

THE VESSEL

The Praetorius Agency Files
File No. Three
SNEAK PEEK

T. E. MACARTHUR



Indies United Publishing House, LLC

Copyright © 2025 by T.E. MacArthur.
Published by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

First Edition
First Printing, 2025
Cover design by T.E. MacArthur

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ISBN: 978-1-64456-813-2 [KDP Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-814-9 [D2D Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-815-6 [ePub]

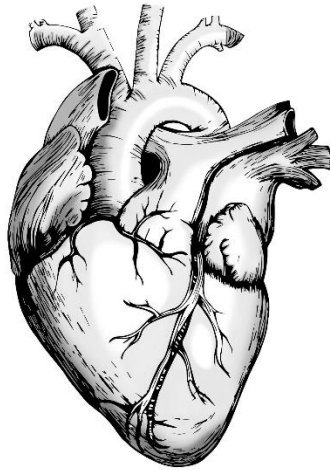
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025903492



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC
P.O. BOX 3071
QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

www.indiesunited.net

THE VESSEL



THE PRAETORIUS AGENCY FILES
FILE NO. THREE



PROLOGUE

SHUDDERSTON PSYCHIATRIC SECURITY FACILITY
SUBDIVISION: MONTFORT PSYCHIATRIC UNIT
TEXAS STATE PENITENTIARY SYSTEM,
LUBBOCK, TEXAS

JUMPING LIGHTS AND BLARING BEEPS BLURRED INTO ONE LONG, STRAINED ANNOUNCEMENT: the crazed mass murderer was finally dead. Took him long enough, someone muttered. No one in the room mourned and not all had the same reason for it.

“Shoulda’ been on Death Row for what he’d done. Would have volunteered to gas him to Hell myself, but somebody thought he was too crazy, so y’all got ‘em instead.” The cop took a cigarette out of his mouth only long enough to blow smoke down onto the old man’s cooling corpse. “Good luck tellin’ his *flock*. Gonna’ break their insane little hearts.” Ignoring the noises of protest, he jammed the stinking cigarette back between his teeth and left without so much as a goodbye, thank you, or a glance over his shoulder at the body. The cloud of putrid smoke lingered behind.

The emergency doctors had barely placed the sheet over the old man’s face when the Surgeon cleared his throat, gently indicating his presence. Three facility administrators and a young woman in a pristine lab coat stared at him as he intruded into their official recording of the event. Beyond him, only those four people remained.

“Y’all here to finish up? Frankly, I believe an autopsy is unnecessary. The man was 103-years-old,” the lead administrator noted, shaking his head. “End of an era.”

The hospital intern next to him peeked up over her glasses at the administrator, the newly arrived Surgeon, then down at the body

on the gurney. “How long was ...” she checked her clipboard, “Mr. Marshall here?”

“Reverend Marshall. Since 1989.”

“Decades.” Her voice hinted at a small amount of surprise but not too much. She was expected to remain objective. “Official time of death noted at 11:57 PM, and witnessed by,” she named each administrator as she indicated him with her pen, “As recorded by EMTs responding to the ward and corroborated by Doctor Saul Williamsen, inmate Cliven Earl Marshal, age 103, was found unresponsive in his room. After basic triage, and in adherence to the decease’s DNR, no further efforts towards resuscitation were attempted.” She paused solemnly. “We still need to have actual Cause of Death determined, then —”

“Hate,” the older of the officials muttered.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Cause of Death: Self-poisoning by Hatred. If he wasn’t preaching it, he was the recipient of it.”

Another added, “Geez, you can smell it on him. Anybody else, I’d say it was just old man stink — but on this guy?”

“Surprised he doesn’t wear brimstone for aftershave.”

The intern’s eyes widened, and she bit her bottom lip. None of what was said made it into her report.

The Surgeon nodded once, pretending to agree, and moved his hands behind his back so that the others could not see his white-knuckled fists. “I will take care of the rudimentary requirements. A report should be ready for final signatures by tomorrow?” He asked hopefully. *That should meet your requirements, yes? I know you want him out of your hands. Out of sight — out of mind.*

“That’s fine.”

