end. And nice try, nerd. I saw the weight set in the truck that's going in the basement."

"That's Cara's. I'm a delicate flower."

"That's you, all right. Now stop dragging your feet. We can go faster than this. But if you tell me to pivot, you get to carry the rest of your stuff in here solo."

McCord's crack of laughter bounced off the unadorned walls. "Deal."

Meg stepped closer to her sister, Cara, who stood at the bottom of the steps, worry digging a crease between her eyebrows. With the same tall, athletic stature, long, straight black hair, and ice-blue eyes, they could almost have been twins, though in reality Cara was eighteen months younger than Meg. Granted, the months-old, pale, inch-and-a-half-long scar over Meg's right eyebrow would now forever differentiate them. "I wasn't sure the two of them were going to be able to manage that piece."

"You and me both." Cara stepped to the staircase and laid one hand on the heavy wood banister as the men crested the stairs and set the wardrobe down in the hallway on the runner. "They're good." Turning, she stared down the hallway to the pile of boxes stacked in the middle of the kitchen. "Want to give me a hand with these?"

"It's the least I can do, considering you did the same for me last month." Meg looked down at the pack of dogs at her feet to find her black Labrador, Hawk, at her knee. "Come on, guys. Let's see if we can find the box with the treats in it." She started down the hallway, trailed by

Hawk, along with Cara's two rescue dogs—Saki, a mini blue-nose pit bull, and Blink, a retired red brindle greyhound. Cody, McCord's hyperactive golden retriever, shot past the group to gallop into the kitchen and then stop, tongue lolling out of his mouth as he waited for them to catch up.

Up until last month, the two sisters had shared a house in Arlington, a situation that worked perfectly for them until they'd both partnered up. Webb had found the perfect compromise for all four of them—a duplex with two identical units located in the Cookes Park area of Washington, DC, only ten minutes from McCord's office at the *Washington Post*, and about fifteen minutes away from Webb's firehouse, Meg's office in the J. Edgar Hoover Building, and Cara's dog training school in Arlington. Meg and Webb had moved in the previous month; now Cara and McCord were moving into their side of the duplex.

"You live and work with a trained scent dog. Let's make this job easy." Cara entered the kitchen and pointed at the stack. "Hawk, find the treats."

His tail waving happily in the air, Hawk trotted toward the pile of boxes, detailing each box as he moved methodically around the pile. Circling to the back side, he sniffed the bottom box, moved up to the middle box, paused, and immediately sat down in his trained alert signal.

"Good boy." Meg circled the pile. She lifted off the top box and set it on the counter, opened the next box down, and pulled out a bag of chicken jerky. "He's such a Lab. He'll do anything for food."

Cara ruffled his ears and bent to place a smacking kiss on the top of his head. "Of course he will. Now reward the good behavior."

Opening the bag, Meg pulled out four large pieces of jerky. "Sit." Three rumps hit the ground simultaneously.

Cara gave Cody a look and he belatedly sat.

Meg gave the dogs their treats and they scattered to different parts of the room to settle down, crunching loudly.

The rhythmic thud of boots muffled by the charcoal stair runner telegraphed the men were on their way down. Webb and McCord came through the kitchen door, both breathing hard. They were both dressed in jeans and T-shirts, but, beyond that, they were the yin and yang of light and dark, as different as the sisters were similar. Out of his turnout gear, Webb had a firefighter's muscular physique, with brown eyes and dark hair trimmed short to fit easily under his helmet, and the no-nonsense outlook of a first responder. McCord, on the other hand, had blue eyes behind his wire-rimmed glasses, slightly floppy blond hair, and a perennially jovial expression. If there was a joke to be made about a situation, McCord would be the first with a zinger.

"Any more pieces like that?" Webb made a beeline for the fridge, opened it, and pulled out two cans of beer, handing one to McCord before opening his own and taking a long series of swallows.

"No, thank God." McCord opened his own beer. "The beds are next, but they're all broken into pieces. Then we just need to put them together."

"Bedroom, master bath, and kitchen." Cara picked up her glass of sparkling water and tapped it against McCord's can. "If we can get those set up today, we can settle in for the night. And then deal with the rest over the next few days."

"We can do better than that." Meg leaned back against the counter. "Todd's on shift tomorrow, but I'll be here. We can get almost everything into place by the end of the weekend."

"Unless you get called to a case." McCord tipped his head back to take a long drink. He set his can down and

fixed Meg with a pointed stare. “You’re not holding out on me, are you?”

Meg fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Would I do that?” At his derisive chortle, she shrugged. “Okay, I would have in the past. But we have a deal.”

