

DARK LAND, DARK MIRROR

An Eco-Noir Mystery

JONAH RASKIN



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Dark Land, Dark Mirror

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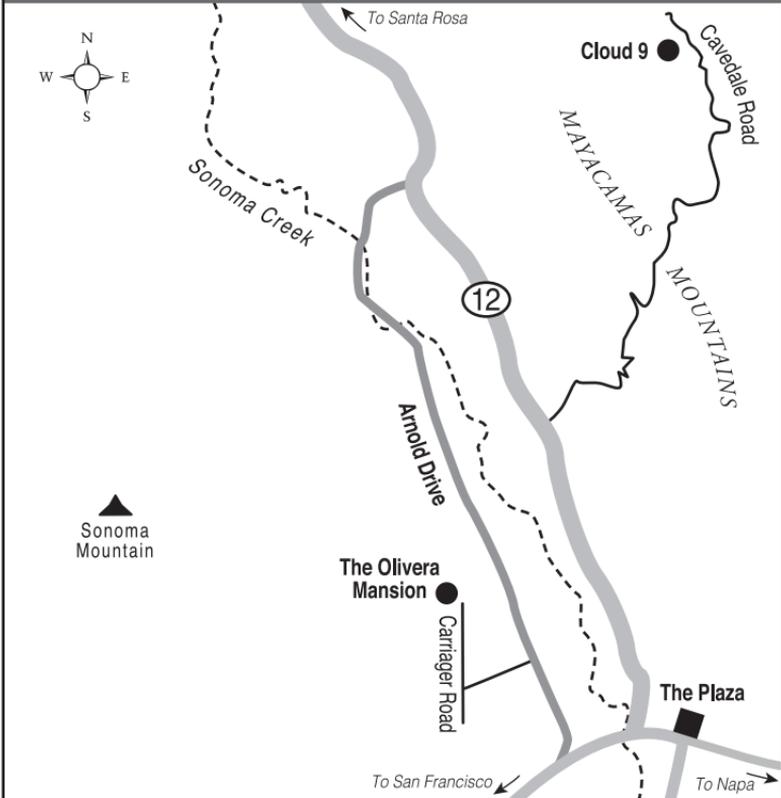
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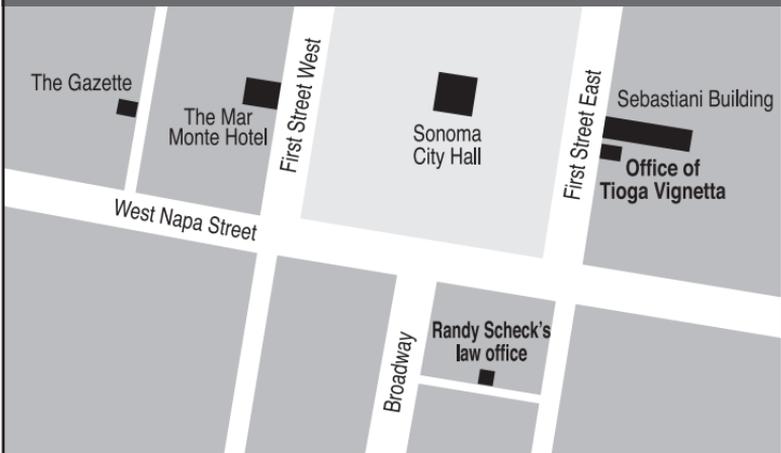


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THE VALLEY OF THE MOON



THE PLAZA



“Young girls they do get weary.”

— OTIS REDDING

Part I

The Awakening

An immense cloud darkened the sky. Even when the sun emerged at the end of the day, the cloud lingered on the western horizon. Then, at night it gathered strength and returned the next day bigger than before; a monster that would not be driven away. The rainless days went on and on. Old Tom Smith, who knew the ways of the ancestors, said that the dark land was cursed and that the evil would have to be exorcised.

A Murder in the A.M.

The ancient, clunky landline rang once, and then three more times, seemingly louder and more insistent each time, demanding to be heard, begging to be held and crying out to be wanted. Roused from a long, labyrinth-like sleep that provided her with little rest, Amanda Coverdale reached into the darkness and brought the receiver to her ear.

“Hello,” she murmured, her voice groggy and gravely.

“Tioga,” the dawn caller grunted, beast-like. Randy recognized Amanda’s voice but he didn’t want to waste a moment of his precious time talking to her. He had to speak to Tioga. No one else would do. After his opening salvo, he growled, “there’s been a murder. Mrs. Olivera, the widow, found dead in a shed on Carriger Road.”

