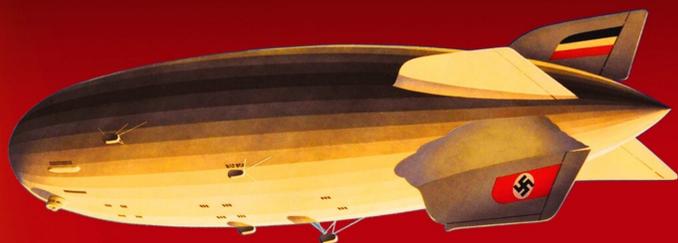


LITERARY TITAN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

T. E. MACARTHUR



A PLACE OF
FOG AND
MURDER

A LOU TANNER P.I. MYSTERY
DIESELPUNK SAN FRANCISCO

T.E. MAC ARTHUR

A PLACE OF
FOG AND
MURDER

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In memory of Tay McArthur, Mary-Margaret Gridley McArthur, and Patrick James Lacy. You are deeply missed.

Author's Note

Welcome to a strange and wonderful Science Fiction 1930s America. Dieselpunk meets Raymond Chandler. Break out your copies of "The Big Sleep" and "The Thin Man" when you're done here. Pull up a bottle of Old Forester Bourbon and a pack of Chesterfields (actually, you can skip the later – please,) and put on some Billy Holiday. Let go of everything you thought you knew about the time between the world wars, femme fatales, hardboiled detectives, and technology. In short – have a good time – my treat!

Lady Shamus,
damn right that's me.
Flatfoot in heels.

THE CITY AS PROLOGUE

There are different types of danger out in the Big, Bad World. Of them, crime is the biggest. Every crime comes down to greed and fear. And every criminal is either a coward, a blackmailer, or a bully – sometimes they're all of those at the same damn time. And sometimes, they're the good guys.

I speak from experience.

-Lou Tanner, P.I., Notes for female Pemberton Graduates, 1935

The City was a haunting specter tonight. Eerie lights seeped through fingers of thick fog, revealing high-set rainclouds — when you could see them — in the color of dried blood and decomposing yellow. With the late fall comes all the dying. The trees, the leaves, the long days of summer, and the patience of one's fellow man to remember his manners and to keep his homicidal desires to himself.

It was that sort of evening, too. Wet as an overworked cafe dishwasher and colder than a corpse's embrace. *That* sort of evening.

I shoulda' stayed inside with a snoot full of bourbon and a Guy Lombardo concert on the radio. "*Shoulda*" being the operative word.

Look, every city has its tales of wasted youth, unapologetic greed, and emboldened desperation. The deep wounds of history are nothing more than slashes between those who have and those who

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have not. I've been both of those, up and down, rich and poor, always riding on the hills in life's little cable car.

Such things make people hate big cities.

Me? I like the City.

I guess I do belong here, if only in the shadows.

But, San Francisco, *my city*, brightens all its dark and dingy alleys with unique charms I can't always put my finger on.

Sure, we have old fashioned cable cars left over from the last century. The Ferry Building and the Palace of Fine Arts, still standing after the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition. The Fisherman's Wharf Amusement Park. Chinatown and its exotic clubs. The Zakheim Murals on the Union Pacific rail aqueducts. The Trolleys and Nightcrawlers. The Montgomery Street Aero & Rail Station. All the architecture of allure.

And all of it a façade cloaking a city hanging on by a thread. Nuthin' but pretty dressing, like a prostitute robed in a hand-me-down Adrian gown she found tossed in the trash by some respectable person who wouldn't be caught dead in anything so out of date.

Any nostalgic, wistful thoughts passed right through my brain and vanished into the bleak fog.

Nostalgia is fine, so long as you are remembering only the good ole' times.

And in this business, my business, and in this city, my city, good ole' times are damn rare and precious.

When one looks for the dirty and the ugly underside of civilization, one can't clutch their pearls when it shows up on a dead body.

CHAPTER ONE

Nobody warns you that the universe is out to get you.

Nobody.

In fact, everyone will flat out lie to you, fibbing gleefully about how everything's going to be just fine. If you ask a dead woman, robbed of her future by a murderer, she probably won't lean on the side of optimism.

-Lou Tanner, P.I., Notes for female Pemberton Graduates, 1935

I was hearing things, like desperate cries in the night, the shuffle of predatory feet, and ghosts of murderers past sneering at the dumb dame all alone in the fog and rain.

Me. I'm that dumb dame.

My mother called me Lillian Lucille.

My friends? They call me Lou.

I call myself Private Investigator.

And there I was, the lone woman on a dark, empty street. No excuses — I accepted that job, never mind the blackmail that made me do it. Screw it. If I had to do this, then I had to do it right.

Right?