“Y’all ever sit through one ‘a his sermons? Jesus Christ! Y’all woulda’ thought he was trying to bring on the Apocalypse all on his own. Craziest freaking hour I ever spent ...” The committee of administrators, none of whom produced a smile or a glance of pity for the dead man, filed out, mumbling about the old man’s sermons, leaving the swinging door pounding a dying rhythm as it closed.

Good.

The intern, however, didn’t move.

"You needn't stay. This won't take long. There won't be anything of interest."

"I should stay," she said, barely looking up from her clipboard.

"You don't need to."

"Need? No. But I do want to see him ... especially his heart." She flipped a couple of pages on the clipboard. "I caught a quick glimpse of this earlier. Considering his age, his heart is remarkably healthy. Doesn't that intrigue y'all?"

"Not particularly. He was a ..." *Think!* "An advocate for healthy living."

"I wish he'd given his body to science. If he was just a health nut, I sure as hell would like to know what he was eating. I mean, look at his BP and Ecco over the last couple of years. I swear, that's what I'd expect to see on a 40-year-old man's chart." She snapped shut the metal clipboard. "Let's open him up."

This is becoming a bit more than just annoying. The Surgeon picked up a scalpel, adjusted the overhead lamp, and did his best to appear ready to start. *Go away.* He laid his hand on the chest of the corpse, pinching a bit of the sheet to indicate he was in control. "I can manage this alone."

"But y'all shouldn't. This man is a medical miracle." She snagged the top edge and hesitated for a second. Her expression was one expected on a child touching slime for the first time. She jerked her hand away, confused, then brazenly reached again to pull back the sheet further than they had during the official declaration of death. Amazed, she yanked the overhead lamp down even closer to the cadaver.

The Surgeon tried to catch the sheet to put it back but failed.

A gasp caught in her throat. She reached out and ran her fingers down the gruesome scars on the old man's chest. "Do y'all see this?"

Don't touch.

"These scars?" she continued, "They look like he's gone through chest organ transplants." The intern whipped open the clipboard and showed the Surgeon what he already knew. "Mr.

Marshall's lungs are ... my God, do y'all see this? Y'all know what this looks like? I bet he's had lung *and* heart transplants."

Get out. "They are done every day." *Just leave.*

"Not to geriatric inmates — those scars aren't old, they're relatively new. Maybe in the last few years, which would have put him in his late eighties at the earliest. Probably when Mr. Marshall was in his nineties."

Shut up. "I believe it's Reverend Marshall."

"Doctor Vance —"

"You know me?"

"Of course. I read your paper on transplant rejection in the AMA Journal. I recognize your photograph."

Damn it.

"Doctor, you'd know better than any other. No one gets transplants at that age. And his records don't indicate any of the necessary medications needed to avoid rejection of tissue —"

Stupid girl.

The scalpel was too handy and time too limited.

The intern clutched her throat as she bled out, unable to scream. Her knees buckled first, then the rest of her collapsed. It all happened so fast. So easily.

As a woman, she wasn't important. *Never was, never would be.* He needed to work quickly. From his pockets, he removed the Sacred Text and Pure Instrument and laid them near the head of the old man. The organ transport box, already prepared, lay open and waiting. Hardly appropriate for the Sacred Vessel — the box was temporary but desperately necessary.

Making terrible gurgling noises, clutching her throat, the intern crawled away from the gurney.

He needed to be careful, or he might slip in her blood and do real damage to himself or the Preacher. He had only seconds to work. Magic could be seen by all, even the unworthy.

Snapping on new gloves that did not have the intern's arterial spray all over them, he began reading from the Sacred Text. The Pure Instrument replaced the profane scalpel in his hands. Everything with its proper name and proper placement was ready. Magic could begin.

Heaviness filled the room from where it had been waiting, dampening sound, swallowing any warmth. An odd stillness set in. A pause. The moment.

The air shimmered and spun — creating a vortex at its beginnings. The brightness burned the air, smelling like an electrical fire behind a wall. The Surgeon raised the Instrument into the air, then quickly sliced it through the graying flesh of the old man. The scalpel's sharpness met no resistance from the loose skin. The Sacred Magic would provide what little of the cauterizing that was necessary to preserve the heart. Clamping arteries and veins wasn't an issue — the Preacher's old body was dead already.