It was not the first time there had been a murder in the Valley of the Moon. Men and women had been shot, stabbed, bludgeoned and even hacked into pieces with a machete. It would not be the last. It was an odd sort of murder, indeed, a murder on a hot day in February that came after a long, horrible dry spell and before the torrential rains and the awful flood.

Perhaps it was not a murder at all, though the notion of murder provided a kind of cold comfort to the living.

Moreover, the murder—if that’s what it was—acted as a

kind of thorn in the budding romance between Amanda Coverdale and her lover, Tioga Vignetta. At the same time, it helped to accelerate the career of the attorney for the defense who hoped to prove beyond a reasonable doubt, not only that his client was innocent, but that the Valley itself was a dark and a menacing place: the shadow side of the California dream.

Randall Scheck, Esq. was not a native of the Valley, but rather an outsider, and, as an outsider, he was mistrusted by nearly all of the insiders. That he was a lawyer made him doubly suspect to those who followed his meteoric career and who shook their heads in disapproval of his antics in and out of the courtroom. He had better go back to where he came from; that was the hue and cry around the Sonoma plaza, the open-air living room where locals and tourists alike gathered and gawked at one another.

Amanda Coverdale happened to be in the immediate line of his fire. After all, she had picked up the phone. But she was also, perhaps, the least likely person to be moved by the lawyer's urgent plea to speak with Tioga Vignetta, the daughter of fastidious and respectable parents, who provided him with his deepest human connections to the Valley.

Amanda Coverdale loathed Randy Scheck.

Oblivious of the hour, oblivious of the world beyond the queen-sized bed, she rubbed her eyes. Then, she shook the long, athletic body beside her which had curled up instinctively into a tight ball, arms embracing a red satin pillow as though to comfort body and soul.

Tioga loved sleep more than anything, except perhaps love itself. Deprive her of it and she turned ornery. So she made sure to sleep eight or nine hours a night. And Amanda guarded the portals to slumber against all intruders.

When the sleeping body didn't, and what's more wouldn't,

stir, Amanda shook it again vigorously and held out the phone.

“Tioga,” she cried out. “Time to wake. It’s your boss, Randy, calling about a murder. He’s as agitated as ever and just as impolite.”

Tioga rolled over, removed her sleeping mask and her earplugs, squinted her eyes and looked up at Amanda who was now half awake.

“He’s not my boss,” Tioga murmured. “Tell him I’ll call back in an hour or so. The body isn’t going anywhere fast this morning. Oh, and tell him...oh never mind...I’ll tell him myself when I speak to him.”

She replaced the mask over her eyes, rolled over onto her side and faced the sliding glass door that led to the garden. Then, she rolled back again.

“Why don’t you call AT&T later today and cancel the landline,” she said. “We don’t need it anymore.”

Amanda huffed and then spoke softly into the mouthpiece of the telephone.

“You heard Tioga, didn’t you?” she asked. Then in a voice meant to placate the dawn caller but had the opposite effect, she added, “She’ll call you very, very soon, Randy.”

He shot back louder now than the first time he had delivered the news.

“Don’t you get it?” he shouted impatiently, and produced a ringing in Amanda’s ear, so she held the phone at a distance. Randy added, “There’s been a murder in the Valley. The accused has apparently confessed. Roy Benedetti, the old judge, appointed me counsel to represent the defendant. I want Tioga to be the investigator on the case. She’s gotta do this for me. Tell her I’m sorry about the mix-up on the last case and tell her there’s a hefty budget that’s too good to turn down.”

“Thanks much Randy,” Amanda said in a business-like

tone of voice, then returned the handset to the base and gazed down at Tioga.

“Did you hear that?” she asked, her voice still groggy. “A murder in the Valley. They already have the killer in custody.”

Once again, the sleeper had curled up into a ball and had fallen asleep, oblivious to everything and everyone around her. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed with a sassy expression she wore on her angular face, Tioga looked remarkably like her Italian grandmother, Giulia. Her photo graced the bedroom wall and was flanked by a larger, older photo of Amanda’s red-haired, freckled-faced, Scots-Irish grandmother Mary Coverdale, who’d married twice, outlived both husbands and gave birth to 14 children.

From the expressions on their stern faces, the Old World grandmothers looked as feisty and cantankerous as their New World grand-daughters, who were both in their mid-30s and who kept house in a small cottage on a small parcel that ran along Sonoma Creek, which had flooded twice after a long dry spell.

Except for the Fourth of July and Christmas, Tioga and Amanda kept to themselves and avoided the elderly, retired citizens who enjoyed hefty pensions, social security benefits, grandchildren galore and the leisure to do nothing but complain about the loud noises and the foul odors that leaked out from the untidy homes with their ugly lawns that surrounded their pristine properties.

