

THE SKIN THIEF

T. E. MACARTHUR



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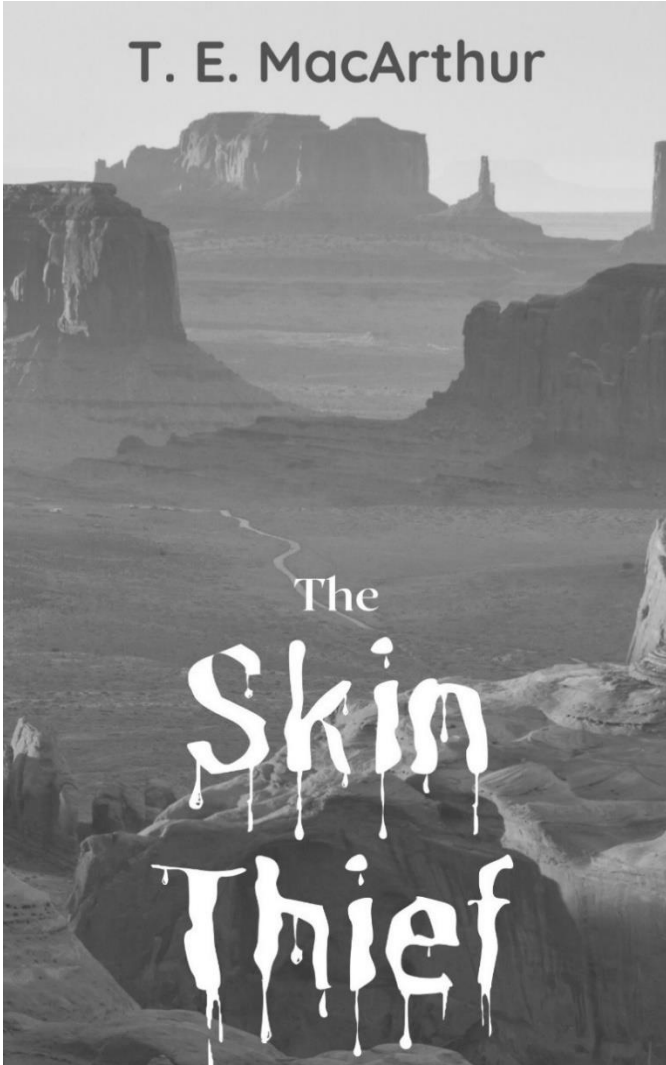
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A Place of Fog and Murder

T. E. MacArthur



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I grew up in Colorado, though I was California born and now California living. Places such as Mesa Verde, Canyon de Chelly, and Chaco fascinated me. Like many children, I wanted to know all the exotic supernatural wonders of these magical ancient people. It was never my privilege to visit those sites in my childhood. And perhaps that is just as well – over time we have learned so much more about the actual people who lived in the cliffs and along the mesas, things that are far less exotic and magical, and far more human.

I offer you this story from my inner child to yours, in search of the mysterious and scary, but by no means looking to make any of those real ancient people or people today in the Four Corners region appear to be some sort of “*other*.”

The best lesson we can learn is that people are people – they are decent and bad, nice and mean, smart and dumb, and everything in between. Pedestals are for only statues. Human beings were always a mix of good and evil, just as they are now, just as they always will be.

Perhaps that is the scariest lesson of them all.

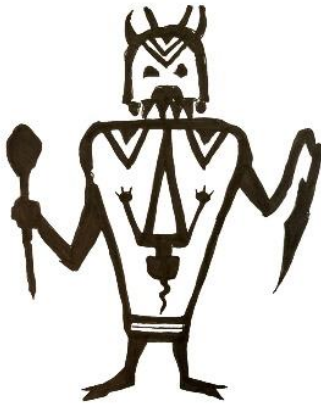
T.E. MacArthur

DEDICATED TO

My father, **Tay McArthur** * (1932 – 2022,) whom I lost last year in April. He was my best beta reader, always being a teacher first, a fan second. **(yes, missing an "a." It's a long story.)*

My dear friend and almost-husband, **Patrick James Lacy** (1950 – 2023,) a man who never heeded the airline admonition to put on *his* oxygen mask first before helping others. His generosity was infinite. He leaves a big, PJ-sized hole in so many lives.