Inside the chest cavity, the heart was still and darkening. As the powerful vortex above dropped its tail into the old man's open chest, the heart began to stir. Blood circulated in and out of the muscle, glowing as if lava filled the arteries and veins, mixing and changing within the vortex before returning to the organ. The heart itself burned and glowed.

The Surgeon moved quickly, one of many skills he was known for. Efficiently, he disconnected the heart and lifted it into the air — into the vortex. It twitched and pumped against his fingers, hot and sticky. The words he repeated were forceful and tasted intense in his mouth. Each phrase brought bolts of energy to his body, to his hands, and to the glowing organ he held aloft.

Time, however, was not always the friend of ritual. Not even with the Sacred Magic. Someone might see this.

The Surgeon set the excited, beating heart into the organ transplant case where it shimmered in a protective spell. A limited, protective spell. *Success for now.*

One more thing.

The Preacher needed a means to translate himself into his new life. Right now, he needed a temporary Carrier too remain vigilant over the body he would soon possess. Seizing a bone saw, the Surgeon cut the dead body's arm off, below the elbow. Placing the appendage beside the heart, he sensed the spiritual presence the Preacher had attached to the limb. Preservation of the heart, intact, was sacred and essential to complete the regeneration. The arm? No. That appendage would be quickly cremated, more or less efficiently,

and boxed up. That portion of the Preacher's essence would follow the arm, tethered as it were, to the home of the Preacher's new body, to watch. To make certain the new body was prepared.

For himself, he would continue as the Ritual Surgeon and protect the heart at all costs, as it would contain the greater portion of the Preacher's soul. The heart. The Holy Vessel. At all costs, at any cost, he would see this to the end. He would see the Preacher reborn. No one would stop the glory of his rebirth.

Speaking of.

The intern almost made it to the door.

What a mess.

The Surgeon took up the transplant case and walked around the far side of the gurney, so as not to leave with blood on his shoes. At the door, he stopped, to check his surroundings. *Just in case.* After all, a little blood on his shoes wouldn't be unreasonable coming out of a morgue. But it was best not to give anyone cause to start an unwanted conversation. He'd scrape it off on the stairwell steps before going to his car. But the intern, that foolish girl, was still moving. Not crawling or grasping, simply vibrating — staring at the ceiling, mouth gaping perhaps in the shattered hope she might still draw a breath.

He stepped on her neck and put his full weight on that foot. The crunching sound guaranteed that she was no longer an issue. He freed her from her shock and pain.

He was, after all, a nice guy.



CHAPTER TWO

MARIN HEADLANDS, GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATIONAL AREA SAUSALITO, CALIFORNIA

DIM MOONLIGHT BLED DOWN ON THE SCENE ...
A CRIME SCENE ... TEXTBOOK PERFECT ...
... ALMOST.

Two dead bodies, disbursed effluvia, footprints in the dirt, a bold perpetrator hiding nothing, and a raging spectral animal summoned from the depths of darkness charging up the hill to slaughter a pair of former intelligence agents, one of whom was colorfully expressing his need to know how the hell they'd fallen into this trap. Hadn't they learned by now?

Apparently not.

This is my fault.

Tessa Wells-Lancing and her partner in the newly opened Executive Protection and Security agency did the only logical thing they could: they ran for their lives, praying the whole time to find somewhere to make what might be their last stand.

The man right on her heels loudly proclaimed that he that either the situation or his body was getting too old for this nonsense. The word, "nonsense," startled Tessa and triggered several unpleasant pictures of her childhood. Such things were not right for this time nor place. Staying alive was.

Jack de Sombras, her partner, leapt over a lichen-covered boulder and landed with no grace whatsoever. Cowboy, charmer, and the agency's official skeptic. And at this rate, he was not going to forgive her for dragging him into this, if they managed to get out unmauled.

Tessa slid behind a cover of scattered rocks, leaving a skid-mark behind her in the dirt. Her *Sight* released its claws dug into her psyche — briefly. Never predictable. Never welcome. Not now. *Precognitive Sight*, the source of her *visions*, which she could neither anticipate nor control, habitually demanded her whole attention at the most inopportune times. Like a toddler tantrum at a toy store. No timing. No warning. Siezing her suddenly by the solar plexus, climbing up her spine, blinding her to all that was real. She'd just barely ripped herself from its grip — seconds after it almost got both she *and* Jack killed.

Why now? What's happening?

