

DARK PAST, DARK FUTURE

A Tioga Vignetta Murder Mystery

JONAH RASKIN



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Dedicated
To
Mona Helen Renney

A Note to the Reader

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. At the same time, the sea in which the fictional characters swim and sometimes drown is as real as twenty-first century domestic violence, crimes perpetrated by men against women, and sexual assaults, all of which have reached epic proportions around the world. They have been exasperated during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the time in which this book was written and edited. While *Dark Past, Dark Future* doesn't purport to provide answers and solutions to an age-old problem and a growing global crisis, it seems fair and just to remind readers that tangible help is available from a variety of groups and organizations. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), <https://www.nsvrc.org/organizations>, provides a directory of organizations in every state in the U.S. It's a good place to begin an effort to stop the war against women.

Cotati, California
1 June 2020

Dark Past, Dark Future

Time: The present

Location: The Valley

Cast of Characters

Tioga Vignetta, PI

Alejandro Mujica, Yaqui, druggie, going good

Natalia Marchetti, wayward daughter in the Valley's first family

Louis Marchetti, grape grower, winemaker, Jack London buff

Isabel Marchetti, long-suffering wife

Paul Rieux, rabbleroising candidate for D.A.

Tomas Contreras, Tioga Vignetta's ex

Joe Urge, pornographer

William Bones, wild man

Gilda Bones, mother of William

Belinda Bones, sister of William

Jeremiah Langley, editor of *The Gazette*

Grace Groff, businesswoman

Gordon Clark, chief of police

Jerry Needleman, mayor

Annette Faulder, attorney

Lester Duck, candidate for DA

Mike Lopez, Latino cop

Charles Rhodes, white cop

Sean Dyce, bartender

Rhonda Hope, artist

Philippe Vignetta, Tioga's father

Georgia May, Tioga Vignetta's mother

Tangerine, Louis' model and muse

Reginald Wentworth, aka Reggie, aka Hawk

Maggie McPherson, DJ

Alyssa, nurse at Our Lady of Mercy

Rachael Glass, barista

“All I’m askin’ is for a little respect
when I come home.”

—Otis Redding (1941-1967)

“You may judge a nation’s rank in the scale of
civilization from the way they treat their women.”

—Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859)

The Man in the Woods

It was a sultry evening in June, soon after the start of summer. Tioga Vignetta walked briskly down the footpath that meandered along Humboldt Creek, now almost entirely dry after a winter and spring with little rain and less runoff. She wore jeans, a loose-fitting blue blouse, and flats; her blonde hair was piled on top of her head, her cheeks were red from the heat.

Her long stride suggested an abundance of alacrity. She wasn't beautiful in a cover girl kind of way, but she felt she was attractive and what she thought, she told herself, was what mattered. Beauty, she believed, was not so much in the eye of the beholder as in the heart of each and every solitary soul; it was perhaps a strange notion for a hardheaded woman who spent her working days with lawyers, criminals, and judges. Still, her interpretation of beauty enabled her to slog through the fog of crime and its punishments.

At the age of 40, Tioga Vignetta still turned heads on the pathway. Occasionally, a walker out for fresh air followed her for a closer look and to chat her up. In addition to her morning and evening walks, she worked out at Valley Spa where she also swam laps in the outdoor pool on Saturdays. She was fit and trim.

That June night, she felt that someone was following her, though she didn't instantly pick up her pace or leave the pathway for a more public route to the plaza, where she rented an office and occasionally saw clients. She carried mace in her purse and a knife inside her jacket, and she

was prepared to use both if and when anyone came too close and threatened her. Perhaps the stalker was one of her secret admirers and merely wanted to breathe the same air she breathed.

She glanced over her shoulder as discretely as she could. The man who she thought was following her struck her as remotely familiar. She thought that she might have met him through her ex-husband, Tomas, who died in a car crash following a chase by two members of the Valley police force. The collision and the fire that ensued—which led to the explosion of a gas tank—made the front page of *The Gazette*. The Valley's daily paper published a police log for citizens to read, so they could shake their heads in disbelief at the spread of car theft, burglary, poaching, and more.