THE SKIN THIEF





CHAPTER ONE

FOUR CORNERS REGION

COLORADO

AGENT X138 REFUSED TO BELIEVE IN GHOSTS, despite the gnawing premonition he was about to become one of them.

He shook it off, hoping that the tingling in his hands and spine would go away. Imagination was taking over, not facts, and X138 was here for the facts. For the sake of getting his bearings, he stopped, crouched, and dragged his fingers through the coarse gray dirt. Splinters of stone and wood pierced his uncalloused skin.

So much limitless night sky pressing down on him. For a moment, X138 recognized his own insignificance, how tiny he was. Above him were more stars than he'd ever seen in Washington DC or New York. Absolutely nothing competed with the glare of the Milky Way. Desert scrub concealed much of the distant horizon, leaving X138 surrounded by the unknown, bottomless canyons in every direction, an endless sea of looming rock, and vicious creatures with only one purpose — to find something to eat.

Something like him.

Why did his boss send him, a city boy, on a mission to the blistering Southwest desert? At least he'd had the good sense to accept a local kid's offer to guide him in the back way. "I'm going to go catch pot pickers who are selling on the black market," he told the kid. Hey, he read Tony Hillerman's Navajo Police mysteries. It wasn't the truth, but it was a fair lie and got the kid willing enough that it only cost X138 twenty bucks to secure his support. When he told the kid he'd need to go into the ruins after sundown, it cost him another eighty. He'd have to ask for reimbursement when he got back to Seattle.

Going to the site in the daytime like some tourist, had failed for the first agent. Athenaeum Intelligence had sent X456 out here weeks ago and he since dropped completely off the radar.

X138 shifted his footing and moved deeper into the rock formations surrounding the site.

Two loud booms rang out from the canyon near him.

Drums?

No.

Falling rocks?

On the way here, the local kid — who looked like a typical American Indian to him — had warned him to stay off the mesa, especially at night. Keep away from the ancient dwellings. No one liked the place. No one talked about the place.

Who constituted *no one*?

Indian Kid, with his stereotyped long braids, bead necklace, baggy jeans, and frowning face didn't explain further. The kid kept talking about terrible things, sounding just like X138 expected an Indian kid to sound.

God, if someone had ever designed a perfect Indian teenager from his imagination, that kid would have been it. Hollywood movie perfect. Perfect to every detail. Not that he'd ever met a real Indian before.

Native American, he silently apologized.

And man was that kid fixated on *Spirits*. Ravenous, cruel, evil *Ghouls*. *Spirits* of this, spirits of that, spirits of divine retribution, spirits of people so unknown even the local tribes had no name for them. *Ghosts* of those who were betrayed and now wanted to get back at the wicked for everything wrong in the world! They'd have to get in line, X138 muttered to himself. He was an intel operative and knew damn well how many people wanted to punish the world for all the sins they perceived being committed.

Small rock skidded down the path behind him, making X138 spin around.

Nothing. No rocks, no pebbles, no sand.

Must be the ghosts, he thought, laughing inside and seriously reconsidering the wisdom of being out here at night. Alone. Indian Kid had left him at the bottom of the path, refusing to go any further once the sun had passed below the outcroppings around the mesa.

Geez, the kid loved telling him all about those *Spirits* in every gruesome, stomach-turning detail. Wasn't the kid on his side? His nerves were raw by the time they reached the back road into the mesa, where the kid had left him and high-tailed it back to town.

At least X138 was coming out of this assignment better educated in Southwest culture.

Skinwalkers, he had asked the kid, trying to sound smart?

No. These Spirits of the mesa weren't them. Weren't Ute. Weren't Navajo. Not Pueblo or Hopi. None of those people. Nobody knew anything about them.

X138 wasn't sure if he believed any of it, but he was positive the Kid believed. And damn it, the stories unnerved him.

It got to the point where he had to tell the Kid to shut up when they were only halfway to the mesa.

And now, X138 wondered if X456 was a *ghost whatever* now. Would he find the body of the former agent, only to be eaten by his ghoulish spirit? Would another agent be sent out here find *his corpse*?

This was exactly why X138 hated horror movies and scary camp stories. He took comfort knowing that if anything did happen tonight, at least he would be the only casualty. By now, the kid had to be safe and sound back in town.