A distant howl carried on the wind froze both of them in place. It was mournful and unnerving. Too unearthly to be a local dog. A wolf? Or the hell hound conjured up by the perpetrator? He would say, "wolf." She would say, "hell hound."

Both agents angled themselves towards the rise of the hill. And watched. And waited.

The headlands air stilled as though the whole area drew in its breath and held it in fear. The gloom of the location sent her skin crawling. The mist and fog blanketed them, heavy and suffocating. "Is it there?"

"Maybe," Jack whispered, gulping down as much as he could. The thick air rumbled with a low groan in two sets, each falling off in the last second. "Is that —"

"No. Foghorn ... different from what that ... *thing* ... the noise *it* makes."

"I sure hope y'all are right."

Full moon. Dense fog. Defused light that threw shadows at them from all directions.

He sniffed too. "I don't smell it. I swear it rolled around in rotten eggs or something."

Jack's right. I don't smell it either. As Tessa took aim and steadied herself for battle, she heard her partner replacing the magazine on his gun. Thank God for extra ammo since he'd drained the last mag firing at ... whatever *that thing* was.

He glanced quickly at her, his black eyes wide underneath the brim of his ever-present Stetson. That splendid dark moustache of

his carried a few gray hairs and several beads of sweat that still gleamed in the shrouded moonlight. Familiar and comforting. He rubbed them away with his ever-gloved left hand — the one with the missing little finger and half of the ring finger.

Listening to each other's heavy breathing and desperate gulps of air, she strained her ears to locate *that demonic-thing* that chased after them. *No more visions today. Please.* Brutal moments drifted by on the incessant breeze blowing again from the Pacific Ocean without anything or anyone breaching the hilltop.

They weren't crazy. They had been threatened, assaulted, chased. Jack knew better than to fire off a gun at nothing. Jack didn't panic. Not to mention that she saw the perpetrator do some sort of ritual, to *summon that thing*, to rise from wherever it lingered to rip them to shreds, just as it had done to the two dead men splayed out in the dirt on the other side of the rise. She and Jack barely escaped its all-too-real teeth.

Jack called it a dog. And Jack ought to know. Damn if he wasn't friends with every dog, cat, and whatever on the streets around his house.

She called it ... *oh, never mind what I called it.* No matter how accurate her description, her partner likely wasn't on the same page. For him, the paranormal was merely a mistake of proper identification — or he kept saying. A series of coincidences. A sleight of hand. For him, what chased them could not be anything more than a dog. A big dog. A terrifying dog. A killer dog. But, a dog. Or a wolf. Show him proof, then *maybe* he'd reassess. Spectral beast or hefty pooch, Jack ran just as hard and fast as she did to escape it. He was not stupid.

He could be worse than her father sometimes. And there was a person she didn't have the bandwidth to think about right now. As long as her dad stayed up in Seattle and kept his disapprovals and dismissive comments up there with him, she would be fine. Even with Jack's denials about their current situation, she would be fine.

Jack's severe crouch descended into a collapsed seat as more minutes ticked by without *that thing* cresting the hill. Being next to the ocean, the Marin Headlands air was always damp, and the grasping fingers of summer fog, reaching through the valleys and over the hills,

were not helping to alleviate the ungodly humidity, but Jack's face was sopping wet from exertion not the weather. "Can y'all still hear it?" he whispered in that beguiling Texas drawl of his.

Tessa shook her head, holding her breath for a second in hopes she would slow her lungs and heartbeat down. No such luck. In this vulnerable state — exhausted and potentially distracted — it was all too possible for a *vision* to overwhelm her consciousness again and drag her mentally away. Control was her best friend tonight, besides Jack. She had to maintain control. Or her *Sight* needed better goddamn timing.

Jack rested his head on his arm, wiping away some of the sweat on his face. "Okay, I lied. I actually do want to know what that animal was. Is. I mean, y'all have got some idea, right? This is yer thing. Is it still after us?"

"I ... I don't know." The frustration showed up too much in her voice. "I'm not a walking encyclopedia of demonic spirits."

"No, no, no," he shot back. "I hope to God yer wrong about that. I say that there was a dog. Maybe a dog with a paranormal bone to pick because of a whacked-up owner, but let's just say, for the moment, it was a dog."

