

# WHEN BLOOD LIES

A Nicole Charles  
Mystery

Linda L. Richards

WHEN  
BLOOD  
LIES

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Linda L. Richards



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**Summary:** In this work of crime fiction, gossip columnist Nicole Charles buys a desk at auction that turns out to be at the center of a secret from the past and a crime in the present. (RL 4.8)

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*The problem with putting two and two  
together is that sometimes you get four,  
and sometimes you get twenty-two.*

—Dashiell Hammett

# ONE

These days there are times when I can't even remember what made me get into the news business in the first place. I know I wanted to do some big thing. I wanted to make a difference. Change things. I wanted to know that every day when I got out of bed, the work I did would have a positive impact on many lives.

And so I played with ideas.

There were other possibilities, but none of them made sense for me.

I don't like being around blood, so being a doctor, nurse or veterinarian was out of

the question, even though I like animals. And sometimes people.

Teacher? While I don't dislike kids, the thought of being cooped up in a classroom with a bunch of them every day didn't sound like a fun.

Cop? I don't like violence. I don't like guns. I know there is more to the job than that, but I couldn't get past those basics.

Firefighter? Of course what they do is worthwhile. They do great work. But it looks so very difficult all the time. Like, you have to sweat and lift a lot of heavy stuff. I'm not particularly talented at either of those things.

But I'm "good with words," or so I was always told. And I know how to "turn a phrase." I thought about being a novelist but found I didn't really have much to say. (Maybe someday.) And then, reading through the descriptions of programs at a

local college, a two-year journalism program caught my eye.

In the first place, it was the only two-year program in the field west of Toronto. And to be honest, it sounded super fun. I would learn *how to dig for information, write a compelling news story, conduct an illuminating interview and other important skills.*

And suddenly it all made sense. I knew that of the things I *could* be, nothing else had ever really clicked for me. Journalism became, in an instant, the only true thing I'd ever wanted to pursue.

I applied to the program. Got accepted. Then spent the next two years learning about how I was going to make a difference. For maybe the first time ever, my life had meaning. I couldn't wait to graduate.

I did my practicum at the *Vancouver Post*, my hometown newspaper as well as one of the top papers in the country. I was



on my way. But right in the middle of my internship, the society columnist dropped dead (no mysterious causes). And I just walked into his job.

It was either a lucky break or a curse. Three years later, I'm still not sure which. The work is not difficult, but it's also not what I imagined. When I signed up to be a reporter, I thought I'd be running around chasing down leads and uncovering conspiracies. Investigating stuff. Busting things wide open. (I wasn't sure what kind of things, but still, it's what I dreamed.)

As the gossip columnist, what I *really* do is go to pretty parties and take photos of pretty people. Then I write pretty words about them to go under the photos. Not too many words at that. It's a living and a good one. But most of the time I don't really feel like a reporter. I feel like a party girl taking photos (pretty ones) and notes.

“Nicole!” The sound of my name in that particular tone made me sit up straighter at my desk. Even at some distance, I recognized Erica West’s authoritative and well-modulated voice. It spoke of Ivy League schools and summers in France and a confident woman who was used to getting what she wanted. You could hear that right away. I didn’t know what she wanted right now, but I was ready to give it to her.

Erica West is the sales manager at the *Vancouver Post*. And she is the publisher’s fiancée. The over-sized diamond on her left hand tells *that* story. But neither of those things—or the ring—explained why she was in my cubicle. For the most part, our paths didn’t have much reason to cross.

“Yes, Erica,” I called back. “I’m right here. At my desk.”

“Your desk.” She sniffed when she came into the area. She wrinkled her nose just a bit as she got to my cubicle, like she

might be smelling something disagreeable. There was no bad smell. Unless downsizing has an odor. There had been a lot of layoffs recently to shore up the bottom line. Not so long ago, there was a reporter in each of the ten cubicles between where Erica had entered the room and where she stood now. There were only two or three of us now.

It's a tough time for newspapers. Facebook, YouTube and millions of "citizen journalists" with their blogs and Snapchats and Instagram feeds. It all eats into everyone's news-reading time. Never mind television and radio. All of those things make people feel informed. Maybe they are and maybe they are not, but the fact is, not too many people actually read newspapers anymore. In my line of work, it seems someone talks about that—the state of the business and where we'll all be in ten years—every single day.

## WHEN BLOOD LIES

So Erica's desire to talk scared me. On the one hand, I was not passionate about my beat. On the other, it was a job. And a good union one at that. I am the child of immigrants. My Scottish upbringing couldn't help but make me realize that a good union job has value.

"Have a seat, Erica," I said, indicating the simple canvas chair near my desk. No one ever sits in it but my brother, Kyle. And only when he comes to get me for lunch and finds me on the phone.

She looked from the chair to me and then back at the chair, eyebrows raised. Like the very idea of sitting there startled her. She didn't answer me, nor did she take the chair, opting instead to perch on the corner of my desk. It was a maneuver that would have looked awkward had I done it. But she managed it with the elegance of a movie star, one long, silk-clad leg crossed over the other, as if the whole thing were a photo shoot.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I think I’ll stand.”  
I didn’t point out that she already was not.

“You wanted to speak with me?” I prompted.

“Did I?” She looked amused. I didn’t say anything. “Oh, well, I guess I did,” she said, examining the tips of her flawless nails.

I prepared myself for the worst, not even sure what the worst might be.

She began without preamble on the topic I’d expected. I could feel my heart sinking at her words.

“As you know, we’ve been making certain...cutbacks.”

I didn’t say anything. Just looked at her. Of course I knew. Everyone knew. We could barely talk about anything else. And those of us still left at the paper walked around the emptier spaces in a kind of hush, waiting for something terrible to happen.