Her stalker had a compact body and short legs but took long frenetic strides, which made Tioga feel he would catch up with her sooner rather than later. He wore a black leather jacket and jeans, and had short hair parted down the middle in a style that was once fashionable. She could not see the hands buried inside his jacket pockets, but she saw his baby face, cleft chin, and long sideburns. He looked like the kind of desperado whose allegiance her ex would have cultivated.

After what felt like a long time, she decided not to leave things to chance. She veered off the pathway and cut through a grove of redwoods, watching for anything on the ground that might trip her and lead to a tumble. She looked back again and saw that the baby-faced man was now clearly in pursuit and had gained ground on her. She stopped in her tracks, removed the mace and the knife, leaned against a redwood, caught her breath, and adopted as mean an expression on her face as she could produce.

The stalker slowed down; she heard the dry leaves snap under his footsteps.

A rickety car backfired near by. She was not far from the tidy neighborhood that bordered the woods and the creek where kids played tag and hide-and-seek. She could no longer see the stalker, but she wanted to call his bluff.

“Don’t get closer! I’ll spray the shit out of you and I’ll slash your face, asshole. Beat it.”

The man stood in the shadows, withdrew both hands from his pockets and extended them in front of him.

“Nothing to be afraid of, Miss. I just want to talk. It seemed better to meet here than at your office or inside your house. It’s kinda private here, outdoors.”

Tioga raised her right hand above her head. The blade of the knife caught the moonlight, which exaggerated its jagged edge. She spoke calmly.

“So talk.”

The man with the baby face took one baby step and then another, though he clearly didn’t want to push his luck. Tioga raised her left hand so that the stalker had a good look at the mace.

“This won’t feel good.”

The stalker came to a dead stop.

“I was a buddy of your ex. I know you have some of his stash. I just want what’s rightfully mine, Miss. No more, no less.”

The moon rose in the night sky. An owl hooted; on the street a car backfired. Tioga laughed a nervous kind of laugh.

“Sorry, but I don’t know you and don’t know anything about any stash my ex might have had, so go menace someone else.”

She removed her mobile, took a photo surreptitiously, and then walked slowly and deliberately through the grove

of redwoods until she reached the street where two kids kicked a ball. They backed away as soon as they saw the knife in her hand. At the corner, she tucked it inside her jacket, took a right turn, and walked briskly toward the intersection, where a line of cars waited for the green light.

Heart of the Valley

The Valley hid its dark past and tried to ignore its dark future. Some folks, fools that they were, glimpsed darkness from around a corner and cried out, “Bring it on.” The Valley rose out of the waters of the Bay and galloped north and west until it reached the outskirts of the county seat. There were banks, hospitals, courts, and jails. The wealthy binged in big houses on tree-lined avenues; the poor survived in tents and under bridges on the outskirts, where they died alone of pneumonia, cancer, and diseases that didn’t yet have a name or a cure.

For some, it was the Valley of Lost Years. For others, it was the Valley of Vice, where you could pay for anything and everything you wanted: sex or speed, art or religion, friends or enemies (if that was your thing). The woman whose life and times you will read about here saw it all, or at least a great deal of it. She recorded nearly everything she saw and heard; it helped her maintain her sanity. Keeping records was also a part of her job.

She loved the Valley and she hated the Valley, too. There were times when she was supposed to love it but didn’t, times when her friends thought something was wrong with her when she did not cheer, as they did. They patted themselves on their backs, told themselves how wonderful their children were, and how the Valley exemplified all that was good about humanity.

Whether it was good or not seemed irrelevant to the woman who walked on the footpath at night, lived in a

cottage that bordered the woods, and rented an office in the oldest building on the plaza, which stood near the geographical center of the Valley and gave the illusion that the Valley had a heart.

Tioga thought of herself as liberated, but she also knew that she was, in many ways, a slave of her habits and a prisoner of this Valley. She knew, too, that if she managed to escape and settle in another Valley, she would find more or less the same kinds of people, with the same hopes and fears. Far too few of them, she discovered, were imbued with the notion she found in the work of the Persian poet, Rumi: “this too shall pass.” She took those words as a mantra, but rarely uttered them in the presence of combative lawyers and vindictive judges, lest they laugh at her.