Since the first case they’d worked together the year before—when a disgruntled bomber shunned by the world around him had taken out his misery and rage on those he saw as responsible, and had used McCord as a direct conduit to the FBI—they’d worked a number of cases together. As an investigative reporter for the *Post*, McCord had been able to use his research skills, contacts, and dogged determination to make himself invaluable to Meg. They’d solved cases, and while they’d lost a few victims, they’d saved countless lives.

One of those lives had been Cara’s.

They’d made a deal during their last case—Meg would share details of her case in exchange for his assistance. He, in turn, would remain silent until the case was closed and would earn an exclusive on the story in reward.

“It’s actually been a slow week for the group,” Meg said. “Lauren and Rocco”—Meg referred to her colleague Lauren Wycliffe and her border collie, Rocco—“got sent down to Florida to help out after that tropical storm blew through and those kids went missing, and they were afraid there was a kidnapping in progress. Rocco found them. They were lost and scared, but that was the extent of it. Otherwise, it’s been quiet lately.” She rapped her knuckles on the cabinet door behind her. “Knock on wood, it will stay that way. It’s a nice change.”

Hawk finished his snack and wandered over to the group.

“Is Brian back yet?” Cara asked.

“This week, hopefully. It’s been a long three months, but Brian couldn’t bring Lacey in until she was in top

shape. There's just too much resting on her performance out in the field. I saw her about two weeks ago, and she's looking great. Of course there's some scarring."

Meg couldn't help but remember the terror of Lacey's injury last April when Brian, out on a search, had been attacked by a cougar and Lacey had defended him, almost at the cost of her own life. Her injuries were severe, but with quick medical care and Brian's steadfast efforts to nurse her back to health, Lacey was making a full recovery. Now it was time to put her to the test.

Meg couldn't have been happier that they were coming back to the team. She'd really missed Brian. They worked together seamlessly; so much so, Craig often paired them together. She'd worked with Lauren and Rocco, and Scott Park and his bloodhound, Theo, over the past few months, but she never felt quite as in-step with them as she did with Brian and Lacey.

"Most of the scarring is hidden in Lacey's fur. More importantly, she moves well. I think what Brian is most concerned about is her stamina. Sometimes these searches go on for hours. He's been jogging with her, working her stamina back up." Meg's gaze dropped to Hawk. "He said she's ready to join Hawk and me on our five-mile misery-loves-company morning runs again."

Cara ran a hand over Hawk's head and down his back. He looked up at her, his tail wagging so hard it repeatedly thumped the side of the boxes. "I bet Hawk will be thrilled with that. He must be missing her."

"He likes working with Rocco or Theo. He's great solo. But he really loves Lacey. And they click together as a team better than any of the other dogs do." The alert of an incoming text sounded and Meg pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Uh-oh."

Webb crossed the room to stand beside her. "What?"

"It's Craig," Meg said, referring to her supervisor,

Special-Agent-in-Charge Craig Beaumont. “I told him I needed this weekend off unless a disaster occurred.” She opened the text and read the message. Then read it again as dread and confusion coiled in her gut.

“I don’t like that look. What’s the disaster?”

“I have no idea.” She met Webb’s gaze. “He’s ordered me to meet him in EAD Peters’s office Monday morning at nine.” As the executive assistant director of the FBI’s Criminal, Cyber, Response, and Services Branch, Adam Peters oversaw the Forensic Canine Unit.

The only time she’d ever been summoned to Peters’s office, it had been to be called on the carpet after she’d disobeyed a direct order from Craig.

To this day she stood behind that decision. A madman had been killing women who looked like her in order to kill her again and again. She’d disobeyed Craig’s order not to enter a building that was about to be demolished because she knew Hawk could find the victim in the basement and get them all out before the implosion. He had—though only by a matter of seconds. They’d been thrown so hard by the shock wave, Meg came away with a grade-three concussion.

She’d do it all over again, given the same set of circumstances.

*You people drive me to drink, and I can’t do it on the job.*

She remembered Peters’s words from the party she’d thrown to celebrate the close of the case and the recovery of her sister after she, Webb, McCord, and Hawk had saved Cara’s life. When he was out of his office, Peters was personable and funny. Inside his office, he was pure hard-ass.

“What did you do wrong?” McCord asked.

Cara smacked his arm—hard—and McCord grunted in pain. “She didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why does she have to meet with Peters?” McCord turned to Meg. “Any idea?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Why don’t you call Craig to get more information?” Webb suggested. “Rather than worry about it for another day and a half.”

“And ruin what’s left of our weekend?” She lifted the beer out of his hand and took a long drink, keeping her eyes locked on his, ignoring his raised eyebrows. “Not on your life.” She handed him back the can and turned to McCord. “What’s next?”

McCord continued to stare at her in silence.

Rolling her eyes, Cara linked her arm through Meg’s and tugged her toward the front door. “The beds are next. Come on, they’ll catch up to us sooner or later. They always do.”