

## Dead West

**Linda L. Richards**

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If there were such a thing as a list of do's and don'ts for a hired assassin, "Don't get involved with the target" would probably be at the top of the "don'ts" column. Linda L. Richards's propulsive novel *Dead West* entertains this scenario, resulting in a story brimming with psychological insights and thrills.

Katie is a formidable contract killer. But when she's ordered to eliminate Cameron, a rancher who's passionate about rehabilitating wild horses, her attempts to get close to her target result in unexpected romantic overtures and a crisis of conscience. Matters get even more complicated when Cameron disappears; Katie suspects that a rival rancher is behind the deed.

While *Dead West* has exciting moments, including a suspenseful passage in which Katie infiltrates an enemy stronghold on a rescue mission, it is primarily a sturdy character study. Katie's inner life is vivid; she struggles with paranoia and doubts about her profession. Her existential musings add weight and dry wit. While she's super competent, she's also appealing and human: she takes a painful tumble into cacti; she is momentarily taken in by an opponent's ploy.

*Dead West* packs plenty of surprises. Katie's assignment morphs into a mystery that leads from Arizona to rural Maryland, giving her the chance to trot out her prime investigative skills. An unexpected friendship with a young man who believes that Katie is his mother adds further drama; she contemplates a life that allows for connection and kindness, even as she risks her employers' wrath. And even as the rat-tat-tat prose moves along, there are moments for picturesque descriptions of Arizona's Cathedral Forest.

Capped with a bittersweet cut-off to easy paths toward happiness that leaves other ways open, *Dead West* is a rare thriller that is both tough and tender.

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