The sign on her office door read Tioga Vignetta, Private Investigator. She unlocked the deadbolt, moved from the outer to the inner office, and turned on the lights. Once at her desk, she booted up her computer, uploaded the photo of the baby-faced man from her mobile, printed a copy, and posted it to her Facebook page with the caption Beware. She emptied her pockets on the desk: small change, keys, and a BIC Lighter.

One corner of the room held several green file cabinets that were piled one on top of the other. A large desk sat near the middle of the room under a fan with blades that turned slowly and moved the hot air toward the ceiling. At the sink opposite the cabinets, Tioga washed her hands, dried them, peered into the mirror, and looked for signs of stress, fear, or panic in her eyes. When she saw none, she smiled and said, “Looking good.” She picked up her mobile, punched in a number, and listened to the ring. A smoky voice answered.

“Alejandro, here. What’s up, *amiga*?”

Tioga cleared her throat, addressing the man she once knew as No Name.

“Hey, Alejandro. A stalker, perhaps one of Tomas’s ex-confederates, confronted me on the footpath that follows Humboldt Creek last night. He said he wanted his share of the loot. I told him I had no idea what he was talking about, turned my back on him and walked away.”

Alejandro took a deep breath, held it in, and let the air out of his lungs slowly.

“What did he look like?”

Tioga put the phone on speaker and folded one knee over the other.

“A short, stocky fellow with a baby face, sideburns, white skin, cleft chin and no noticeable accent.”

Alejandro snorted.

“Baby face...That could be Joe Urge. Used to ride shotgun with Tomas along the border when they smuggled shit.”

Tioga went to Facebook and looked at the photo she had just posted. There were several comments already, including one that read, “Looks like a loser.” Alejandro went to Facebook and studied the same image.

“Yeah, that’s Urge all right. I thought he was out of the country. If he’s in the Valley now, he must smell blood and money.”

Tioga kicked off her shoes and leaned back in her chair.

“Keep an eye out for him, and let me know if you see him. By the way, I haven’t called the police.”

“Wait on that. Do you want a face-to-face meeting with me, or is virtual good for you for now?”

Tioga didn’t have to think long or hard.

“Yeah, meet me at Holy Cow in half an hour. I’ll buy you a latte and a scone.”

She ended the call, checked her email, and when she was satisfied there was nothing immediate to attend to,

went to the closet behind her desk, removed the shoulder holster with a 357 magnum, strapped it on and slipped into the shiny black jacket that made her feel invincible, or almost.

So, Mr. Joe Urge, Tomas' protégé, stalked the Valley. Tioga had never met him, but during their dry, dusty days on the border, Tomas referred to Joe as his whipping boy, and bragged about how easy it was for them to turn coked-up whores into mules "when the border was as porous as cheese cloth." After her divorce, when a DEA agent visited Tioga in her office, she screeched, "Get the fuck out of my face and don't waste my time until you have Tomas Contreras by the balls." Now, it seemed, ghosts from her dark past had returned.

Tioga gathered her purse, phone, wallet, and keys, and locked the door to her office on the way out. She walked down the steps to the ground floor, where she gazed up at the marquee of the Alhambra Theater that read DOUBLE FEATURE on one line, and beneath it POISON IVY and THIS MAN IS DANGEROUS.

At the box office, she noted the times that the films would be screened and told herself she would have to see them again for the sheer pleasure of watching Eddie Constantine as the infamous Lemmy Caution. *Very funny name, she mused; he wouldn't know caution if it hit him on the head.*

Holy Cow

Holy Cow was once the most popular café in town, but ever since a famous coffee chain had opened two local branches, once-loyal customers became renegades and business plummeted. Tioga liked The Cow (as she called it) better now because it wasn't as crowded as it had been before, and the customers who currently took their morning coffee there were mostly tourists and didn't recognize her. She could be in public and anonymous at the same time. The Cow had the best coffee in the Valley, though oddly enough that didn't count for a great deal with caffeine addicts who craved ambiance. Sadly, the Cow couldn't supply it.

