

Veronica Mars: An Original Mystery by Rob Thomas: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line

By Rob Thomas, Jennifer Graham

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From Rob Thomas, the creator of the television series and movie phenomenon *Veronica Mars*, comes the first book in a thrilling mystery series that picks up where the feature film left off.

Ten years after graduating from high school in Neptune, California, Veronica Mars is back in the land of sun, sand, crime, and corruption. She's traded in her law degree for her old private investigating license, struggling to keep Mars Investigations afloat on the scant cash earned by catching cheating spouses until she can score her first big case.

Now it's spring break, and college students descend on Neptune, transforming the beaches and boardwalks into a frenzied, week-long rave. When a girl disappears from a party, Veronica is called in to investigate. But this is no simple missing person's case; the house the girl vanished from belongs to a man with serious criminal ties, and soon Veronica is plunged into a dangerous underworld of drugs and organized crime. And when a major break in the investigation has a shocking connection to Veronica's past, the case hits closer to home than she ever imagined.

In *Veronica Mars*, Rob Thomas has created a groundbreaking female detective who's part Phillip Marlowe, part Nancy Drew, and all snark. With its sharp plot and clever twists, *The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* will keep you guessing until the very last page.

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Veronica Mars: An Original Mystery by Rob Thomas: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line By Rob Thomas, Jennifer Graham Bibliography

- Rank: #52880 in Books
- Brand: Jennifer Graham Rob Thomas
- Published on: 2014-03-25
- Released on: 2014-03-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .74" w x 5.19" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the television series *Veronica Mars*

A *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Salon* Best Show of the Year

“Nancy Drew meets Philip Marlowe, and the result is pure nitro.” —Stephen King

"Best. Show. Ever. Seriously, I've never gotten more wrapped up in a show I wasn't making, and maybe even more than those. . . . These guys know what they're doing on a level that intimidates me. It's the *Harry Potter* of shows." —Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy* and writer/director of Marvel's *The Avengers*

"Classic California film noir. . . . Raymond Chandler in its writing." —*The Seattle Times*

“Sharp wits, steely nerves, and a wicked sense of humor. . . . This is one TV case we don’t want to see closed.”—*USA Today*

“It’s what lies deeper that not only makes the show remarkable but what defines it. Mysteries are its central metaphor; Veronica solves little puzzles because she, like all of us, cannot unravel the bigger ones. . . . Filled with deft, glorious wit.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

About the Author
Rob Thomas

Rob Thomas is the creator of the television series *Veronica Mars* and the cocreator of the television series *Party Down*. He lives in Austin with his wife and two children. He hasn’t fully recovered from Ray Allen’s three-pointer in Game 6 of the 2013 NBA Finals.

Jennifer Graham

Jennifer Graham graduated from Reed College and received her MFA from the University of Texas at Austin. Her short stories have appeared in *The Seattle Review* and *Zahir*. She currently lives in Austin with her husband.

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CHAPTER TWO

Traffic was already a nightmare by the time Veronica dropped her dad off at home and headed back out toward Mars Investigations. Spring break had descended on Neptune in all its bacchanalian glory, and even though the worst of it choked the beaches and boardwalks, the party had spread inland, creeping up through the commercial districts and the historic downtown blocks. The drunk and disoriented glutted the bars, restaurants, and shops all over town, even at noon on a Monday. It’d already been going on for more than a week, and it wouldn’t slow up until mid-April—there were hundreds of colleges within driving distance, each with its own spring break dates.

Veronica glanced in her rearview mirror. Traffic stretched as far as she could see, motionless in the sun. The sidewalks were crawling with undergrads, shouting at their friends, lifting glass bottles in impromptu toasts. Apparently Neptune's public consumption laws were being selectively enforced. But that was par for the course during the three-week spring break season—money talked in Neptune, and no one heard it louder or clearer than Sheriff Dan Lamb. He spent most of the year chasing "undesirables" (translation: anyone flirting with the poverty line) off the streets, only to turn a blind eye to binge-drinking eighteen-year-olds descending en masse.

Someone laid on his horn. A girl with feather hair extensions leaned down into the gutter to vomit, then straightened up and kept walking as if nothing had happened. A cluster of bikini-clad girls on roller skates tripped laughing across the road while several boys stood on the sidewalk filming them with their cell phones. She sighed and fiddled with the radio dial. She'd let Keith man the stations on the way home and now Blue Öyster Cult blared from the speakers, the cowbell ringing loud and proud. *Five hundred stations on this thing and he went straight to 1976. There's no help for some people.* She played idly with the controls, looking for something to pass the time.

"I can tell you one thing: I wouldn't let *my* daughter go to Neptune for spring break."