Tioga literally thumbed her nose at them and went about her own business as though they didn’t exist. A self-employed private investigator, she rented an office in the Sebastiani Theater building in the town of Sonoma, though murder, kidnapping, arson and rape took her to neighboring counties such as Lake and Napa and across the Golden Gate Bridge to San Francisco—the city by the Bay that hatched crime everywhere and took it in, too, from

every overseas port and outpost in the outback.

Most of the time, Tioga called herself an “op,” short for operative. During her long, exacting apprenticeship, her mentor Marvin Jankowitz had lent her a collection of stories titled *The Continental Op* that had impressed her with their intelligence. She’d taken away the word op and embraced it as her very own. The lone operative in the Valley, she held herself accountable to her own code of honor.

Her housemate and near-constant weekend companion Amanda Coverdale—formerly of South Braintree, Massachusetts, and from a family of shoemakers—commuted five days a week to a job in the District Attorney’s office in Santa Rosa, the county seat. At office parties and backyard barbecues, Amanda kept mum about Ms. Tioga Vignetta, especially around her naturally inquisitive boss Michael Gahagan, the chief prosecutor, and an ex-rugby player with a boxer’s nose, who rode his motorcycle helmetless into the hills on weekends and foraged for things that grew in the wilds.

Randy Scheck, the dawn caller who had disturbed Amanda’s sleep, thought of himself as the Valley’s crusading lawyer for the underdog. Like Gahagan, he loved to win, hated to lose, and judged himself by the successes and the failures of his opponents in and out of the courtroom. The two rivals, who found themselves at loggerheads, were confirmed bachelors and in their own eyes ladies’ men. Both had never been married, and both were attracted to sassy Tioga, though in her presence they had learned to watch their steps and their mouths or she would snap at them.

Randy knew more than Gahagan did about the volatile romance between the two women, though he, too, stood largely in the dark and sadly enough didn’t know what he didn’t know.

Tioga and Amanda thought that they were meant for one another, and that they would live together forever. Every hiccup along the way, every spat and miscommunication told them they had to try harder and yet harder again. Sooner or later they would work out the wrinkles.

In-between cases and when preparing to go to court, Tioga tried to educate Randy in the ways of love, marriage and courtship.

Soon after they'd met at the county courthouse and were on opposite sides of a nasty divorce that dragged on and on, she'd told Randy, "Sometimes when you're in a relationship, you don't know any better what's going on than a stranger looking in from outside."

He had so little experience with women and with relationships that he didn't know what to make of her comment. Inside? Outside? What did she mean? The more she tried to explain the less he understood. Legally savvy and emotionally underdeveloped, he was fated to look in from the outside and to long for something that might never come his way.

Envious of what looked like genuine intimacy between Tioga and Amanda, he wanted very much the same for himself. Accordingly, he waited for the girls, as he called them, to bust up and to go their separate ways. At that critical juncture, he would carry Tioga off and persuade her that she wasn't a lesbian after all, not even a lipstick lesbian, and that men were her favorite flavor.

Indeed, as he well knew, she had been married to a surfer named Tomas. While Randy tried to conceal his hopes and his dreams about Tioga, they came out at the oddest moments. Alcohol and weed loosened his tongue and so did his body language.

Behind his back, Amanda mocked him as "randy Randy" and aimed to sequester Tioga from him, especially when

they were at home and in bed together and he had the nerve to call to discuss pressing business.

Now, as the dawn chorus ceased and the birds went silent, Amanda sat up, arranged the pillows behind her shoulders and leaned against the upholstered headboard. Awake and ready for the day to come out from behind the fog, she grew impatient with the sleeping beauty in her bed.

“Murder!” she said as though entertaining the very idea, and even relishing it. Then she cried out emphatically, “Murder!” hoping at last, on this last attempt, to wake Tioga and drag her kicking and screaming into the nasty world of crime and criminals that lurked outside their proper cottage with its freshly painted green shutters and its newly refurbished slate roof.

Finally, Tioga rolled on to her back, stretched out her long legs, and removed her sleeping mask. With her big blue eyes wide open, she stared at the eggshell white ceiling with its delicate plaster angels, their wings unfurled, that were perched in the corners of the room and around the chandelier at the center; the whimsy of an architect now long departed and among angels or devils.

“Murder,” Tioga said as she rolled the word around in her mouth just for the taste of it. Then she added, “Randy must be overjoyed.”

She laughed at her own conceit that carried a kernel of truth.

“Why in the hell does he have to call so damned early?”

