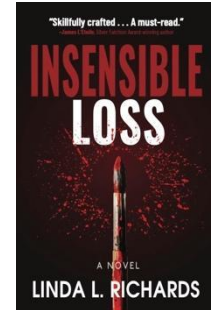


Insenible Loss

by Linda L. Richards



CHAPTER ONE

I am gazing into an abyss. When I plant my feet on the edge of the cliff, all I see is a canyon yawning below me. I see the canyon, and my feet, tightly laced into trail runners. Below and beyond my tidy feet, red rock can be seen everywhere, edges softened by millennia, but deadly still. And steep.

Arcadia Bluff. It has a gentle sound, this location. But the reality is anything but gentle. A rough rawness that would seem to be able to accommodate anything one pitched in that direction. Wild west. There's that, but also more. The secrets of an earth so raw and new, it doesn't know what it wants to be when it grows up.

It happens that the physical landscape matches what is going on in my heart, but this is mere coincidence. And anyway, everything is connected.

I am in a remote part of one of the largest national parks in the United States, and I am all alone, but for my dog.

Again, aside from that dog, I feel as if I have been alone for my whole life, but that isn't true. What *is* true: everyone I've ever loved is dead. Some of them by my hand.

But all of that was before. Here is now.

I stand on Arcadia Bluff and the canyon below my feet seems to careen out endlessly. The aforementioned abyss. The red rock, dotted by trees and even the occasional cactus, seeming to sprout from the rock at odd angles, because the perpendicular drop doesn't support normal growth.

In the distance, far below me, I see a sliver of silvery blue. Maybe it's a river or the edge of a lake, but when I look straight down, between my feet, I see nothing but rock and cactus and peril. It gives me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach to look down, so I try to avoid doing that.

We drove in my old Volvo to get here, the dog and I. The car is dear to me. I've had it a long time and it performs elegantly. Like a tank. An elegant tank. It is a premium car, or it was, but now it is ancient. In good condition, but unremarkable, one of the things about it that I've always cherished: it has never drawn comment. And no one would suspect that under the trunk's false bottom they would find two Bersa Thunder 380 handguns and a whole lot of cash. The car is now my home, my armory, and my bank. Who needs anything more?

Well, maybe I do. But never mind. The journey, that's the thing.

To get here, the path we traveled in that old Volvo is a forestry road. The road is marked on maps as little more than a trail. It is unpaved and unremarked. And putting it that way—the path we traveled—makes it sound like a destination. It wasn't that. It is just the place where, for the moment, we have ended up. When this moment is complete, we'll travel some more. Maybe come to something else. It's what we have now, this life made of almost nothing. As you will have guessed, this state of near nothing didn't happen overnight.

A while ago I left behind the hollowed-out shell of the life I had created. The sham. The farce. The life in which I lived while I processed all of my grief.

Tried to process all of my grief.

Do you know what I discovered? You don't process grief. It lives inside you, waiting for you to trot through the minefield that is life. Waiting for you to make just that one step and the grief explodes back into your face. If you were to process it—like cheese, like peanut butter—at a certain point it would be smooth and glossy and perfectly digestible. Consume it and forget it. But grief isn't like that. It waits around because all it actually wants is to bite you in the ass.

I sound bitter. The tonic in a vodka drink. I don't mean to, but there you are. Sometimes what you feel overrides everything you know.

After I left said reconstructed and hollowed-out life, I didn't know what to do with myself. I was basically—entirely?—homeless. My dog. And me. Homeless and aimless. I had my car. Several handguns. A few small things that I had come to treasure. And a whole whack of cash. The cash was necessary, because this is what I no longer possessed: any form of identification or credit cards. Or anything that said I was a person at all. I had simply disappeared. You mostly can't do that forever.

A myriad of small things will trip you up. You can't travel by air. You can't book a motel. You can't call an Uber. Or bank. When you start to think about it, there are more things you can't do than what you can. After a while you need a landing spot. And you need a plan.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Here goes another run.

Once upon a time—like a fairy story—I was a mom. A wife. A cornerstone of my community. I had a house. A pebble-tech pool.

A minivan with leather seats and televised communication. I had all of the accoutrements of suburbia, right down to the suburb. Tree-lined streets that I traveled to get to my job and take my kid to his school. I had attractive but not fiendishly manicured lawns. A home. That's what it was. My husband, my son. Me. We were a family. We had a home.

One day there was an accident. People were killed. My child. Ultimately my husband, too. I was unexpectedly alone. All I had was a whole bunch of mortgaged crap I hadn't even dreamed of wanting in the first place. After a while of being alone and having no money, I needed a new job and I started taking contracts to kill people.

You see how my narrative breaks down right there? I mean, everything was going along well, from a storytelling standpoint. I'd engaged your sympathy. Maybe even your interest. And then—boom!—I blow all that goodwill with a simple revelation. Yes. Killing people. For money. What kind of nice lady does that? No kind, that's what. But it let's you know at least part of why I run.

And so here we are. Standing on the edge of a cliff. And I'm not expecting to jump.

CHAPTER TWO

Lately I've noticed that I have become afraid of the dark.

It doesn't make sense to me. I am aware of no new trauma that might have led to this condition. Nyctophobia. I have read about it. I have googled, as they say.

I've "done some research." So I know a little about the condition that currently plagues me. I've read that it is fairly normal or, at least, not uncommon. I've read, also, that fear is healthy. In our natural state, I guess, fear is what keeps us alive and safe.

For months, I have found myself waking from peaceful slumber and moving to instant terror when the dark is encountered. The dog smells the fear, or at least that is what I guess. When I wake in this way, I can hear him rustling about as he comes to me. He lays his muzzle on whatever part of me he can reach: my hand or my arm or even a bit of toe. And he'll stay there like that, breathing quietly, until my demons have passed, or I turn on a light.

Usually, I turn on a light.

There are things you can do, that's what I've read, as well. And there is evolved language around it. You can deal with your triggers or work at desensitizing yourself to darkness. This sort of healthy self-examination has never been my forte, and so after a while, I come up with my own solution: I begin to sleep with the light on. It keeps the demons at bay.

All of this would probably be of more concern if we had a home anymore, the dog and I. But we don't. As I said, we are traveling, no destination in mind other than a vague and distant future that at present has no shape.

Every day, we cover many miles in the Volvo. The forestry roads in Arizona's Cathedral National Park seem endless. The park itself seems endless, as well. We keep traveling, only occasionally surfacing for fuel or other supplies. We do that at small gas stations either within the park or just on the outskirts. Places that take cash and don't ask questions. Then we delve right back into the depths of the park. We just drive and drive and drive, stopping only for calls of the body, as well as those infrequent times when I run out of steam. At those times, since we are out—literally and actually—in the middle of nowhere, I just stop the car, then pitch the small tent that lives over top of the false bottom of the trunk. And then I try to rest.

The closest I ever get to actual rest is when the dog settles down somewhere near me, then gets to snoring peacefully. Something about that sound is hypnotic to me. I'll surf behind it until, sometimes, falling under the spell of the simple, primal cadence, I fall asleep. In and out, in and out. I float away on a column of dog snores that lead to core sleep, when my subconscious scrambles to make up for time lost.

In the morning we pack up and head out again. Where are we going? Why? I don't have answers. I don't even have questions. All I know is that everything is behind me. I'm not hopeful about what is in front of me, but it's better than going back.

Everyone knows that you can't go back.