Anxiety kept rapping on my head, like a drunk trying to get back into the gin joint that had just thrown him out. That rasping, demanding voice kept crying wolf in my ears. I wasn't getting paid for that job. I was alone and wearing the equivalent of a neon sign over me saying, "Come get me."

I shook it off. This was neither the time nor the place.

As I glanced around at the worn neighborhood, with its former glory dwindling away in flaked paint chips, broken windows, and shattered wine bottles, I couldn't help but take stock of my own deteriorating situation, starting with the fact that I was in the Bayview section of town, within spitting distance of *the Pointe*.

Yeah, that place.

Nobody honest ever wants to go to *the Pointe*.

But there I was. It was the last place I wanted to be.

All those depressed rows of buildings could easily be my reality, at a second's notice.

This, or prison.

Uncle Joe would be mortified.

I lit up a Lucky Strike and felt the soothing balm of nicotine fill my lungs. My nerves loosened their death grip on my heart.

It rained for a moment, then returned to heavy, spitting fog. Be nice if it would make up its mind.

Was I nervous? Damn right I was — being human after all. Who wouldn't be, under the circumstances? But I'm no fainting lily. I'm also no Automaton or Robot. 'Tons and 'Bots aren't allowed to do what I do anyway.

An occasional sedan or coupe rolled by with those new-fangled darkened windows, blacking out the driver, and headlamps useless after six feet — a secretive hiding place on wheels. Their tires sucked up the water oozing down from the skies and splattered it in a wider pattern along the road, hissing as they went. Empty corpses of metal? Ghost cars continuing into the night?

I've also got one hell of an imagination.

Then, my heart leapt. There was a Nightcrawler coming down the hill. About time. The sleek, white, bullet-shaped vehicle was

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headed down the single track that ran past me and the sight of it let some air out of my over-filled anxiety balloon.

Well, damn it. The Available Sign was off. It already had a passenger. It streaked past, splashing some water on the cab stand, and me.

I was alone again. There wasn't enough good light at the cab stand to let me finish reading the magazine getting soggy in my satchel. Not precisely a good night.

I had one last errand to run for the biggest jerk on planet Earth, Agent Jim Mason. This wasn't the worst one of his many unpaid jobs, but it was the last one, or so he'd said. All I wanted was for him to release my license and badge. He promised to shred his false report to the War Department, the one that could and would land me in the slammer for the rest of my days. Lousy blackmailer. I tried not to spit and cuss. Not a pretty behavior for a lady, or so my mother was always reminding me.

The *Pemberton Correspondence School of Private Investigation's* essential course book and manual had nothing on what to do when the Shamus is the victim. I had memorized every chapter, and that topic didn't make the cut. I walked into this with my eyes open and my brain asleep.

I let a long exhale empty my lungs into a spectral billow in front of me.

My disguise, the one Agent Mason ordered me not to use, itched. I don't take orders from anyone. Not my style. Sure, I could leave off the disguise, sure, if I wanted everyone to know what I was up to and exactly who I was. Which I don't. Expose my identity during one of his jobs? Not a chance.

Normally, I pass for Myrna Loy, the actress. Dark hair, dark eyes, wicked jaw. Not tonight. I did everything necessary to look plain, dull, and invisible.

And it had worked. So far.

Now, "*plain, dull, and invisible*" was sopping and exhausted from running errands for an ungrateful former-client turned first-rate blackmailer. And, I was tired of knowing things — mostly things I didn't want to know.

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Twenty minutes since I pushed the ‘Crawler signal. So tempting to hammer that button again and again, cathartic in fact, but it wouldn’t help — the eye-burning beacon lighting up the sky above me blazed as it was supposed to.

Damn, it’s quiet. Like a ghoul is creeping up on you quiet.

Nothing but the low, mechanized rumble from the Hunter’s Pointe Militia Base. I was far too close to that place for my comfort.

In this silence, every twitch and shake of a leaf might as well be a clap of thunder. My ears strained for fog horns, arguing couples, stumbling drunks — anything. Hell, the latest Fats Waller tune on a badly-tuned radio somewhere would be perfect. My ride showing up would be the best of all.

I could hear my own heartbeat.

Hairs on my neck, those not stuck there by the damp, stood on end.

Smell. More like, stench. I was acutely aware of every scent in the air, like a predator being stalked by something much, much bigger than itself. Sharp. Decaying. Filthy. Moist.

I held my cigarette up to take another drag and saw my hand was trembling. Must be the chill in the air. I don’t scare easily — that was my story and I planned on sticking to it.

And it was too quiet.

San Francisco is a damn big city, despite its small real estate footprint. Damn big cities make damn big noises.

It was deathly quiet.

Then the Golden Gate fog horn moaned, calling out like a prognosticator of doom beyond the horizon.

My shoulders relaxed. Hey, it was sound. That creepy horn worked fine for me.

