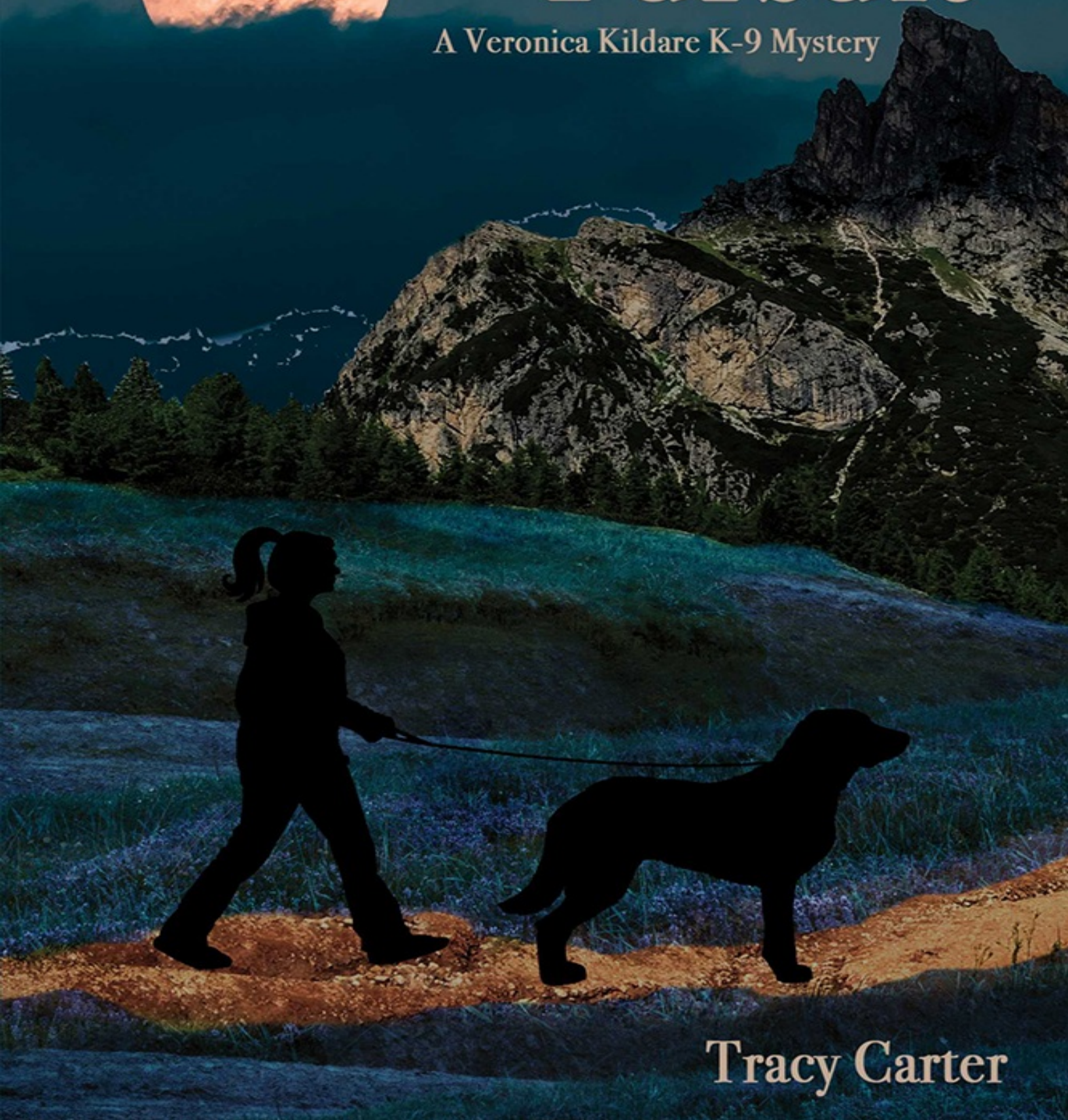


Dogged Pursuit

A Veronica Kildare K-9 Mystery



Tracy Carter

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TRACY CARTER

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER 1

On very rare occasions such as this one, where my fingers have passed the point of numbness and gusting winds pelt me with freezing rain, I think longingly of my former life as a legal assistant, with a nice, cozy indoor job. Then I remember how that life ended in shocking violence, fear, and heartache, and how much safer I feel now, in Colorado, and my longing dissipates rapidly. I just hope the scent trail my dog has been following for the last two frigid hours isn't dissipating at the same rate.

