

NO MAN'S LAND



AN
FBI K-9
NOVEL

SARA DRISCOLL

NO MAN'S LAND

SARA
DRISCOLL



KENSINGTON BOOKS
www.kensingtonbooks.com

CHAPTER 1

Urbexing: Urban exploration, usually of abandoned or nearly inaccessible man-made structures.

Sunday, October 7, 10:47 AM
Massaponax Psychiatric Hospital
Fredericksburg, Virginia

“Is this how you usually get into these places?” Meg Jennings pushed through the ragged tear slicing diagonally across the lower half of the towering chain-link fence. She ducked low, to avoid the jagged edges that threatened to catch the long dark hair she’d tied into a ponytail and to tug at her backpack.

“This is easy, compared to some.” District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Services firefighter Chuck Smaill grinned down at her. “It’s a small price to pay to get a look at some truly creepy stuff.”

“You’re really selling it. And as a duly sworn member of the FBI, I won’t even ask if we’re trespassing. I think it’s better if I’m left officially in the dark on that point.” Meg straightened and turned to the man standing beside her. Several inches taller than her own nearly six feet, DCFEMS firefighter and paramedic Lieutenant Todd Webb had the build of a man used to physical work and the short-cut

dark hair that spoke to how often he wore a firefighter's helmet. "Todd, give me a hand with the fence for Hawk?"

"Sure." Having preceded her through the gap, Webb grabbed one edge of the chain link and curled it back as Meg mirrored his actions on the opposite side.

"That's good. Okay, Hawk, come!"

The black Labrador trotted through the gap, his tail waving jauntily. Without his standard uniform of the FBI's Human Scent Evidence Team's navy-and-yellow vest, he sported only a bright red collar and rubber-soled Velcro boots to protect his paws.

Once he was through, Meg let go and the chain-link fencing vibrated back into place with a discordant metallic twang.

Smaill held his arms wide. "Welcome to no man's land."

Meg eyed the property around them. "No man's land?"

"It's an urbex term."

"Urban exploration has its own terms?"

"It has a language all its own. If you got on any of the urbex forums, you wouldn't understand half of what they say because they all use the lingo. Like 'blagging,' 'lift surfacing,' and 'tankcatting.' In this case, no man's land is the dead space between an outer security fence and the actual site or building. So, welcome to no man's land."

Meg took in the prickly weeds and overgrown grass, their lush green fading with autumn's cooling days. "Um . . . thanks?" She tipped her hand over her eyes, squinting past the open space to the red brick structure rising into the cloudless sky. "That's really fantastic Gothic Revival architecture. Such a shame it's practically falling down in real time."

Smaill's eyebrows shot up to disappear behind the sun-streaked blond hair that fell boyishly over his forehead. "You recognize the architecture?"

Webb laughed and bumped his shoulder affectionately to Meg's. "Oh yeah, she loves old buildings. I can't count the number of times she's had me pull to the side of the road so she can admire some old Victorian manor out her window. The older the better."

"Hey, at least I don't make you jog with me at six in the morning like I do Brian. He tends to pick parks for jogging, but I love going through the oldest neighborhoods in DC. Those classic houses have a special glow as the sun is just clearing the treetops." Meg considered the red brick structure. "And it's not hard to nail this one. See the decorative pointed brick crowns over the windows? The front-facing gables on the top floor in that steep roof? The main central castle tower? Classic Gothic Revival. But this building is more than its architecture. Do you know anything about it?"

"I always find out about a site before I visit," Smaill said. "Makes the hacking more interesting because you know what you're exploring. Also makes it safer because you get an idea of the setup and might foresee some of the hazards. When this place first went up in the decade following the Civil War, it was the Massaponax Insane Asylum. See how it's built? As a big center structure with the two wings on either side?"

"Yeah. The architect didn't quite get the symmetry down, though."

"He wasn't trying to. The wing on the left, the big one, that was the men's wing. The more modest wing was for the ladies."

"And here we are without McCord, the walking Civil War encyclopedia," Webb deadpanned. "Even without the numbers he could spout off the top of his head, I'm betting the Battle of Fredericksburg and the rest of the Civil War

left a large proportion of the surviving male population with some nasty mental health issues.”