By the time Tioga arrived at the cafe, Alejandro was already seated in one of the comfortable armchairs along the far wall. He smiled at her and rose to his feet. Alejandro fashioned himself a gentleman. That's how his mother raised him. His instinct was to take Tioga's right hand and kiss it, but he repressed the urge and merely shook it. Neither of them uttered a word, but both drifted toward the front counter and locked eyes with the barista, a young woman named Rachael who wore her hair in immaculate dreadlocks and smelled of lavender. Tioga looked up at Alejandro who, at almost a foot taller, loomed over her.

"What'll it be?"

"Hot milk to settle my stomach."

Alejandro had already had several cups of coffee and didn't want or need more caffeine. He reached for his

wallet and produced a credit card, which he handed over the counter.

“For me and for Tioga both.”

Rachael took the card and held it in her right hand. Tioga wore a bemused expression on her face.

“I’ll have a latte and a croissant.”

She took the plate with the croissant and moved to the far end of the counter, where, along with Alejandro, she waited. A young man with a full beard made their drinks.

“Are you still living in town, kiddo?”

In some parts of the Valley, she was known as a nosy parker. Her curiosity did go beyond the normal, but that was part of her job. The bearded guy didn’t look up as he cleaned the nozzle on his shiny machine and filled their order.

“Yeah. Living in the apartment above the garage at my folk’s place. It’s better than the street. Been there, done that. Enjoy your coffee.”

Alejandro took the cup with the hot milk and held it in both hands. Tioga picked up her latte. They sat down at one of the small round tables behind the display that offered a dozen or so different kinds of tea, from Assam and Oolong to Masala Chai and Yunnan. Alejandro rarely held back what was on his mind. Now, he jump-started the conversation and drew upon the discourse he’d been having in his own head.

“I always thought that Tomas gave you his share of the loot for safe keeping, but I never said anything. I didn’t think you’d level with me.”

The loot, as Alejandro called it, weighed on Tioga like the proverbial ton of bricks. She thought of it as dirty money. Evil money. In fact, it was drug money that Tomas accumulated during his days as a smuggler. He had hidden it in an old warehouse on the edge of town, where he also

concealed contraband. In a moment of weakness, he had told Tioga where he kept the loot. After the fiery crash that consumed him and his vehicle, she retrieved it and decided to keep it, rather than turn it over to law enforcement. She had been afraid to touch it, for fear it would poison her as it had poisoned her ex and his pal, Hawk, and their confederates on both sides of the border.

Yes, she knew where the money was stashed. She didn't like or want to remember, though she could bring her memories to the surface when necessary. It was her one big secret from a dark past, a past that was sure to morph into a dark future. One day the loot would come back to haunt her. She would have to face it, even if it meant that getting her hands dirty.

Tioga sat across from Alejandro, buying time by sipping her latte, then suddenly slamming her cup on the table.

"Jesus, that's hot! ...Why would you think Tomas gave me the loot? We were no longer married, and we'd been on the outs for quite a while before he died in the crash. I have no idea where Tomas hid the loot."

"Yeah, yeah...Tomas didn't have anyone else to turn to. You were the only one he could trust not to run to the cops, or blab to any of his old buddies. He was a good judge of character, most of the time, though he relied on Terry McCoy and on my brother, Pablo, both of them thieving thieves."

The latte had cooled considerably. Still, Tioga sipped it slowly and resisted the impulse to avoid Alejandro's gaze, which made her uncomfortable. Finally, she lined him up in her sights and drilled him with her eyes.

"That's a pretty story about Tomas trusting me, my friend, but that's all it is: pretty."

She had more to say, but she wondered if Alejandro would accept her story at face value. Alejandro wore an

expression on his face that said he didn't quite believe her. Why should he?

As a PI, Tioga always played her cards close to her chest. If someone didn't need to know a fact or a rumor, she didn't share it, which meant that she repressed things and could feel overwhelmed. At the Cow, she leaned across the table and placed her right hand on Alejandro's outstretched left hand.

"What I need now is a good pair of eyes and ears. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep an eye out for Joe Urge and let me know, pronto."

Alejandro removed his pork pie hat and flattened the unruly hair on the top of his head.

"I thought Joe Urge was in Mexico, but he moves about quickly. And he has family in the Valley."