“Pay attention, Veronica. Shari is counting on us,” I tell myself sternly while focusing on my four-year-old Chesapeake Bay Retriever. Leda sniffs the air repeatedly to hone in on the scent which is her job and continues trailing. Trailing is basically a dog following a specific person's scent pattern wherever it has wafted, either on the ground or in the air, as opposed to following a particular set of tracks (tracking). Leda's tail is up and her whole body radiates intensity. This is today's mission and she loves it. As Leda hesitates briefly at a trail intersection in the Boulder County Open Space area where we are working, I call her back with one quick word, grab the plastic baggie containing the scent article (a red bandanna fished from a Jeep) and open the baggie for Leda to get another good sniff of the target's scent. When Leda is actively sniffing, she breathes in and out over one hundred and fifty times a minute. She looks up at me with her serious, almost yellow eyes (which alarm many people unfamiliar with Chessies) and turns abruptly back to business. I

reinforce the Find command—even though she’s definitely got it—while tugging my rain hat down lower on my forehead in a vain effort to stay just a tiny bit dry.

“Of course, this has to be one of the 30 days a year it’s not sunny in Boulder,” offers Sgt. Tim Donovan of the Boulder County Sheriff’s Office, who is following Leda and me as support while we track Shari Wright ever upward in the trail system below the famed Flatirons. I murmur agreement to Tim knowing he won’t be offended by my single-minded focus on my dog. We actually met through his wife, Sylvia, who took me under her wing when I joined the same yoga class last year. Tim and I have worked together several times now in similar lost person situations after his department called me in as an independent resource. Tim, Sylvia, and their four ebullient teenage daughters have rapidly established themselves as part of my extended family over the past year. He never seems to mind the quiet time he gets when working a situation with me. Having two sets of twins makes for an interesting dynamic in the Donovan household! I am only 30 but feel so much older than his bubbly, friendly girls. And small talk is definitely not my strong point any longer.

From what I learned during our Thursday morning briefing after the Sheriff’s Office called me at 11:00 a.m., Shari is a typical Colorado mountain kid, loves hiking and snowboarding, and waitresses while she attends university. Her friends became alarmed when she did not return from an early afternoon hike the day before, and oddly, no texts or photos were sent by Shari to any of her friends during the hike. Unfortunately, no one was sure which of Boulder County’s 40,000+

Open Space acres accessible to the public she had chosen to visit and it took some time to locate her ancient Jeep tucked away on street parking access near the Greenbriar Connector. Her cell phone appears to be turned off. Modern technology is a great locator, until it isn't. Now we are going old school with a trailing dog. Here's how.

A human body contains approximately 60 trillion cells. Every day, about 50 million dead cells drop off this human body. This is the scent that Leda is following primarily in the air and occasionally on the ground. Leda's body language is all positive as she surges steadily forward at the end of her 16-foot long line made of ½" wide supple webbing. Now is a good time to tell you, I am obsessive about my dog's safety. My line is shorter than those used by many trainers, as I worry constantly about Leda surprising a bear around a blind corner while she's intently working—just like the mama and two cubs we saw shoving berries into their mouths by a creek during our morning run a few months ago. Luckily for us, the bears were so intoxicated by the luscious fruit that my dog and I skidded to a halt and backed quietly up the hill without drawing any attention. Thank God for obedience lessons and a rock-solid recall.

Leda appears locked in, following Shari's scent trail up the muddy Lower Big Bluestem Trail and then the Upper Big Bluestem Trail, for a short jaunt on the Mesa Trail and then onto the Shadow Canyon Trail. The wet weather is helping us in some regards by keeping the trail largely vacant of hikers, and the scent relatively fresh—although presumably at least 18-24 hours old by now. A dog has 200 million scent receptors in its nose, distributed among the plentiful folds located there. In contrast, a

human has at most a mere 5-20 million wedged in a space the size of a nickel way back in their nose. I'm betting on my dog. "Good girl, Leda. Find," I urge her on quietly while wiggling my fingers in their gloves for a little warmth, and feeling the cold trickle of persistent rain dripping down the back of my neck.

"Looks like she was headed toward Bear Peak, maybe, after those last few turns on the trail, and her friends said she likes hikes with vistas. You get the great view of the mountains to the west from there," I say to Tim while half turning my head so he can hear from behind me.

"If so," he replies, "I'm afraid she's gotten into trouble. That's normally just a good long day hike for someone in Shari's condition and the weather was fine yesterday afternoon." Tim keys his shoulder radio with a few brief words to alert the EMTs trailing us hopefully up into the mountains with our latest supposition. We pass by the monoliths called Devil's Thumb and the Maiden, usually popular with rock climbers, but not on this raw day. Most of the surrounding rocks are seasonally closed due to wildlife but the Maiden is always open. It's unusual to see the majestic spires of rock without their customary background draping of impressively blue sky, but rather with this flat, pewter-colored scene looming behind them. The Maiden is renowned for its descent featuring a 120-foot free-hanging rappel to a narrow, open saddle named the Crow's Nest. And before you ask, I have not had the pleasure. Not afraid of heights, but not inclined to dangle on a rope.