Why don't I ever remember to bring pain killers? And why don't my visions have better timing? "Dog. Demon. Whatever. If it's trying to tear you apart, I doubt the American Kennel Club rating matters." She swallowed too hard.

"Y'all really don't know what it is?"

"The last five minutes are a blur right now."

She could feel his glare. "Speaking of that, what the hell happened back there? One second y'all are with me, runnin', then next thing yer standin' there practically askin' it to eat ya' or whatever it does."

"Oh, I think it claws its victims to death, it doesn't eat them," she said with far too much dry sarcasm, earning her his Eyebrow of Doom and a muttered curse.

Jack surveyed the incline, and while keeping his weapon pointed uphill, crept over to her position. "Come on, Darlin'. What happened?" His tone was a muddled combination of care and

outright confusion. He swept loose strands of her hair out of her eyes.

"A message is trying to get into my head," she chewed on her lip. "I've been fighting it for the last ten minutes, or so. I'm doing my best, but Christ! This time, it's strong."

"Is it one of yer *visions*? Now? Hold up — that only happens when y'all touch someone."

"I don't know anymore. This one, the last couple, they've been different. They try to force me see them."

"Ah hell, this ain't the time. Tell it to wait," he whispered intensely.

"It doesn't work that way!" she snapped back.

"Then how *does* it work? Haven't ya' figured it out ...?" He swallowed back a comment — a remark he knew he'd regret. "Not here, right? Not now." Jack sighed and wiped the sweat from his forehead and eyes on his wool suit jacket. "Okay, I'll ask it: what do we do now?"

Out of the silence, the growl became a grinding, scraping snarl. Bouncing off the broken geology, man-made structures, clumps of fog, and wind-stunted trees, the howl echoed against itself to become a collision of terrifying sound.

In a distance, a billow of dust rose above the hill's crest. No more than a quarter mile away. Maybe closer. It was coming. It was big. Bigger than she remembered.

The tremor that passed under her feet — that wasn't an earthquake — it wasn't real, it wasn't solid. Ringing filled her ears and depth perception waivered. The *vision* wasn't knocking, it was crashing through the door.

Oh God no. Not now!

Tessa's breath turned shallow and quick, and with it came nausea and dizziness. A rush of dread flooded her chest, then her arms ... her legs ... crashing into her head. Surreal tinnitus amplified until her hearing burned from the noise and crushing pressure attacking her eardrums. The *vision* wanted in. Now. Regardless of the circumstances. If it had to immobilize her with pain, it would do whatever it needed.

Her gun hit the dirt as Tessa dropped to her knees, clutching the sides of her head and fighting the urge to scream in pain.

It gripped her solar plexus. It crawled up her spine.

Reality blurred and distorted. She could feel Jack's arms around her — hear Jack begging — something desperate — his words made no sense. He couldn't help her.

Not now! God please, not now!

An old man. About Jack's height. In fact, he could have been Jack — a hundred years old. Withered body. Dark blue, hateful eyes. Patches of hair. Age spots. But those eyes — wide and glaring, as if he was shocked and offended that the world continued to exist.

He held his beating heart out for her to see. "Give me what's mine!"

"What?"

"He ain't yers, whore! He's mine. Give him back to me!

Behind the old man, *Death* stood laughing. *You stealing now, girlfriend? That boy isn't meant to survive. He's been living on borrowed time.*

Jack?

Time's up.

"He's mine!"

"No!" she screamed.

Jack pulled her into his chest, begging her to quiet down. "Shhhh. That dog's still out there. Darlin', ya' gotta' fight this — I

can't help you." His hand slipped gently over her mouth as he tucked her in tighter. "I don't know how.

As she huffed and gasped into his hand, he lifted it away. It took a full minute before she caught her breath. His hold loosened as she came around. "I'm back," she whispered. "How long?"

"A couple a' seconds. Not long. What did you see? It was a *vision*, right?"

Tessa nodded vigorously without confidence, and rubbed her nose. "I ... I think ... I don't know. Everything's so cloudy," she waved trying to clear her brain fog. "Thank you." Her back hurt like hell.

He was shaking too. "Just as well," he swallowed. "We've got bigger things."

"Really, really big."

"Darlin', we better come up with a plan."