Tioga broke off the end of her croissant, dipped it in the latte, put it in her mouth and chewed slowly. Then she placed her right hand over her heart.

"That information is much appreciated... I'm packing heat again, and I'm prepared to use it if and when necessary. I don't like being pushed around, especially by a nobody like Joe."

With a teaspoon, Alejandro scooped out the foam in the cup that had held the hot milk, now nearly all gone. Tioga turned away from him, gazed at the newspaper rack and read the headline on the front page of *The Gazette*: "Tight Race for D.A. Becomes Even Tighter." She seemed distracted, Alejandro thought, and he wondered what else was on her mind, besides Joe Urge. He read the same headline and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

"If you're looking for work, I have something for you. It's out of my league."

"So tell me, then; what is it?"

She didn't want to seem overly eager. Alejandro leaned back in his chair so only the two hind legs touched the floor.

"You know the Marchettis, don't you? Isabel and Louis. I drive them to and from town, run errands and keep an eye on their daughter. She's a handful."

Tioga focused her eyes on the two hind legs of the chair.

"I wish you wouldn't do that. You're making me nervous."

Alejandro looked like a small boy who had been rebuked by his mother. He smiled and righted the chair so that all four legs touched the floor.

"Thank you."

"De nada."

Tioga stared at him and rolled the Spanish words across her tongue.

"De nada, de nada..." Yes, I know Isabel and Louis. I bought a case of their Pinot in January, and also a whole flat of the stinking rose that the crew harvested and dried in the barn. It was so overpowering, I had to store it in the garage. Louis is an odd one. He boasts about his collection of Jack London memorabilia whenever I see him; in fact, he thinks he's the incarnation of Jack."

Alejandro took out his phone, went to his photos and showed Tioga the picture of the young woman he was eager for her to see and meet.

"Maybe you know Isabel's and Louis' daughter, Natalia?"

He sounded unsure of himself. Tioga shook her head and fussed with the unruly hair on the top of her own head.

"I've heard about Natalia. She's notorious in these parts, but I don't really know her. If you can't say something nice about her, maybe don't say anything at all."

Alejandro folded his arms across his chest. He was happy to tell her all that he knew, but he didn't want to seem boastful.

“That’s a nice idea. Fact is, somebody is trying to blackmail Natalia. I’ve been acting as her go-between, though I’m new to the blackmail biz.”

He cleared his throat paused for a few moments to allow Tioga time to process the intel.

“Natalia received two anonymous letters threatening to make public certain photos of her unless she paid up. I’ve read the letters, which look like a child wrote them, probably to disguise the writer’s handwriting. The most recent one instructed Natalia to go to the plaza and sit on the bench next to the statue of General Vallejo. Needless to say, she didn’t go. I went in her place and explained to the guy waiting there that, quote, ‘Ms. Marchetti is too unwell to leave home. She asked me to negotiate with you.’”

Tioga’s thoughts sometimes turned cartwheels and did other kinds of acrobatics. But sitting there with Alejandro at Holy Cow, her thoughts bounced, leapt, and raced ahead, unwilling to wait for him to finish his story.

“Natalia must have posed in the nude, and is afraid now that she’ll be slut-shamed. I think she should call his bluff and wait and see what the would-be blackmailer does next.”

That was more than Alejandro really wanted to hear all at once, but he nodded his head.

“I thought that’s what you’d say. I wish you’d tell Natalia that in person. Someone has to, and you’re the most qualified for the job. If you want, I can set up a meeting.”

Tioga wore a puzzled look on her face.

“How did you know the person at the bench next to the General was the blackmailer? I mean it could have been anyone, a tourist even, waiting there.”

Alejandro had been sitting too long for his own comfort. He rose to his feet, stretched his legs and raised his arms above his head. He peered down at Tioga.

“You look stressed now. Do you want to just let it go?”

She wondered if he was avoiding her question; it seemed like it. Well, she wouldn't avoid his. She didn't answer out loud, but yes, she did want to let it go, wished the whole place would let it go. She gazed at the friends of The Cow who were on their devices, and not paying an iota of attention to her or to Alejandro, who stood on tiptoes and stretched his long legs. Tioga's question about the identity of the blackmailer hung in the air.