Enough children were being hurt by the situation here already — hence X138's mission.

He kept thinking of death. Of the sudden, creeping, morgue-like cold overwhelming his hands and joints, making them hurt. Of stillness blanketed in a suffocating layer of beige dust. Of shifting silhouettes seen when the moonlight allowed.

Of being foolish enough to be out here alone, at night. All alone.

Spasms of fear coursed up and down his legs, like icepicks stabbing at them. Goose flesh crawled along his arms. He was sweating, desperately flapping his coat to cool off. Any field experience he had was useless, wasn't it?

A burst of chilled wind blew dirt and stinging gravel at him, spraying the area with debris and noise. Shit, the landscape didn't want him there anymore than that kid's supposed ghosts. What followed the cacophony was eerie, empty silence.

Agent X138 crept forward, weapon ready. Every breath shallow by half, too quick, and followed by a shake up and down his spine.

The official agency communication he'd received was simple:

AGENT X138

INVESTIGATE: TWO AGENTS SENT TO
SITE NOW MISSING.

SITUATION UPDATE: TWO CHILDREN
KILLED IN WAR FOR CONTROL OF 32ND
STREET GANG TERRITORY. GANG
LEADER MISSING — REPORTED DEAD
— LURED TO REMOTE LOCATION.

STATUS URGENT: DETERMINE
DISPOSITION OF MISSING AGENTS —
DETERMINE DISPOSITION OF MISSING
GANG LEADER — DETERMINE
PARTY/PARTIES RESPONSIBLE.

CODE: YELLOW. LETHAL RESPONSE
AUTHORIZED.

Urgent. Dead Children.

In quick strides past sagebrush and rock, his boots sank into the deep sand and dirt.

The entrance to the old cliff ruins was ahead.

A placard, like those at any state park, bore the name of the place in scratched paint on rusted metal. The sign was bent sideways, its pole crimped in the middle by force, and now lying at an ominous angle off the path. Withered, leafless branches stuck out in all directions, and dust drifted into mounds against the boulders. It looked nothing like the fruitful farmland only a couple of miles away.

They had tried to make this a tourist spot?

Tried.

Failed.

No one took care of this place anymore, certainly not since an epic flood had drowned every living bush, tree, and creature, a few years before the drought. Even the land was deceased.

Stop. Wait. Listen. An agent's basic training. The air smelled of rot instead of piñon pine. The kid's warnings iced his nerves. The

kid wasn't precisely clear on what could happen to him, only that it was worse than eternity in Hell.

Creeping forward again, one step at a time, barely rising above a crouch, X138's stomach churned. Heavy chains drooped across the path, proving a complete failure in their one purpose. A sign squeaked on its last nail, writhing in the resurging wind. The lettering was gone, scoured away by the elements over time.

The dirt tempest settled for only a moment, giving him enough time to hear the ringing in his ears and the sound of every movement. Mist hung inside the canyon, blotting out its true depth.

Wailing cut through the silence, putting X138's on edge. Was that a human shrieking in pain, or some animal? Or something else entirely? Not a ghost. No such thing.

Pivoting slowly, he concentrated, trying to triangulate where the sound came from. Behind him? No. In front of him? He stilled every muscle, straining to hear the slightest echo. Yes. There it was, the last of the cry. Toward the entrance to the dwellings.

What was that?

Imagination? No. He never imagined that kind of thing before. A coyote? Sure. That was it. *Just a coyote.*

Overhead, an empty sky, filled with too many stars, blended so completely with the blackened distance that it gave him vertigo. He shifted his foot in the dirt, letting the scuffing and crunch of gravel calm his nerves. Those sounds were real or tangible.

He pushed his hair out of his face and inched his way to the edge of the cliff dwelling's entrance. It was little more than a gaping, black hole on the edge of the ravine, partially blocked by sagebrush.

Sweat formed on his upper lip and at the nape of his neck. *Focus on the mission.* Down the stairs, cautiously, one barely steady step at a time. They'd been hacked out of the rock by someone a long time past and were eroded by blasting sand and, at another time not so long ago, tourist foot traffic. Treacherous and hazardous enough in good light, in the dark they might be deadly. But he didn't dare turn on a flashlight. He'd be spotted by someone nasty. Or something.