Veronica paused. She knew that voice right away: Trish Turley, big, blond, and Texan, sounded like an avenging fury cutting across the airwaves. Her TV show ran daily on CNN, and Neptune's local talk radio streamed the audio.

"I mean, the place is just a pressure cooker of hormones, drugs, and alcohol. Kids these days aren't taught to respect their own limits. And have you seen the way these girls act?" You could practically see Trish Turley shaking her head in approbation. "All you have to do is look up Neptune in your World Wide Web and you'll find video upon video of them showing their breasts for free beer. And then we're shocked when someone gets hurt."

Ah, the twin pillars of outrage journalism: slut shaming and victim blaming. Trish Turley liked to call herself a "victim's rights" advocate, but anytime she could turn an eye on the general decay of society (as witnessed through WASP-colored glasses), she made sure to cover all the bases. The corruption of youth? Check. Amoral decadence? Check. Missing white girl? Yahtzee.

But even Veronica had to admit that it was disturbing how little difference eighteen-year-old Hayley Dewalt's disappearance had made to the festivities. The news had hit that weekend: Hayley, down with friends from UC Berkeley, had been missing for almost a week. But you'd never have guessed it from the air of celebration hanging over the town. The bass pounded on and the beer still flowed freely. She wasn't sure what the reaction to one of their own vanishing into thin air should be, but the spring breakers' blind and blissful determination to carry on as if nothing bad could happen to them surprised even her. She wasn't sure she'd ever had that invincible, indestructible air, even when she'd been younger.

"And then there's this Keystone Kop sheriff."

That caught her attention. She turned the radio up a little.

"This Dan Lamb character? What a joker. Who goes on national TV in the post–Natalee Holloway world to say we shouldn't worry about a missing teenaged girl? I hope that the Dewalt family has a good lawyer on the books. A lawsuit might just get Lamb's attention."

A slow smile spread over Veronica's face. *Trish, Trish, Trish. We have so little in common, and yet suddenly I have a powerful urge to kiss you.* She'd been watching Lamb for the past few months, waiting for any opportunity to nail him to the wall—but if he kept this up, he'd do it himself.

The video Veronica had sent to TMZ had started the ball rolling, of course. She'd caught Lamb on tape talking about the Bonnie DeVille murder case, saying, "I don't care if Logan Echolls ain't the guy. America thinks he's guilty and that's good enough for me." That little snippet had hit the airwaves hard. Lamb had an election in eight months, and for the first time his reelection was a less-than-sure bet. The town's wealthiest residents still supported him—Lamb looked after their interests, after all—but his approval ratings had taken a nosedive in the past few months.

"Let's listen to this guy's statement when the press finally cornered him Friday afternoon," Turley continued.

The sound quality changed—wind crackled against a cheap recorder. Sheriff Dan Lamb's voice was calm, but there was no mistaking the hint of impatience.

"We are definitely on the lookout for Miss Dewalt, but as far as we can tell there's no evidence of foul play. At this time we are not conducting a criminal investigation, nor are we conducting a missing person search. Look," he said, his voice rising over the sudden murmur of a crowd. "This happens every year. Kids get separated from their friends. They overindulge, they forget to check in, and everyone panics. Then they turn up a few days later, safe and sound. There's absolutely no safety problem here in Neptune."

Some part of Lamb must have realized it was a bad idea to answer questions off the cuff about a missing girl, but he had a pathological inability to turn down media attention. It clearly ran in the family. His brother, Don—who'd been the sheriff when Veronica had been in high school—had been cut from the same cloth. And now Lamb's sound bites had been playing on repeat through the weekend, making Neptune's Sheriff's Department look cavalier and incompetent.

The traffic started to move again. Veronica eased the car forward, narrowly missing two girls who stopped in the middle of the street to light each other's cigarettes. They both held up their middle fingers in perfect unison. Veronica cheerfully flipped them off in return, then took a right toward Neptune's Warehouse District.

The redbrick building that housed Mars Investigations had been a brewery at the turn of the twentieth century, but in the past decade it'd been subdivided into lofts and offices. Veronica was still getting used to it—back when she'd worked as her dad's receptionist in high school, the office had been in a modest commercial district, surrounded by bookstores and Chinese takeout joints. But when the '09er, an exclusive new nightclub, opened just down the street from their old location, rent had shot through the roof, effectively gentrifying her dad's one-man operation right out of the neighborhood. Rent here was more manageable.

Though if she didn't land a good case soon, it still wouldn't be manageable enough.

The Mars Investigations logo—a modified Eye of Providence with horizontal lines across the triangle—hung over the door to the walk-up, etched in glass. Veronica climbed the creaking stairs. The place had an old-building smell, dry and dusty and warm. At the top of the landing she pushed through the double doors to the outer office.

