

A woman in a black dress is walking away from the viewer down a bright yellow path that stretches into the distance. The path is flanked by a dark blue, textured field. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

A Nicole  
Charles  
Mystery

If It  
**Bleeds**

LINDA L. RICHARDS

# If It Bleeds

LINDA L. RICHARDS



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**Summary:** Nicole Charles is a gossip columnist for a big city paper who gets the chance to cover a murder after she finds the body. (RL 4.0)

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
PO Box 5626, Stn. B  
Victoria, BC Canada  
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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
PO Box 468  
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*“I don’t mind a reasonable amount of trouble.”*

—Dashiell Hammett

# ONE

**T**o get ahead in my line, you either get a break, make your own or happen to be in the right place at the right time. I got lucky one night with all three. Too bad that meant someone had to die. I try not to think about that.

My being there had nothing to do with the death of Steve Marsh. He would have died even if I wasn't there. Good thing for me, I was.

When I arrived, I realized he wasn't at the party. Since I hadn't taken his picture

that would cause trouble if not corrected. I'd been told.

"But he's not here, darling," Erica West told me when I asked if she'd seen Marsh. As my question sunk in, she arched an eyebrow at me. The lights in the gallery made her pale hair shine. It reflected the dried-blood gloss of her nails.

"He must have been, but I don't see him now," she said. She indicated a back entrance with a rapid flick of her fingers. A waiter caught the motion and rushed over with a tray of drinks. No one denies Erica West. She has a way about her. But she wasn't after a drink. She slid one finger up and down the neck of the ice swan on the table beside her. The motion was innocent enough, yet implied a threat. And not only to the swan.

"I trust we'll see his smiling face in your column in the morning?" she said brightly. Too brightly. I felt a sliver of fear.

I knew I shouldn't reply. I didn't have the right answer. Instead, I asked a question. "What's he drive?"

"Sam can tell you." Another flick of those deadly fingers. This time at a thin man with spiky yellow hair.

"Sam, darling," Erica called, "what does Steve drive?"

"Audi," Sam shot back. "Silver SUV." He barely missed a beat of his chat with three women dressed in black. I grabbed my purse and charged toward the back. Moving in the direction Erica had indicated, I passed through a back room and came out into an alley. It smelled of old brick and rotten garbage.

Vancouver summer days are long. It was after nine at night, and the light was starting to fade. It was going to be a beautiful sunset. At another time, I would have paused to enjoy it. But not tonight. The thought of Erica's perfect nails melting

holes in the ice swan's neck floated in my memory like a threat.

The alley was a shock. Inside the gallery, everything was white and clean and the kind of empty that comes with a big price tag. White concrete benches on a polished concrete floor. Hidden lighting. Music floating on clouds.

That gallery could have been on any corner in any good neighborhood in the city. But go out the back door and into the alley, and you remembered it wasn't just anywhere. It was in a part of town that was changing so quickly no one had bothered to tell the whores and the night crawlers.

Patrons of the arts enjoy these dances with the dark side. They think it's cool to have to step over a sleeping drunk or two when they go to a gallery. That way, when they pay big bucks for the work of some artist they've never heard of before, they know they're getting the real deal. It puts them in direct



contact with starving for the art. Never mind that most new artists who get those prices for a painting have the support of a good gallery, an arts grant or both.

So the alley was a shock after the clean gallery. A group of junkies saw me come through the door. They began to move my way. Slowly. I didn't think I'd be in danger if they caught up with me. But I didn't feel like getting hassled for spare change. Not in an alley by myself.

I looked down the alley, thinking Steve Marsh would be long gone. Then I could head back into the gallery and nurse my regret with a drink. So I was not happy when I spotted the silver Audi. It was parked a couple of doors down. Idling. Someone in plain sight behind the wheel. I cursed myself. If only I'd tried to answer some of Erica's questions. I'd probably still be in the gallery, and Marsh would have had the chance to drive away.

The junkie pack was closing in on my right. I moved toward the Audi, parked with its taillights facing me. The driver's window was up. Marsh faced away from me. I thought he was maybe talking on the phone. But I couldn't see what he was up to and I couldn't see his face.

I waited, hoping he'd sense me standing next to his car. But he didn't move. And the junkies were closing in. I couldn't just stand there. I raised my hand and tapped on the window. Once, twice, three times. Hard. No response.

By now the whole thing was getting to me. Sure, talk on the phone. Sketch. Whatever. But *move*. Marsh wasn't doing any of that. I could see the freckles on the back of his neck under short dark-red hair. Even in the dim light, I could see the soft fine hairs on his neck. But there was no movement.

And the junkies were getting closer.

## IF IT BLEEDS

I tried the car door. I'd expected it to be locked, but it opened at my touch. Music slid out of the car. The smell of something dark slid out as well. And then, without the support of the door, Marsh began to slide too. I stopped him, pushing him back against the seat. And then I saw.

A short-handled tool was sticking out of the base of his throat. There wasn't a lot of blood. Maybe there hadn't been a great struggle. But somehow I just knew.

I'd never seen a dead person before, but when you see it, you know just what it is.