No shit, Sherlock! Jack could be too obvious sometimes.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a long, creepy howl. Howl? More like whining, grinding, and destruction in its wake.

The wind stopped. Silence filled the vacant pause lingering around them. Their gazes sought the other, the understanding of danger instantly agreed on.

They both rolled to opposite sides of the boulder and aimed at the ridge. Tessa bumbled a bit for a moment, fighting to maintain her footing. "Jack, I don't think we can outrun that thing. Whatever it is."

"Not with y'all stoppin' every two minutes to receive an email from the beyond." He kept gesticulating as if that would provide the right image.

"I can't do anything about it right now," Tessa hissed at him. "Or didn't you notice? Where were you, two minutes ago? You're the one that's so good with dogs —"

"I was joshin' —" Jack watched her, again, with that strange mixture of concern and annoyance playing across his face, along with reddened embarrassed cheeks. "Shitty timin'. I guess I ain't that funny tonight."

At least he knows he screwed up, she thought.

Finally, he gestured a humble acknowledgement and scrambled back to his original spot.

He doesn't want to be here, Tessa reminded herself. *He doesn't believe. He's here because of me.* Still, there he was, crouched behind a boulder, solid and ready. *My Cowboy.*

The air shifted. The periphery of her view sparked with tiny flashes of light. That rush of dread again. First, her chest, then her spine. Consciousness twisted and the ringing —

No! The *vision* couldn't have her. She was on duty ... *in this reality, damn it* ... she would not be drawn away again. She would not leave Her Cowboy to take on whatever was approaching all by himself.

Normally deep brown and golden dirt appeared morgue gray in the filtered moonlight. Mixed with sea mist, it caught in every breeze and swept into her eyes, yet she didn't dare close them long enough to rub it all away. *Close your eyes, and it's off to Never-Never Land.* Her *Sight* still tugged on her soul, trying to force her out of her reality. She struck her balled up fist against the granite rock near her just to feel pain shoot through her hand, reminding her of the here and now.

The *vision* released its grip. It was done with her ...

For now.

Whatever the perpetrator had summoned, it was coming fast. Whatever raced towards them was nearly at the top of the hill. Damn near on top of them. The trail it climbed disappeared over the ridge down into a steep ravine between two grass and boulder strewn hills, making every noise echo through the area like the scream of a monster.

It came closer and closer. Growling. Snarling. The resonance crashing through the stones, cervices, and valleys.

Jack solidified his stance and steadied his aim, his signature Stetson on the ground behind him.

What is that sound? Was the approaching thing screeching? Like metal on metal? . *What the hell is it?* Tessa pressed her back against the boulders of her hiding spot, the icy and damp sensations creeping down her spine. In her stomach, anticipation was gnawing at her like a starving rat. *Screw this!* If their quarry sent this thing to kill them, she'd make sure it felt enough agony that it would turn on

its so-called master. *The Skinwalker*. She should have learned more about Skinwalkers. But it felt rude to ask. The people who knew didn't want to be asked

Her *Sight* yanked at her consciousness, pulling her physically away from where she balanced, and stumbling at first, Tessa shoved herself back into position. *Stop it! Jesus Christ, why now?*

Had Jack seen her? No. He appeared laser focused on the road and what was coming.

Bugger off, she told her precognition. *It's too late now. No forewarning could prevent what was coming. Correction — arrived.*

The monster flew over the ridge and gained some airtime before landing — four wheels at once. The older model SUV, in desperate need of a tune-up rushed into the open area and skidded to a stop. No lights. No sirens. But the moonlight provided plenty of illumination. The shield emblazoned on its white door stood out. "Officer Begay, Police!" the driver called out over a loud speaker. "We received your call."

Tessa's whole body released its anxiety in a heavy sigh. *Thank God.*

U.S. Parks Police.

But that officer didn't know what he was walking into.

Oh God, we have to warn him.

End of Sneak Peek

The Vessel: The Praetorius Agency Files #3 will be released on **May 31, 2025**. Available on Amazon, Kindle, Draft2Digital, Booksby, and other major retailers.

Go to **TEMacArthur.com** for links and information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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So, do you want to talk ghosts, Raymond Chandler slang, steam locomotives, and Elizabethan insults? Want to hear about the Icelandic volcano trip or the Denver Airport accident? She's your gal.

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