She put the question to herself as much as to Amanda and then she followed it with another, “Why can’t he wait until eight or even nine, when normal folks make calls and begin to go about their daily routines?”

The phone rang again once and then two, three, four times, eagerly, insistent and demanding.

The hands on the clock now read 6:05.

“It must be Randy once more,” Tioga said as she cleared her throat and gazed up at Amanda who looked disinterested. “He knows I’ll pick up sooner or later, just to put me and you out of our collective misery. I don’t think he’ll stop calling unless we wave a white flag and surrender, or better yet invite him to breakfast in bed.”

She lifted the receiver, brought it to her ear and reclined against the headboard.

“Randy,” she said and sounded now as though she’d been awake for hours, awaiting his urgent call.

“What’s up, kid?” she asked, hoping that her irreverent tone of voice might knock some of the wind out of his lawyerly sails, but that was hoping against hope.

“This case is humungous!” he roared. “There’s more than enough for the likes of you and me both. So, listen, meet me at the Cow. I’ll give you the skinny when I see you down there. Too bad you never knew Mrs. Olivera. There must have been half-a-dozen of her own kin who wanted her dead just because she wore the pants in that family and cracked the whip, too.”

Randy paused a moment and then asked, “Have I got you going?”

Out of habit, Tioga reached for the number 2 pencil and the yellow pad of paper that lived on her side of the bed. “seven a.m. Randy, Holy Cow. Crack the whip,” she wrote with big loopy letters.

“You got it,” she said enthusiastically, then hung up the phone, gave Amanda a perfunctory peck on the cheek and sprang to her feet, as though ready to do battle with monsters as yet unknown and invisible.

Suddenly, Amanda looked happy. It didn’t take much to change her mood. She pulled the red comforter up to her chin, looked toward the foot of the bed and wiggled her toes. Then she put a serious expression on her round

face with pink cheeks that made her look like a wholesome milkmaid.

“I don’t see why you slave away for randy Randy,” Amanda said. “You’re so mismatched it’s not funny. You don’t have to put up with his shenanigans ever again; he’s not the only lawyer in town.”

Tioga shrugged her shoulders, removed her black floral kaftan and hung it on the hook at the back of the bedroom door. Naked from head to toe, she gazed down at Amanda who had tossed the bed covers to the side. Her firm, pink nipples now pointed toward the plaster angels on the ceiling, her pubic hair matching the brown bangs that covered most, though not all, of her white forehead.

“I didn’t realize there’d been a murder here in the Valley,” Tioga said in a disbelieving tone of voice. “I suppose you did. You know everything!”

“Yeah,” Amanda replied. “I thought that I told you. *The Gazette* ran a story about it just two days ago. Gahagan thinks it’s a slam-dunk for us. You know, he worshipped the ground Mrs. Olivera walked on; she taught him everything he knew about haute couture and haute cuisine.”

Tioga peered out the window at the light that flared up above the horizon and announced the start of yet another day in the Valley of crime and criminals, cops and lawyers, the guilty and the condemned. Indeed, here was yet another day to combat the demons that haunted her.

“Oh, yeah, now I remember,” she said tentatively. “I was out of town, working on the case of the movie animator with identity theft. I guess I’ve been preoccupied. But I’m working on it. Trying to be present more. I’ll get the hang of it. I always get where I want to be. See if I’m not wrong this time.”

Amanda peered at the robins perched on the deck.

“Sometimes I think you need me just for the juicy stuff

I feed you about Gahagan,” she said. “And if I stopped feeding you office gossip you’d find a way to bail on me.”

Tioga stepped into the white, tile bathroom, turned on the light, and then looked back at Amanda who was still splayed across the bed.

“I’m not even going to touch that remark,” she said. “And no you didn’t tell me there was a murder in the Valley. I would have remembered if you had. We don’t have murders every day. Not yet. The barbarians haven’t arrived, I don’t think. Then again, maybe they’re already here. Maybe the killer is just the first in a wave of barbarians.”

In the bathroom mirror, Tioga glanced at her still sleepy face and then looked down at the birthmark on her left thigh that she always wanted to hide. In one long, continuous motion, she stepped into the bathtub and pulled the plastic curtain closed behind her.

From the bedroom, Amanda shouted, “Maybe you shouldn’t rush into this murder. You just wrapped up the last case.”

Tioga applied shampoo to her hair. Then she peeked out from the curtain, while the shower poured down her back.

“Murder!” she said. “Murder’s my thing! I gotta work with Randy on this one. My last case was a piece of cake. It put me to sleep. Zero challenge. I need something that takes me out of my comfort zone.”