Every nerve in his body screamed, *Run back home.*

Those weren't his orders. His orders were crystal clear.

Use extreme prejudice. Code: Yellow. Lethal response authorized.

Agent X138 also knew what his orders didn't address — what other agents were saying back at the Headquarters. *Who cares if gang*

leaders were dying or missing? But in the underworld vacuum their absence created the power struggles that emerged and were spilling into the streets. Now, there were mounting civilian casualties.

Two more dead kids.

Two dead innocent kids.

I have kids.

Voices — whispers. Couldn't be. No such thing as ghosts. But no one was here.

More than one? Saying something about him — unworthy — lawless — undeserving.

Muffled laughter? Growling? Hissing. Jesus, what was he hearing?

In front of him. Behind him.

He ran down the last stairs toward the ancient dwellings, weapon poised.

The ancient dwellings were nested in darkness, except for pale moonlight shining in from the vast opening of the cavern. What a place! What a marvel of ancient engineering.

One of the Shadows moved. Human shaped? Imagination? No such thing as ghosts or whatever the hell people called them. They weren't any more real than the Mothman, the Jersey Devil, or ...

Quiet. Silence. Emptiness.

The stench. Like garbage. No, more like an open sewer.

Despite it, he gulped in air and took stock of his environment as coolly as possible. The ruins here were a little different from *Mesa Verde* a few miles away. Smaller numbers of round, stone buildings. Smaller footprint. Harder to get to. Lonelier.

Near him on the rock, was something gouged in white ...

X138 turned his flashlight on it and jumped back. It had seemed real for only a second. A fraction of a second. Long enough to scare him. A petroglyph in white, maybe hastily scratched into the surface of the stone. A horned, hollow figure, sneering, holding a club and a knife. Inside him appeared a human being, upside down, helpless.

He backed away from the crude petroglyph.

He had to go further inside. He slipped around another old, battered chain and a newer sign that read, *Danger — Keep Out.*

Behind him, a bush rustled. X138 snapped his aim over to the sound.

He could hear his own heartbeat.

A shadow — formed by a bush — changed shape.

Quiet.

Loose gravel fell. Rocks clashed against the floor of the cave dwellings.

X138 gripped his gun with both hands. He was shaking. He couldn't make it stop.

One foot reached out, touched solid ground, and he shifted his weight.

The ancient city was full of holes, both purposeful and accidental. At *Mesa Verde*, they were well lit, confined by chained barriers, and announced by helpful rangers and tour guides. At *Mesa de los Muertos*, they were hidden in the shadows. Shadows. Always the shadows.

And more of those angry petroglyphs. Hastily scrawled.

Something laughed. Behind him. It was laughter— or —what makes a sound like that and isn't an animal?

X138 spun around. His eyes had adjusted to the dark. Was it enough?

Movement? He listened until his ears hurt.

Laughter. From behind again. X138 spun back, losing his bearing. Only the open face of the cliff dwelling with its relentless horizon told him he was facing west.

A rock skipped. Jumped. Skidded along the floor.

Thrown!

The laughter came from all around. Many voices. Echoes against the rocks and stones.

Behind. In front.

The shadow swept across him.

He fired two shots. They ricocheted off the walls. The reverberation pounded his chest and head until the echo silenced.

Stillness.

No footsteps. No shuffling. Only his own breathing.

Above, the wind shifted a load of sand over the side of the dwelling roof, sending the grains pouring over the edge like water.

Behind him. A whisper. No one there.

He took three quick steps backward and suddenly found nothing under his footing. Cursing, he dropped down and landed hard.

X138 sat up, stunned. He hurt, but he'd only had the air knocked out of him. Getting to his feet was harder than he'd expected, but then, what did he expect? Groping around, he found he had landed in a round room, with an opening at the far side. He must have fallen into one of the family rooms.

The blow to his head came from behind. His vision blurred. His gun flew from his hand and skittered out of reach.

The grip on his collar was so tight that it choked him.

The edge.

He reached back and should have been able to grab his attacker's hair, or shirt, or ...

Nothing was there.

His belt was held and used to move him. Where? Where was he being taken? He waved his arms frantically, striking out at whatever had him.