Footsteps.

Short stride. Fast. Cloppy — maybe a hollow heel. A woman’s shoes. Like my mother used to wear. Scuffing. Sliding. Irregular rhythm. My guess? She was moving fast but looking back to see what was behind her. It tripped up her pace.

My hand dropped to my hidden gun. Fingers slid hopefully to the .41 Remington Double Derringer holstered in a stocking holster,

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clipped on my leg. The cab stand was partially shadowed by an awning that covered it and the open space between it and a dilapidated phone booth that hadn't been serviced in years. I just fit in that small gap and it was a good place to stay low. Unseen.

Those footsteps were close. I'd lay a bet they were coming from that alley one door up from the stand.

A trickle of water poured from the corner of the awning and splashed on the asphalt below, spitting droplets in all directions.

I'd looked down that alley before calling my hack. Its dark outline was only pronounced by the remnants of a neon sign that once read, "Open 24 Hrs." The windows on the building, a former Mom-n-Pop, were boarded up. Only the "O" and "N" still blinked and glowed. This had been a neighborhood with hope — once upon a time. Before the Pointe.

Footsteps. Slowing. Coming closer.

I braced and pushed harder into the shadows between the stand and the phone booth. I could be wrong, but I didn't think the alley went through to another street. At the end was a cigarette advertisement, painted on the back of a brick building from the next street over, lit by one phosphorescent lamp.

I pushed harder into my shadows.

A gal rounded the corner from the alleyway, rushed past me, splashed my feet with puddle juice, and hurried along without slowing down to say sorry. She didn't see me. She was covered head to foot in expensive looking clothes. She hugged the shadows and moved without a steady gait. I got the feeling she'd melt into the building's brickwork if she could. Her every move said she wanted to be somewhere else, fast, like death was right on her heels and she owed it a gambling debt.

Was it the weather she was dodging? Yeah, right. Any gal who willingly runs in those heels must be afraid of something, and it isn't a light rain shower.

At the end of the block, she stopped and looked both ways. Turning slightly, she noticed the cab signal shooting the company's emblem onto the clouds above. Her hands released their death-grip on her coat and fell to her sides, still knotted up into fists.

She wasn't just afraid, she was terrified.

Then, that was when I heard the other steps — following her route down the alley.

So did she.

The gal froze and gripped the collar of her coat tightly to her throat. The shadow from her hat covered most of her face. I could see that her lips were parted, panting, waiting to scream.

Heavy footsteps echoed from the alley. Flat-footed. Thudding. Regular, like a trained athlete sprinting to the end.

Masculine.

Call it my *Women's Intuition*, but it was obvious to me, the gal needed help. I got into this business to help.

I dropped my cigarette into the puddle at my feet, crushed it with my toe, and walked out from the shadows, getting drenched in the process. The scuff of my shoes on the sidewalk and my sudden appearance made her jump. She stifled the scream she'd almost released.

"You look lost," I said, a little loudly. Not the wittiest thing to say, but I waved like an idiot, trying to appear to be Jane Average.

"No. I ... ah ... need to find someone. I mean, I'm looking for ..." She walked a few steps toward me. I still couldn't see her face for the hat brim pulled low and the coat collar pulled high, but she was thin, had a fashionable silhouette, and a voice that was a little high pitched. Fear was gripping her. "Actually, I am all turned around," she admitted too quickly and sickeningly-sweet for my comfort. "I need to get over to ... another neighborhood."

Thought you were looking for someone or someone looking for you?

Her story was adjusting to the circumstances. I knew the type — truth was just a tool of the moment. Okay, so, she was still in some sort of trouble, and I didn't let go of my *Galahad* response just because she was struggling to keep her story straight. I kept smiling for her and listening for those other footsteps.

Now? Nothing.

Not even a cousin, twice removed, of an echo.

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The masculine footsteps had stopped. Maybe, he was waiting to see what I'd do, or what she'd do now that I was in the picture. More gut instinct here, but it wasn't hard to put this scenario into clear scope.

She approached me, and her voice had a little throb in it, right where she'd put it on purpose. "Your 'Crawler is coming. May I take it?"

And leave me here in the rain, with someone tailing you? Mere blocks from the creepy, secretive goings-on over at the Pointe?

Hell no.

"It's very important I get where I'm going fast," she pleaded.

Glancing up the street, and over toward the alleyway, I couldn't see anyone. I hadn't imagined those footsteps, had I? "We can share. That'd be fine by me. I'd like to get out of the ..." I let my gesturing at the clouds finish my sentence.

"Oh, yes, of course. Of course, we can share, that would be great, these cabs take so long, you know, and it would be better to share the cost anyway, don't you think, two gals off to the races ought to share a cab, are you heading over to Union Street? Everyone's always going over there." she quivered, thinking her babbling made her sound confident.