“Got it in one,” said Smail. “Back then, they didn’t know what was wrong with those men. PTSD wasn’t defined until after the Second World War. In the First World War, they recognized the issue as ‘shell shock,’ but they still didn’t know what to do about it. Now imagine how unprepared they were to handle it in the 1860s and 1870s after Sherman’s March to the Sea, the destruction of South Carolina, and the retaking of Fort Sumter that ended the Civil War.”

“So instead of dealing with it, they locked those men up here,” Meg said. “Out of the public eye.”

“Here and many other places. Hardly seems like the right way to treat veterans who barely survived the effort to protect their country. Granted, some days I’m not sure we do that much better now. Come on, let’s get in there.”

The group followed a scant path that cut across what was once a well-tended lawn, now given way to weeds and brambles dotted with fallen amber leaves.

When Smail had invited Webb on one of his urbex outings, Webb had suggested that Meg and Hawk come as well. Having met Meg and Hawk six months before at the site of the National Mall bombing, and then being with her for several other cases, Webb knew urbex would be exactly the kind of search-and-rescue—or SAR—practice that kept Meg and Hawk at the top of their game. Meg agreed wholeheartedly. From then on, it was just a matter of matching schedules between a firefighter, a firefighter/paramedic, and a SAR team. A common day off between the first responders finally meant they could make the trip together from DC to Virginia.

“What’s that mean?” Webb pointed to a faded metal sign attached to the brick near the front door featuring a yellow circle overlaid by a triad of downward-facing rust-

colored triangles. "It's almost like a radiation hazard warning, but not quite."

"I've run into that one before," said Smail. "It's the civil defense symbol for a fallout shelter from the Cold War."

"Duck and cover," Meg murmured. She scanned the lower windows—some were cracked but mostly intact; others were boarded up. "Can we get in the front door?"

"Last time I was here, someone had forced the lock on it and it was standing open. Hopefully no one has secured it since then. I'm not sure who owns the property now. I know there were rumors someone was going to buy it, gut it, and reno it into swanky condos, but clearly that hasn't happened yet."

"It's a great property." Meg scanned the front of the building, each floor marked by a horizontal stripe of white stone transecting the brick, and windows topped by decorative arches of alternating white and black blocks. "The outside is really stylish."

"And the inside is really a mess," Smail countered. "But if they took it back to the studs and built it out again, it could be spectacular." Bracing one hand on the wrought iron railing, he climbed the stairs to the front door, with Meg, Hawk, and Webb following.

The heavy wood door formed a Gothic arch with a pointed apex. It stood open, leaving a gap of several feet to the doorjamb that allowed daylight to stream inside.

"When we're inside, be constantly conscious of your surroundings. For instance, places where the floor has given way can be treacherous. And if some spots have collapsed already, there are likely others that could go with only minimal stress. Eyes and ears open at all times. If anything looks dicey, don't push it." Smail looked down at Hawk. "He's ready to go in?"

“All he needs are his boots. We can’t afford for anything to injure his feet and risk taking him out of future searches. But he’s used to working rubble wearing them. I’m going to keep him on lead unless I’m concerned he’s going to get caught on it. Then I’ll let him loose.”

“There might be a few places where he’ll do better without it, but you know best. He’ll come when you call him if he’s off leash?”

“Just you wait,” Webb said before Meg could answer. “That dog is so well trained, he can practically bring you breakfast in bed. Don’t worry, he’ll be great.”

Smaill pushed the door open a few more inches and stepped into the gloom. “Then let’s do it.”

They moved from the brilliant technicolor of fall into what was originally monochrome hospital beige, now spoiled by dark splotches of rust and mildew and brilliant palettes of paint. It took a minute for their eyes to adjust to the lower light, but then details began to emerge.

The foyer ceiling was at least twelve feet high, but the whitewashed patterned tin, originally lovely curling scrollwork, was torn apart with whole sections ripped clean away, and the remaining areas were invaded with creeping rust stains. Paint peeled in ribbons from the walls around slabs of plaster that had lost their battle with gravity and crumbled to the floor years ago. The floor, once a utilitarian linoleum, was now an uneven spongy layer that tore in soft spots under their steel-toed hiking boots and was littered with papers and scraps of wood. The wall opposite the door was covered in clashing colors of spray paint, with the most recent artistic offering, **WRekER**, in large red block letters with a white border over older faded stylings.

Webb whistled. “You weren’t kidding. It’s a mess. It looked way better from outside.”

"This is nothing," said Smaill. "Wait until you see some of the hospital wings. Come this way."