Agent X138 reached down to his belt and undid the buckle. It slackened and his assailant no longer held him by it.

It didn't save him. He'd been thrown too hard.

Screaming, he dropped down ... and down

... and down ...

... and down ...



CHAPTER TWO

PIONEER SQUARE, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

SHE HAD A MISSION AT LAST. Two long years of waiting — working on menial desk projects and praying for a fresh start — she had a mission.

Her sanity depended on it.

Her career depended on it.

Her life depended on it.

Seattle's signature rain had grown from drizzle to steady downpour over the past few hours, chasing most visitors to the Emerald City indoors. A boon for the cafes, a bust for the sidewalk sellers, and a challenge for Athenaeum Agent Tessa Wells-Lancing. With so few people on the streets, she couldn't hide amongst the throngs of tourists. A woman alone, dressed well and carrying a briefcase, on the weekend? Well, if anyone gave her trouble, she could handle them.

Can you?

Tessa's bravado and security vanished, leaving only the sound of someone or something eating.

Not now, she demanded and closed her eyes while tightening her grip on her briefcase handle and reminding herself that the hefty tome, PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND IT'S DEVELOPMENT, waited inside beneath a landslide of documents and papers for her to sign.

After a moment of peaceful city chaos, she opened her eyes again. A deep, humid breath was followed by a soothing list of must-do's. After the meeting, when she *would be given a mission*, she could take lunch near Pike Place. Oh yes, she would definitely be given a mission.

The Agency shrink had cleared her for duty while being amazed at her recovery from the *Unfortunate Incident*, or more specifically, Tessa's chosen methodology for coping. Parapsychology? Why not? If one thinks they encountered something ... well, unanswerable by normal science, why not deal with it with un-normal science?

The shrink gave her a few resource recommendations and signed off. Ah well, the Agency shrink wasn't there to make sure Tessa was sane but to make sure the Agency could still make money with her employment.

Work out her first steps for the mission – contacts, equipment – that sort of thing. Perhaps even finish that last chapter. She'd given up hope that the recommended book could answer her ... particular ... question, but she had another six like it at home. One was bound to have the answer. The flashbacks, though ...

The city park décor at Pioneer Square reflected the aesthetic of a *Paris le Metro* subway entrance as opposed to an urban U.S. tourist destination. The Art Nouveau ironwork arbor held dripping vines and flowers over the wet pavement.

Tessa's low-heeled boots tapped lightly against the sidewalk as she darted around puddles. At the corner, she stopped a few paces from a small group of sturdy tourists huddled together under the cheap umbrellas they'd just purchased at a gift shop. Tessa observed the out-of-towners while they all waited for the crossing signal. Traffic sloshed by, kicking up gutter spray. The tourist group stepped back from the curb and into the empty space Tessa had left in front of her.

The day was miserably wet – the sort of wet always shown in movies during funerals..

Sunday. The office building looming ahead was officially closed until Monday. A security guard sat at his station in the lobby, bored, and probably watching the latest sports game. The elevator bank just beyond the security desk only went from the first to the fourth floors. The special elevator went further up, but the guard didn't have an operator's key since clients for the Agency never visited on weekends. Agents entered from beneath the building with their own keys and elevator.

Looking up, Tessa noticed lights on the seventh floor.

Her Field Controller, code named *Kyriós*, was early — he always was. She was on time — she always was.

Her whole body ached with anxiety, not excitement. Well, either way, she'd finally be out of that limbo an agent finds herself in after two failures in a row. Failures meant loss of revenue for the Agency, and honor didn't retain a high resale value. Still, a field mission rather than excommunication to the Agency's infamous Department 44 was best.

And as usual, the man-with-the-newspaper was sitting in the bus shelter twenty feet to her right, keeping his own clear view of the building. When wasn't he there?

Dizziness, dry mouth, nervous tension. Was Newspaper Man the cause, not the expectation of the new mission? She wasn't sure. Strange, he had no umbrella, only big, dark sunglasses hiding his eyes and a heavy coat. New Italian shoes too. He wasn't trying to be inconspicuous. In fact, he left the impression that he wasn't concerned about being noticed.