She closed the curtain again, applied a body scrub, placed her head and shoulders under the showerhead, and listened to the sound of the water as it gurgled down the drain.

“Suit yourself,” Amanda shouted. “It’s your poison. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Stay away from this case. Take a breather.”

In the bedroom, with a towel wrapped around the hair she’d piled on the top of her head, Tioga hummed the melody to a song she tried to remember but that kept eluding her.

Amanda sat back and watched her put on panties, a camisole, a cashmere sweater, a pair of designer jeans, a gray jacket that she took from the rack in the walk-in closet and a pair of well-worn, red Liz Claiborne flats she'd had for years.

"I don't want you to go," Amanda said firmly. "I wish you would stay. I'd like it if we could be here together all day."

She might as well have cried out in the wilderness.

Tioga lifted her left foot and then the right, examined the soles on both shoes and decided they'd do. Then she stood up straight and arched her back.

"How do I look?" she asked a tad uneasy about her appearance. "Tell me. Be honest now."

Amanda rolled onto her back and stared up at the plaster angels on the ceiling. She would be honest, but in her own way.

"When Randy says he wants you, you go without thinking," she said accusingly. "When I implore you to stay, you find an excuse and leave. I think you're afraid of committing to this relationship."

Tioga ducked into the bathroom again and stood at the mirror. "Not again," she moaned as she turned and looked over her shoulder. "Enough with the 'c' word."

She wiped the moisture from the glass, opened her mouth and looked at her teeth. Then, she applied a red lip-gloss, and darkened her brows with a pencil.

"Force me to stay and I'm outta here for good," she said. She paused a second and, as she continued to peer into the mirror, she asked herself, "I am really afraid of something or someone?" And then in a singsong tone of voice, she made fun of her own question, "Sticks, stones, names, what will break my bones?"

She turned away from the seductive mirror, switched off the bathroom light, sat on the edge of the bed and wore a

pensive expression on her face.

“Deep down, aren’t we all afraid of ourselves?” she suggested. “That’s what it comes down to doesn’t it? The thing inside that eats away at us: my guilt, your sense of sin.”

Amanda inserted a pillow between her legs and rolled to her side.

“Oh, very good, Ms. Pop Psychology,” she said mockingly. “I’ll have to remember that one. And think of this one, too: it occurred to me last night before I fell asleep, before I had my nightmares: maybe you take cases to run away from yourself.”

Tioga stood up and brushed her hair once more.

“See you tonight,” she said, almost indifferently. Then, with a smidgeon of real feeling she added, “Call me if you want me. I’ll have my cell with me. Maybe tonight we can go on a date.”

Amanda rolled out of bed, smiled, and planted a kiss on Tioga’s lips.

“In my nightmare, I boarded a ship that went down at sea; a phone rang and rang and I couldn’t get to it,” she said. “And then I woke in the darkness.”

Tioga put her arms around Amanda and squeezed.

“Yeah, well, I’m headed for a real daytime nightmare,” she said. “And like it or not, Randy Scheck is smack dab in the middle of it.”

Then the two women kissed on the lips. Both of them smiled, though smiling did not come easy to either one. For all her seeming indifference, Tioga found it hard to break away from Amanda.

In the kitchen, she went into automatic pilot: grabbed her leather briefcase and black pocketbook, removed a light jacket from the hall closet and draped it over her left arm. Then she unlocked the front door and locked it again from the porch, retrieved a large, black umbrella from the

railing, and scampered across the parched lawn to a green Mini Cooper parked in the driveway. As she turned the key in the ignition, she looked back at the bedroom window and sighed.

Morning rush hour traffic moved in fits and starts, then slowed to a crawl when a yellow school bus pulled into Boyes Boulevard and stopped on every block to pick up kids in yellow rain slickers and boots, their mothers hovering above them, models of helicopter parenting.

Tioga turned on the radio and tuned into the weather report—“rain, heavy at times, gusty, southwest winds,” the local meteorologist predicted. Then added, “this could be the beginning of the end of the drought.”

Next came the basketball highlights: “Warriors pound Spurs 128-98.”

Tioga banged her fist on the dashboard.

“Yeah!” she shouted. “Go Golden State!”

Email January 30

From: Tioga

To: Tomas

Weather something fierce today; you'd love it; reminds me of our wedding day on Maui: the winds, the rain, the way we huddled under the trees, ate ravenously, collapsed in the hammock, and as I recall neither of us slept that night. I can't say that I'm sleeping any better these days. Nights are rough. Amanda sounds like the proverbial broken record. Send me good vibes and good wishes please. Hope you're still in love with the island. You know, it's kind of like an island here, too, only an island on the mainland.