## WHEN BLOOD LIES

And now? It seemed like, for me, here it was. I had a flash of me working at a Denny's. Pancake-and-sausage-filled plates balanced precariously in my arms. My hair sticking out madly from beneath a cap and streaks of sweat running down my forehead, fortunately hiding the tears.

Erica was speaking. I forced myself back from my vision to hear her words.

"In fact, we've made enough of them now. Cutbacks. We're closing off this whole floor."

So that was it, then. I had no words. I wasn't trained to be anything other than a reporter.

"When?" I managed to squeak out. My throat felt dry, as if I hadn't spoken in a long time.

"Hmmmmmm?"

"How long do I have?"

"Have for what, dear girl?" The words

sounded affectionate, but I knew the tone. Erica was irritated.

“You know. Before I’m...out.” I had a vision of her calling security. Having me escorted out of the building, my personal stuff in a box in my arms, with a *Don’t let the door hit you on the way out*.

To my surprise, she put her head back and laughed. I knew that if she could have seen herself, she would never have done it again. The laughter changed her features. She went from composed and elegant—beautiful, really—to witch-ugly in a heartbeat.

“Oh, charming girl,” she said when her laughter had run out. “You think you’re fired. How very sweet.”

Now I was the one who was feeling irritated. “You mean I’m not?”

“No. Definitely not. For one thing, if you were being fired, there’d be someone here from HR. Not me. And maybe some

sort of counselor. We're doing that now, you know. To help with the loss."

She looked at me like she expected something, and so I said, "Oh."

"No. It's me here because this isn't a matter for HR, really. Or not exactly. It's coming from the executive suite. And no one else likes dealing with this stuff. And I don't mind. Anyway, enough of that. All that really matters is that we're going to need to buy you a desk."

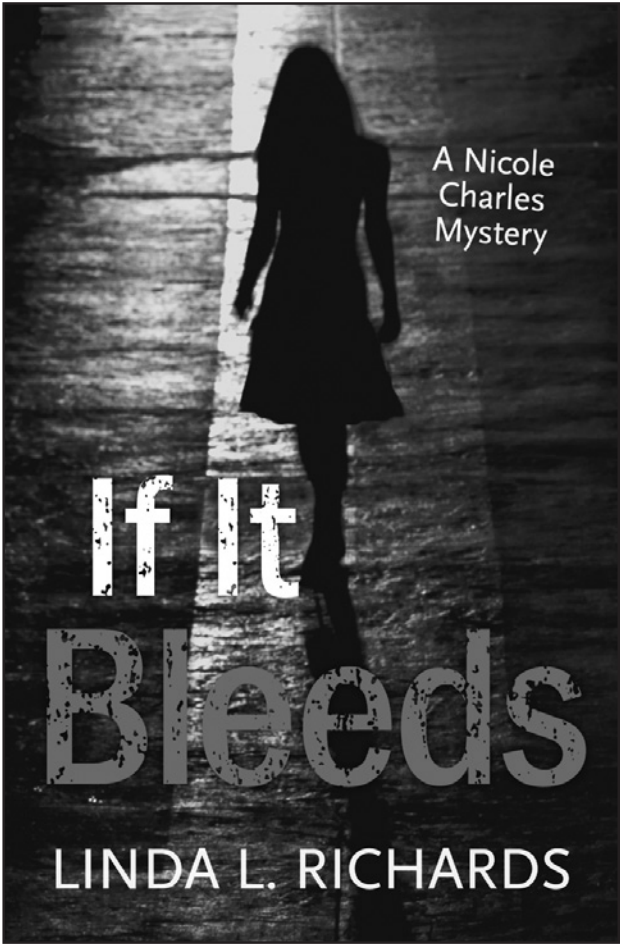
"Sorry?"

She looked at me for a moment with both eyebrows fully raised. I got the feeling she couldn't quite understand how smart I was not. And then she explained my professional future to me, slowly and carefully, as if she were speaking to a child. Then I understood quite quickly. It was a chain of events I'd seen happening in the office plenty over the last few months. Too much, in fact.



I was being downsized. That was the long and the short of it. Though not severely. I wasn't being cut out or cut back, but my desk was. Or, rather, the space it was taking. I'd still have a job, was how Erica explained it. My mail would still come to the newspaper for me to pick up there. When I needed to take a meeting in an office environment, I could still do it at the newspaper. But the rest of it, I was going to have to do from home.

**LINDA L. RICHARDS** is a journalist and award-winning author. She is the founding editor of *January Magazine*, one of the Internet's most respected voices about books. She is also the author of six other novels and several works of nonfiction and is on the faculty of the Simon Fraser University Summer Publishing Workshops. In 2010, Richards's novel *Death Was in the Picture* won the Panik Award for Best Los Angeles-Based Noir. For more information, visit [www.lindalrichards.com](http://www.lindalrichards.com) or [@lindalrichards](https://twitter.com/lindalrichards).



A Nicole  
Charles  
Mystery

# If It Bleeds

LINDA L. RICHARDS

**M**ore than anything, Nicole Charles wants to be a real reporter. She didn't go to journalism school to work the society pages. One night while covering a gallery opening, she discovers a dead body in a dark alley. Suddenly Nicole is right in the middle of the biggest story of the year. It's the chance of a lifetime. Too bad someone had to die to make it happen.

“Like any well written novella, author, Richards hooks the reader within thirty seconds: west coast Vancouver atmosphere, tight plot, judicious back story, dialogue and a body. Add the tension of a newsroom full of testosterone, egos and dubious fair play and you get...*If It Bleeds*...read it. Hope there is more to come.”

—Don Graves