Turning to the right, they entered a cramped office with a rubble-covered floor. Open cubbyholes of worn, faded wood lined the walls above where desks once stood. Overhead, a gaping gash in the ceiling revealed a glimpse of the floor above, and pipework for the sprinkler system and wiring for the ceiling lights dangled, free-floating, overhead. A single intact bulb hung from a rusty fixture.

Meg and Hawk wandered over to where a pile of heavy, yellowed papers was tossed carelessly in a corner. She squatted down for a better look at reports edged with mildew. "When did this place close?"

"Sometime in 2003."

"These are handwritten ward reports from the 1970s. I'd have thought this stuff would have been destroyed because of privacy regulations."

"Apparently not."

Meg turned to her dog, who was pulling slightly against the leash, his head turned to peer down a long hallway stretching into the men's wing. "Do you smell something, buddy?"

"Mildew, dead critters, and rotting wood." Smaill picked up a curled black-and-white photo from inside one of the cubbies, holding it out by one corner for them to see. The picture showed a section of brain with a long, thin protrusion thrust deep inside. "For sure he smells something. You say you've explored ruined buildings before?"

"Yes, but usually freshly ruined. Explosions, fires, natural disasters. Nothing like this. It's something new, which is good for him." She gave his leash a light tug as she got to her feet and Hawk came to stand beside her. She pointed up

at the ceiling and the rooms visible overhead. “Are we going up there?”

“You bet. Down into the basement too. It’s pretty creepy down there.”

“Lead the way.”

They made their way down a hallway where paint curled from the walls as if bubbles had formed and popped, revealing the scarred wall beneath. Overhead, a line of rusted fluorescent lights marched in a drunken line along the gloomy ceiling. Weak daylight tumbled over the floor through open doorways leading to exam rooms.

“Hawk, come.” Meg paused in the doorway of an exam room, scanning the interior. Lines of rust ran down one wall in rivulets to disappear behind a steel gurney. An overturned wheelchair with only one rubber wheel remaining sat beneath a cracked window. Beside it, ragged holes in a tangled pile of moldering blankets indicated the resident rodent population. A rippling, faded poster listing the classification criteria of *DSM-IV* mental disorders was still tacked to one wall, and a vacant doll head lay on top of a narrow white-laminate medical cabinet, the gash of its mouth grinning into eternity.

“That’s creepy as hell.”

Meg glanced over her shoulder to find Webb close behind her. “The doll?”

“The doll head. What happened to the rest of it? I thought this place was for adults.”

“There were women,” Smaill replied. “So there may have been kids too.” He paused, frowning at the doll. “That’s a nasty thought.”

“Sure is.”

Farther down the hallway, their progress abruptly halted at the gaping hole that stretched the width of the hall and dropped all the way down into the depths of the

basement. Long slats of wood subfloor drooped into the gap, hanging nearly to the floor below.

Meg stopped a few feet back and was surprised when Hawk didn't stay with her but instead leaned toward the hole. A gentle tug at the leash brought him to her side. "How do we get around that?"

Smaill pushed open a door to their right that was nearly invisible in the gloom. "Up this way. Get out your flashlights and watch your step. Things are going to get a *lot* less stable. I'd recommend taking Hawk off his leash now. He's going to need complete freedom to navigate."

Meg pulled a flashlight from her backpack and shone it past Smaill. Not only was the stairwell beyond the doorway dark due to the lack of windows, but most of the middle of the staircase had collapsed, leaving a curl of steps clinging to the outer wall as it rose up into the shadows. She stepped into the stairwell to peer at the pile of torn wooden steps, fractured railings, and crumbling plaster. "That's more like what I thought we'd be dealing with. You're sure it's safe?"

"The steps are built right into the wall. Use your light, watch your step, stick to the wall, and you'll be fine. Don't trust the railing on the wall to hold you if you slip, or you'll end up on the pile below." Smaill gestured at Hawk. "He'll be able to manage?"

"Better than us. He has four feet and a lower center of gravity." She unhooked Hawk's leash, coiled it, and stuffed it in an outside pocket of her backpack. "Todd, you go first, and I'll send Hawk up after you."

Webb pulled a compact flashlight out of one of the pockets of his cargo pants and turned it on. He started up the stairs, his long legs carrying him easily over the first step piled high with rubble. The step groaned under his weight, but held. Keeping his light trained on the step

above, Webb moved slowly and carefully into the dark. He stopped partway to push enough debris off the step to make room for his boot, and it tumbled onto the wreckage below with a crash. Halfway up, he turned around. "It's more stable than it looks. Send Hawk up."