"Since you guys called me in right away after her vehicle was found, the trail seems pretty decent for Leda and easier for her to follow without dozens of searchers having trampled all over the Open Space."

Tim gives a wry chuckle. “We heard you last year after you found that poor, elderly lady with dementia who had wandered away from her care facility. Leda did a phenomenal job on that trail even though they made it tough on you with all the prior searching and blundering around by the care facility personnel.” I nod briskly to that comment and keep my eyes on Leda’s wet, but still curly-haired spine. I am just amazed that, within a few years of my leaving Ohio as a heartbroken and devastated shell of my former self, my life has been totally restructured around dog training, thus allowing me to find a sense of purpose again in my new community.

Up and up we climb, battling the driving rain, tenacious wind, and slick footing—until Leda pulls strongly on her line and abruptly veers right off the trail, angling up a side hill and toward a cleft in the canyon wall. Her ears are up and she’s sniffing the air energetically. Tim rips off a piece of pink surveyor’s tape to mark the spot where we leave the trail for those coming behind us. The dogs and I have hiked this trail several times and never noticed this obscure cleft in the rock before. All the miles of running and snowshoeing to stay in shape for situations like this one are certainly coming in handy. As it is, my legs are getting a bit weary, but we need to find Shari.

“I wonder why Shari deviated from the trail here. The way to the peak is clearly marked,” Tim speculates. We follow Leda carefully picking our way over and around jagged rocks—many of them deceptively slippery after the overnight and morning showers. The scree field on our right looks like an enraged giant has smashed thousands of bowling balls and dashed them down the hillside in a fit of pique. The

wind intensifies and the sky looks increasingly angrier and more ominous. Leda does agility training two or three times a week with me and it all pays off whenever she has to clamber over any obstacle for her job. On the other hand, I feel I could move a lot more quickly if not encased in full head to toe rain gear.

“Well, maybe she had to pee, or was looking at fall foliage—or was trying to photograph a bird or wildlife,” Tim finishes my sentence. Leda’s pace has picked up as she presses forward into her harness literally dragging me across the rugged terrain. I’m almost holding my breath, thinking to myself, please... please let her be okay. Leda makes a sharp right turn around a massive boulder in the shadow of Bear Peak and immediately her locate barks ring out in excitement. Three sharp barks—just like she was taught. Tim and I hasten forward, rounding the behemoth rock, and find a pale and lifeless Shari prone on the ground. He immediately calls her name and reaching for her wrist, checks her pulse.

Tim calls out to me. “Veronica, she’s alive!” We share a quick, pleased grin before he immediately starts to assess her condition. A massive purplish bruise darkens the side of Shari’s face and her ankle is bent at a decidedly unnatural and nausea-inducing angle. Tim gets on his radio calling forward the rescue team, which has been moving stoically up the mountain behind us for several hours as we tracked Shari. They will hustle up here quickly with a stretcher, and more importantly, their medical knowledge. Shari is worryingly still, but her chest *is* moving ever so slightly. Tim has pulled a Mylar thermal blanket out of his pack and tucked it around Shari. As the medics arrive

breathing hard, but all hustle and efficiency, I turn my attention to my beloved Leda. She has the drive to be a search dog, but she is atypical in particular ways. She has never needed the immediate gratification of a toy or tennis ball when she locates her target. Leda sits on her haunches watching me intently as Shari is tended to. Once the injured woman is bundled up and sent down the mountain with the EMTs, Leda glides over on her quiet pads and leans against my leg as I rub her ears and kiss her face.

“Clever, clever girl, such a good girl.” I pull Leda’s collapsible bowl from my pack and fill it from her water bottle. She takes a good satisfying drink and turns back to me showing her beautiful Chessie smile and leans against me harder. She quite literally saved my life in Ohio when I adopted her and now she’s saving even more people in Colorado. I sit next to my dog for a few quiet, happy moments listening to the tenacious rain drip softly on the rocks, pleased with our day’s work, as Tim, looking like a wraith in the fog, takes his last scout around the area where we found Shari.

Later, much later, I examined that earlier peaceful moment of contentment under the sodden veil of Bear Peak in great detail. But I was absolutely sure of it—even in retrospect. There had been no foreboding ripple or murmuring portent in the air warning me that within days violence was about to blast its way into my life. Again.