Alejandro kept her waiting while he gathered his thoughts, which worked mostly in a linear way, except when they moved in circles on their own and without his direction. Now they seemed to go all over the map, but finally he settled his mind and centered himself.

"The dude wore an American flag pin on his lapel. He had a manila envelope tucked under his arm. He waved the envelope in front of me and said, 'If you want the photos back, wait for the next message and bring cash.' I told him to show me. He opened the envelope, removed one photo dangled it, and said 'Don't worry, this one and all the others I have here are copies. We'll return the originals and the negatives when you hand over the cash in small bills. No hundreds. Got it?'"

"Hurry up and wait... Welcome to our lovely town."

Tioga watched the slow flow of traffic on the boulevard, the main North/South thoroughfare, which led to the highway and the city. Alejandro waited for her to give him her undivided attention. Her eyes finally wandered back to his.

"This blackmail business is right up your alley. It has your name written all over it."

Tioga raised and lowered her thick dark eyebrows.

"I'll mull it over."

She sounded dubious about taking on the case, though Alejandro didn't seem to take her comment as an outright

rejection. He had known her too long and had been around too many tight corners with her to jump to conclusions, or assume much of anything without knowing facts, the more the better. Not that long ago, Alejandro and Tioga had run a gauntlet together. They traced and tracked Tomas and Hawk to an abandoned warehouse in the Valley, where the partners stashed drugs, brought their whores and concubines, and plotted more smuggling and trafficking for fun and profit. Tioga's memories of that chapter in her life were still fresh.

"Yes, I said. I'll mull it over."

All of the facts—that was something else Alejandro had learned not to expect. He gave Tioga a flirtatious glance.

"You do just that darling. Mull it good. Think about it. Maybe you want to jump at this blackmail thing."

Tioga smiled and winked.

"Mind if I change the subject?"

Alejandro shook his head.

"Where are you living these days?"

She was curious in a disinterested way, she thought. Alejandro moved his head gently from side to side until the bones in his neck cracked. He laughed, lowered his shoulders and let go of the tension that had made him on edge.

"I'm couch surfing and I'm barn surfing. Louis Marchetti had the space above the rafters turned into an office. It has a bed. He used to invite his *chicas* there. Not anymore. Isabel cracked the whip. That's why I can bunk there. I wouldn't want to make it my home unless it had stuff like hot running water. I'm getting soft."

Tioga checked the time on her cell, checked her messages and read a text from her father who lived in Geneva, Switzerland, and who wrote to say he was sorry he missed her birthday and added, "Sweetheart, please forgive me." *Whatever*, she thought, and returned the phone to the

front pocket of her shiny black jacket, her second skin. She looked up at Alejandro.

“Just my dad... Listen, you’re welcome to stay at my place. The bedroom in the front of the cottage has been vacant ever since Camilla took off for Mazatlan to be with her grandmother. The old woman is the matriarch of the Rodriguez family and she’s dying a slow death. Camilla won’t be back for some time.”

Tioga watched the shifting expressions on Alejandro’s face, hoping that they might offer a sign of what he was thinking, but his face revealed nothing.

“Or... *nada*?”

“What? Yea, thanks, I appreciate the offer.”

Tioga pondered the enigmatic guy who sat opposite her, lost in thought. In all the time she had known him, he never appeared to have had a 9-to-5 job. And yet, he managed to survive in the claustrophobic interstices of the Valley, where folks like Louis, Isabel, and Natalia lived in close proximity to loners like Alejandro, and scoundrels like Joe Urge.

“Or *nada*. Look, you don’t have to pay rent for the rest of this month. You’ll have privacy in your bedroom, but I’m afraid we’ll have to share the kitchen. I hope you’re not messy. I hate messes.”

Alejandro reached into the front pocket of his jeans, fished out an old pocket watch, held it in the palm of his hand and read the time.

“Thanks, I appreciate the offer. I could show up later this afternoon. Meanwhile I have to check in with Natalia. I’ll tell her that I spoke with you and you’re considering the possibilities.”

Tioga gathered her things, stood up and took a step back.

“You do that. With Joe Urge out there running around, I don’t feel safe. I’m going home to stash the hide-a-key and lock up.”