The room was neat but shabby. Light streamed through the blinds, falling in long bars across the floor. The

walls were a deep taupe shade that took on a brooding tone in the shadows—the color had been picked for its cheapness rather than aesthetic qualities. A thrift-store sofa sat beneath the hallway windows, a dusty rubber plant in the corner. Across from their color copier, a fish tank burbled quietly.

Cindy Mackenzie sat at the reception desk, watching Trish Turley on the biggest of the three monitors on her desk. Mac's short shock of brown hair fell over one eye, and a slouchy gray sweater hung off one narrow shoulder. Veronica and Mac had been friends since their junior year at Neptune High. They'd been drawn together by Mac's hacking skills, but it was their mutual misanthropy that had sealed the deal.

Mac looked up as Veronica shrugged out of her leather jacket, hanging it on a coat rack by the door. "Morning, boss."

"Boss?" Veronica widened her eyes. "Did I start *paying* you?"

"No," Mac said, her eyes darting back to her screen. "But it's also not really morning."

"I think thousands of spring breakers would disagree with you," Veronica said.

"Touché."

A few months earlier, Mac had left a secure job at Kane Software to work with Veronica at Mars Investigations. The pay at Kane had been great, but the job itself was a little too bland for a self-proclaimed digital outlaw. Finding new and creative ways to dig up dirt for Veronica's clients was much more her speed. The title they'd been tossing around had been "technical analyst," but at this point it seemed mostly philosophical—the caseload had been dry for weeks, and the few gigs they'd had had been completely lowbrow. Cheating spouses, fraudulent insurance claims, due-diligence investigations. Things Veronica could easily have managed by herself.

"Did you see Neptune made the news?" Mac nodded at her monitor and turned up the volume. Turley's enormous hair filled the better part of the screen, a stiff blond bouffant that didn't budge when she moved. The woman's eyes blazed as she spoke, enunciating every word with righteous indignation.

"I'd like to encourage anyone who can to donate to the Find Hayley Fund. If this sheriff's not going to find her, it's up to us, viewers."

"The fund is up to nearly four hundred thousand dollars, and it's only been open a few days," Mac said.

Veronica whistled. "Well, Trish Turley may be an opportunistic parasite thriving off our broken criminal justice system. But she sure can throw a booster sale."

She sank down into the threadbare couch and rested her head back against the wall. "Next year, let's go somewhere for spring break, Mac. Anywhere college kids aren't puking. Someplace with no booze."

"Next year, spring break in Tehran. I'm booking it now," Mac said, not even looking up from her computer. "How's your dad?"

"Good. The doc says just a few more weeks and he can do some light-duty work. He can't wait to get back in here."

“Catastrophic injuries are wasted on some people.” Mac shook her head. “If I’d ruptured every single one of my organs, I’d be milking it for everything it was worth.”

Veronica stared at a long crack that zigzagged like a constellation across the ceiling. She distantly realized she’d have to call the landlord about it. But talking to Sven about the
shitty roof would necessitate talking to Sven about the rent, which was three days late. She exhaled loudly and closed her eyes.

“You may have noticed that another Friday has come and gone, and your bank balance is nonetheless unchanged,” she started.

Mac cut her off. “It’s okay, Veronica. I know things have been tight.”

Veronica opened her eyes and smiled weakly. “Mac, I’m so sorry. This isn’t how I imagined any of this.”

“Hey,” Mac said chidingly. “We both knew there was a chance it wouldn’t work. Look, I’ve already started looking around for another paying gig. Just to cover my bills, you know? And I can still come in as, like, a consultant next time you need me.” She gave a lopsided grin.

“Of course, my prices are double for consulting.”

“Of course.” Veronica smiled, but inside she was cringing. It wasn’t just that she was letting Mac down, but on top of that she worried there’d never be another case complicated enough to require Mac’s technical savvy. She’d worked for her dad long enough to know the truth about the PI game—for every high-profile case, for every Sherlock-level puzzle, there were a hundred boring, petty cases. And she was barely scoring the latter.

Was this really what she’d chosen? Over New York, over a corporate law job where she’d be pulling in six figures—*before* bonus time? Well, at this rate it wouldn’t last much longer. Unless something changed, she’d bring Mars Investigations—and all her father’s work—crashing down around her.

As if on cue, the door swung open. In walked a woman with chestnut curls flaring out from high cheekbones and a light wool suit tailored to fit her ample curves. Her stiletto heels rang sharply against the floor as she strode forward. She moved with heavy, almost sultry grace. Her dark, velvety eyes made a circuit of the room before finally coming to rest on the couch where Veronica sat.

“I’m looking for Keith Mars,” she said. “I need his help.”

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