"Hawk." Meg waited until the dog's gaze swung up to hers. "Go to Todd."

Hawk neatly jumped over the first step and then continued toward Webb, who shone his flashlight down on each step to guide the dog's way.

"You're right," Smaill said. "He's more sure-footed than I am. You next, and I'll bring up the rear."

Climbing the stairs was a slow, precise process. Place a foot, test your weight on the step, then transfer that weight. No sudden moves; just gradual, steady progress. But within three minutes they were on the upper landing gazing down at the ruins below.

"Are we going to be getting down the same way?" Webb asked.

"No. The other flight of stairs in this section is at the end of the wing. It's cut off from the main entrance by that cave-in, but there are a couple of emergency exits with crash bars on the ground floor we can force open to get out. Come on, things get interesting up here."

Smaill led them through the upper areas of the wing. Each room was lined with windows, and the light streaming in chased away the gloom. But the remnants of life here only accentuated the creepiness hinted at below:

A multistall bathroom where the sinks had been ripped from the wall and thrown to the floor in front of stalls so rusted, it were as if they'd been sprayed with blood.

A wooden prosthetic leg lying alone in a corner of the corridor, its painted surface so old and worn that it looked like mummified skin.

A ward room with the twisted remains of a bedstead crumpled near a pockmarked radiator sagging away from the crumbling wall.

A skeletal stainless steel table in the middle of a surgical suite, standing beneath a darkened lamp.

But creepiest of all was the morgue they discovered in the basement after they had descended a much sturdier flight of stairs. The room retained most of its working components, so it felt as if the staff had just stepped out and would return momentarily. A compartment door stood open, the stainless steel slab with its integrated neck support pulled out, ready to accept the next corpse. Sturdy glass organ jars were clustered on a nearby countertop beside heavy rubber gloves, tossed over the edge as if just removed. An organ scale dangled beside a deep sink, its needle several degrees off plumb as if ghostly flesh lay within its bowl.

But throughout their exploration, Hawk seemed distracted, his attention always focused down the corridor or out the nearest door. Meg was constantly calling him to her side when he wanted to wander away from the group.

“What’s up with Hawk?” Webb crouched down beside the autopsy table and gave Hawk’s back a good rub. “I’ve never seen him this distracted. Do you think he’s picked up on something?”

“As Chuck said, I think he’s smelling a dead rodent somewhere.” She held still for a moment, considering her dog. “But his head is definitely not in the game. So why don’t we let him show us?”

Webb straightened. “Let him lead the way?”

“Sure, why not? We don’t have a set search plan here. We haven’t found whatever he smells yet, so he’ll only lead us somewhere new.”

“That works for me, as long as it’s safe,” Smaill said. “And you said he’ll come if you call him if he gets into trouble.”

“Definitely. We’re in the basement, so there shouldn’t be any gaping holes dropping a story or two. But he’s a wizard with voice commands, and on top of that, we have his ‘don’t mess with me’ name.”

Smaill glanced at the dog and then back at Meg. “‘Don’t mess with me’?”

Webb laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. This is your first foray into canine search-and-rescue. Spend time with Hawk and it’ll become second nature.”

“That’s the name I use when Hawk has to follow my commands with zero hesitation, even if it looks like I’m throwing him straight into the path of danger,” Meg said. “Like the time we were doing a search on a railway trestle and got caught near the middle of it with a train coming straight for us. We were closer to the side with the oncoming train, so I ordered him to sprint directly for it.” She extended both arms to include herself and Hawk. “As you can see, we both made it. So if I think he’s getting into trouble, I say ‘Talon’”—Hawk jerked to attention and she laid her hand gently on his head in acknowledgment—“and he’ll do whatever I say.”

“Handy. I wish we could train our candidates at the house like that.”

“Amen to that,” Webb said with a grin.

Meg knelt down next to Hawk. “Hawk, something’s got your attention. Find it.”

Hawk’s ears perked up and his head tilted at her.

“He’s a little confused because he’s not in his work vest,” Meg explained to the men. “But he doesn’t need it here. Come on, Hawk, we’ll follow you. Find it.”

Hawk turned and trotted through the open doorway melting into the darkness beyond.