"That's us, two gals who shouldn't be out alone, on a day like this. You sure you don't need more than just a cab? Maybe a policeman or —"

"No, no! Just a ride. It's all I need."

"It's none of my business but you look to be in trouble."

She opened her mouth. Something told me that she wanted to talk. "I'm ... I'm ... wait, here's the cab," she pointed.

Boy-howdy, you can bank on 'Crawlers having good timing, especially when you don't need them to. The mechanized cab was heading down the hill in our direction.

Okay, we'd get in the cab and I'd get her to start talking again. Not that I really had time for this, but I sometimes just can't help myself. Shamus to the rescue.

"Look at me, all discombobulated. I'm just running terribly late, I'm all confused, silly me." She had that affected, Mid-Atlantic

accent I knew all too well. “I hope you haven’t been waiting too long, I mean, the weather is dreadful, don’t you think so, it’s just dreadful and I didn’t expect to be out, I would have packed an umbrella ...” We were back to the babbling.

The ‘Crawler’s locks popped for us. The passenger section slid out and she slid partially into the seats, not leaving enough room for me to get in. Nice. I’ll need to get pushy. I’ll need to get a good look at her too, once we were underway.

Her hands were shaking. She grabbed off her gloves before sliding a little further in. Still not enough room for me ... oh Wow-wee, she had a rock on her finger worth twenty-G’s if a dime. It found light in this darkness to sparkle.

“Latin Quarter, Broadway at Columbus,” she said to the brass speaker-horn. ‘Crawler, driver-less cabs were operated by dispatchers down by the wharf.

Honey, weren’t you going to Union Street? Ah Truth, the ever-flexible Demon.

Her head was covered first by a patterned scarf of roses and leaves, silk to be sure, and then a grey Fedora pulled way down. Gloves were now sitting in her lap. Overcoat, it still taking up too much of the seat. I’d needed to get closer to gander a look at her, while she faked a giggle and a fussed over making room for me. Finally. I could play along for a while longer.

Perky nose, in silhouette, plus pouty lips. Young, I thought, but couldn’t confirm it until I had a chance to look at her skin and eyes. Her jawline hadn’t started its slow descent into antiquity, as mine had.

A kicked-bottle made a startling racket in the dark. A man stopped where the neon light pierced into the alley, and faced me, knife in hand. That was definitely a knife. No imagining that. While it gleamed in the street light, he drew back so his face remained shadowed.

“Hey, you, hold it right there!” I shouted. Oh yeah, Lulu, that move was genius. Pure genius.

He retreated further back on seeing me point at him and turned on his heel to flee the scene.

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“Stay here,” I commanded the scared gal.

I had my heater out from under my skirts in less than two seconds. An old-fashioned weapon, but damn if it didn't do the job.

Pushing away from the cab, I braced against the brick building and checked down the alley. A figure, in silhouette, down by the lit cigarette ad, ran away, stumbling, and trying to not be there in a big hurry. His confidence level had changed; he wasn't running as surely as before. I moved quickly into the alley, gun held up with both hands.

He stopped only long enough to get a look me over; not that I got anything better than a crappy eye-balling of him. His silhouette gave me bits to mark him by, not much else. Overcoat. Narrow brimmed hat. Compared with the trash bin he ran past, I decided he was tall. His coat could conceal virtually any body size, but my quick impression was one of athletic health. Not much to go on, but better than nothing.

“Miss,” I called back toward the ‘Crawler, “if that guy was following you, I think you can relax now. We should take you to the police, so you can —”

The cab door slammed shut and the ‘Crawler sped away.

She left me here.

Alone.

Knowing someone had been chasing down the alley.

Damn it.

The rain started coming down in much bigger drops and I swear I thought I saw a flash of lightning.

The fog horn cried out and I detected a slight snicker in it.

Abyssinia, doll, as they say. Be seen' ya.

Whatever trouble you're in, Sweetheart, isn't my business anymore. I sure hope no one leaves you stranded in the rain.

Grabbing up my damp skirt to put away my heater, I cursed her a couple more times.

It got quiet again and I felt conspicuously alone. Again. After listening for anything normal, the wailing trumpet of Louis Armstrong started floating down from one of the apartments to challenge the foghorns to a duel.

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Wet, or cold, or both, I still had a job to do. One way or another, I was getting soaked.

Did I mention I could be a real sap sometimes?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T.E. MacArthur is a *New York Times* best-selling author – okay, that’s *not true*, she’s still working on it. There are, however, more than seven novels and novellas with her name on them, including the multiple award-winning paranormal thriller, **The Skin Thief**. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her cat, Onyx Calypso, in the Lower *Catswold* District of her apartment.

Please come see what she’s up next to at
www.TEMacArthur.com