Isn't one of ours. Much too respectable to be one of my colleagues. Amongst her associates, it was widely accepted that he posed no immediate threat. He was from some legitimate federal organization or a rival private one. Tessa agreed with that assessment.

From experience, she knew the crossing light was about to cycle through and change. She side-eyed Newspaper Man, the not-so-covert-observer.

She felt him, as if his glare penetrated her skin.

That scent? Sweet, smoky, almost ... medicinal. Nothing like the petrichor of the rain or the exhaust of passing cars.

That was when she saw Ben. Laying on the pavement. Blood everywhere. Yes, now she could smell it. Her heart was hammering in her chest. *Christ, not again. Not now!*

Ben's eyes. Glazed over. Clouded. The Figure. Tearing him away. Screaming. Fighting. He didn't want to go. The Figure ripping at Ben – its scent turning from sweet to sour to morgue-like –

Familiar. Frightening. *Danger*, she heard It say.

Tessa looked around wildly before she thought better than to do that.

The street was empty – no Ben – no blood.

Newspaper Man was still watching, but behind him waited the Figure cloaked in black, fading in and out of the reality around It. She'd seen It before with Ben and now, here.

Newspaper Man gave no indication he knew It was there.

It radiated menace, and the sight turned her insides. Moving. Changing. Floating behind Newspaper Man. People walked by the bus stop, oblivious to Its presence.

Danger, girlfriend.

That voice, in her head. She knew It. She knew It.

She gulped in her breath, blinked hard, and looked again.

Newspaper Man sat as usual. Nothing but an ad for a men's cologne behind him.

She'd seen It. She'd heard It. It was playing spectral games with her. Sensation left her arms and her head spun. Her instinct was on alert adding to everything else.

Calm. She would have to stay aware — without panic. Newspaper Man was too obvious to be taken seriously, but smart training told her to keep an eye on him anyway. It was not something she could do anything about. Even the strange scent was gone.

Tessa, jerked back to reality. She sneaked a glance back at Newspaper Man.

Newspaper Man watched her cross the street.

Tessa glared from the far corner..

Newspaper Man glared back at her.

This is ridiculous, her sensibility scolded her.

He's a problem, her gut screamed at her. Wait, was that her gut? Or her anxiety?

The clock tower chimed. She couldn't be late. Her first mission in so long and she couldn't be late. Not for this. The first mission in two years.

He's still over there, and I don't have time to play games with a rival agent, she rebuked the inner voice. Tessa's legs moved on their own, following the known path to the office. Her anxiety multiplied each time she told herself to ignore the hue and cry pounding her psyche.

Crossing the side street, Tessa navigated the downside of the hill that tilted steadily toward the waterfront. She followed the slope as it turned up an alley with a battered door not visible from the street. Her key fit the lock in the side after two fumbling tries.

Steady. Breathe. She slowed her movements with determined force and controlled her hands. *The hands of a professional.*

She wasn't late, not yet. The mission was her only focus. *Professional.* She folded her umbrella, smoothed her hair, and squared her shoulders — comfort gestures.

In the gray light, her rich, auburn hair disrupted the gloom. It was that long, stick straight hair, her heart-shaped face with thick but small lips, and Elizabeth Taylor violet-colored eyes that were her few physical assets. The rest she brought to the party was based on her life as a skilled intelligence officer and an exceedingly well-connected operative, minus the last two years.

Her heart squeezed. At least her father didn't know she'd trapped herself in an unviewable alleyway. Alone. An amateur's mistake. The consummate intelligence veteran that he was, her father would undoubtedly be disappointed in her.

Get a grip, Tess.

Frigid air tickled the back of her neck — spectral fingers alerted her. Decaying alley smells mixed with that familiar sweetness.

Danger!

Her hand dropped to her waistband holster.



CHAPTER THREE

THE UNDENIABLE SENSATION within each cell of her body announced Its arrival.

The Figure as standing right next to her. *Death.*

She and *Death* were too well acquainted now. She knew *Death's* presence. That was the scent that dragged memory back to the present. She knew *Death's* voice, too.

She knew *Death's* sickening laughter, especially when it was directed at her.

Tessa turned to point her 9mm between Newspaper Man's eyes, now threatening less than three feet from the muzzle. "Hands out," she growled, words low and clipped. How could she let this happen? Cornered. Beginner's fatal mistake.

Slowly he moved his hands outward. "Easy, honey."

"Name."

"I'm not—"

"Name!"

"Trono. Phil Trono. Look, I ah ..."

"Who are you with?"

He licked his lips and leaned forward.

"Don't. Even. Blink."

"I think this is a simple mistake. You kept looking at me, so I thought maybe —"

"Who are you with!" She watched his body, especially his fingers, for the slightest tell. *Don't make me kill you*, overwhelmed her thoughts.

The man who called himself Phil pressed moistened his lips again. His breathing was unsteady. Sweat formed above his eyebrows.

Pull the trigger, girlfriend. Death's voice was icy smooth.
Shoot and I'll take him away, too.

Fire welled up in her chest, carrying into her arms and her hands. This was going to be like Ben – just like Ben. *Don't make me do it! You don't want death. I've seen It – you don't want that.*

She must have spoken her thoughts out loud.

“Shit, lady, it was Jenkins,” he spit out. “Jenkins over at the Keepers Group sent me to watch you folks.”

Tessa's vision tunneled down to only the man and the tip of the gunsight. “Why are you over here now? In this alley?” She spoke slowly, hiding the tremble of fury, fear, and electricity coursing through her muscles.

“I just told you, honey, so why don't you put that thing down.”

His right hand twitched. Left hand swept out to take the weapon from her. He struck the muzzle hard instead, as she pulled it back and held it close to her body.

Shoot, Death insisted.

I can't.

Tessa crouched back as he took another grab for the weapon. It almost slipped from her numb fingers.

His right hand gripped her neck and squeezed.

Girlfriend. Shoot, Death demanded.

No!

Sickening dread flooded her stomach — her chest — her lungs. No room for air. No air!

Shoot!

It wanted *her* to provide *him*. To kill him. To –

Tessa flipped the weapon in her hand and pounded it on top of his arm until he let go. With a backswing, she connected the grip with his face, knocking him backward – stumbling – until he dropped to the ground.

His expression of shock and fear as she threatened to pistol-whip him again was at first a relief, she wouldn't have to kill him, then satisfying.

She heard him try to speak as she searched him for weapons. She watched him struggle with pain and consequence while she called for backup. Moving fast, she made certain he wasn't going to give

anyone any trouble. Her gun, she kept low, out of reach and out of sight. The last thing anyone needed was attention drawn to the alley.

She hadn't killed him. Why? She could have. She should have. "I can't."

But that was the job, wasn't it? Didn't mean she liked to kill, but she'd done it before.

Goddamn it — I hesitated. She'd taken a terrible risk by not dropping him there and then, like any other agent would have.

Again.

And she knew why. That damn Agency shrink knew why too. But Tessa was one of those agents they needed back in the field —

Or permanently out of the way.

In either case, the shrink had cleared her.

And she was sure the shrink had been premature.

Several agents, Agency medical staff, and her Controller's personal assistant responded to her call. With terrifying efficiency, the Keepers Group point man was bundled up and removed to what she assumed was emergency services under heavy security. Statements were given. Judgements quietly passed. Evidence removed. The stink of the alley returned. All routine as though this happened every day. All personnel were ordered back to their own business.

One of Tessa's departing colleagues gave her *that* stare — the one that implied he was amazed her attacker was still breathing. Tessa turned away. She owed no one in that crowd an explanation. No one.

Damn it. Now I'm late.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T. E. MacArthur, author, artist, historian, amateur cat whisperer, and parapsychologist wannabe lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She wrote the standout Steampunk series, ***The Volcano Lady***, and the classic, one-shilling serial, ***The Gaslight Adventures of Tom Turner***.

A Place of Fog and Murder is her Noir-Punk mystery, bringing a fantasy sci-fi 1930s San Francisco to life with her tough-as-nails femme-fatale-detective, Lou Tanner P.I., through exciting car chases and Chandleresque witty repartee. She's even written for several specialized publications, anthologies, and was an *accidental* sports reporter for **Reuters News**.

Her storytelling dramatically shifted direction recently to embrace the paranormal, her lifelong obsession, with the creation of her newest novel, **The Skin Thief**, set in the Four Corners region of Colorado, not too far from where she grew up.

You can find her at www.TEMacArthur.com