

'Alice Vega is sensational.' LEE CHILD

HIDE OUT

LOUISA LUNA

AN ALICE VEGA NOVEL



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First published by Doubleday, an imprint of Penguin Random House US, 2022
Published by The Text Publishing Company, 2022

Cover design by Text
Cover images by iStock

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, part of the Ovato group, an accredited ISO/NZS 14001:2004 Environmental Management System printer

ISBN: 9781922458391 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781922459701 (ebook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia



This book is printed on paper certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds FSC chain-of-custody certification SGSHK-COC-005088. FSC promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

San Francisco was not Alice Vega's favorite town, on account of the weather. She preferred the heat straight up, never ran the a/c in her own house in the Sacramento Valley except during the most brutal of heat waves; otherwise, it was windows open. At home she typically walked around in yoga shorts and a tank top, but for work, every day, including today, she wore black—pants, shirt, jacket, boots. A Springfield pistol in a shoulder holster over the shirt, under the jacket. She'd worn the straps as tightly as she could stand it for so many years, just shy of cutting off circulation, that there was now an outline on her skin of the holster pocket, a collection of pink lines like an architect's sketch on her ribs, just south of her left breast.

Work brought her to a lot of places she didn't care for. She stood on the front steps of a big yellow house in Pacific Heights and pressed the doorbell, the glass front door wide behind a decorative iron frame. She heard the two-tone echo inside and figured it might be a minute. Lots of stairs. She turned around and looked at the street, empty and quiet for a Saturday. It was noon, fifty-five degrees, and the sun was out but muted, some wisps of fog hanging in the air.

A young tan man came to the door, bald with a black beard and glasses, wearing a mustard shirt and white pants that appeared oversized and expensive. He opened the door; the glass hummed as it shook on the frame.

"Ms. Vega?" he said, tentative.

"Yes," said Vega. "Mr. Fohl?"

"No, no, I'm Samuel. The Fohls' assistant," he said, embarrassed to correct her. "Come in, please."

Vega stepped into a large hall roughly the size of her whole house. There was a black-and-white-checked parquet floor, and an ornate carved wooden ceiling. A tiled wall fountain bubbled quietly in the corner.

"It's Tiffany," said Samuel, catching Vega's gaze.

Vega nodded, accepting the information as she would a ticket from a parking-lot payment machine.

"This way, please," said Samuel, and led her to an adjoining room.

The ceiling was engraved wood in the new room as well, and there were two wine-red leather couches, not a crease on them, facing each other.

"What will you have to drink?" said Samuel, his hands clasped behind his back. "We have flat and sparkling water, or something stronger if you prefer."

"No, thanks," said Vega.

"Very good," said Samuel. "Anton is wrapping something up. He'll be with you shortly."

He left the room. Vega let her eyes travel along the edges of the windowpane. Outside, there was a bush of papery purple flowers clipped into the shape of a box.

She examined the room now. There was a dark wood sideboard the length of the entire wall opposite her, a white vase holding an arrangement of black lacquered sticks on top of it. Behind that

stretched a long rectangular mirror, the top pitched at an angle so it leaned forward, almost as if it were put there to capture the full-body reflection of whoever was sitting on the couch. Vega saw herself in the glass, the crooked black sticks crossing the image of her face.

“Ms. Vega,” said the man she’d come to see.

He rushed into the room, swung his arm back leading up to the handshake, as if to gain momentum. Vega stood and extended her hand, and their palms slapped together, so it was really more of a high-five. He held a folded sheet of paper in his other hand.

“Anton Fohl,” he said. “I’m so sorry to keep you waiting. I was on one of those calls. . . .”

He trailed off and looked to Vega for approval, she guessed, expecting her to say, “Oh, it’s no trouble,” or “Please—just to sit in this delightfully appointed room has been pleasure enough,” but he had not, of course, ever met Vega and therefore didn’t know that she purposefully didn’t partake in small talk unless she was trying to glean information from a person, much the way someone would pull and pick the meat from the delicate bones of a steamed fish.

“Please,” he continued, gesturing for her to sit.

Vega sat, and Fohl sat on the opposite couch, so they were now about six or seven feet away from each other. Vega had not researched Fohl before meeting. She’d wanted to rely on her first impressions, and then piece the rest together later. Social media was great for that, but it was all through the filter of the screen through the filter of the author’s engineering, which was two screens too many for Vega. She trusted her own eyes.

Fohl was handsome, in his fifties, with walnut-colored hair, the gray woven throughout with a white streak above each ear, so precisely placed it seemed to have been dyed that way. His eyes were a saturated blue-green and by far the most noticeable features on his face, save the lone boyish dimple in his left cheek, visible only when he smiled.

“Can we get you something to drink?” said Fohl, glancing at Samuel, who hovered in the doorway.

“No, thanks,” said Vega.

“We’re good, Samuel, thank you,” said Fohl.

Samuel withdrew, and Fohl placed the sheet of paper on the

cushion next to him. He leaned forward and rested his knees on his elbows.

“You must have had quite a drive,” he said. “Coming from where? Sacramento?”

“Not that far,” said Vega. “A little south of there, though.”

Fohl whistled, expressing gentle astonishment.

“Well, thank you for coming all this way to speak face-to-face,” he said.

Vega smiled and then stopped, waited for more.

Fohl nodded rhythmically, like a bobble-head dog on a dashboard.

“I, uh,” he said, then coughed into his fist. “This is not something I wanted to put in an e-mail. I wanted to speak in person, to meet you, first off, but also this is . . .” He paused and pursed his lips, as if conducting an executive search for the right word, but Vega had a feeling he already knew it. “. . . a different sort of case than you’re used to.”

He paused again—Vega presumed, to allow her time to digest the disclaimer, but she already had, and she thought that if Fohl knew about half the cases she took that didn’t make press coverage, he might rethink his assumptions.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Fohl, holding his hands in front of him as if to stop her from getting him wrong any further. “It’s still a missing-person case. It’s just that it’s likely to be the biggest case of your career.”

Fohl winced at the magnitude of his own words, but seemed excited by what he was planning to say.

“My wife, Carmen, went to Cal for undergrad—her father and grandfather went there, but my family and I, well, we went to Stanford, so you can imagine how it went the first time she brought me home to meet the parents.”

He didn’t laugh, but his eyes grew small as he smiled knowingly. When Vega didn’t laugh along with him and just continued to stare, Fohl’s smile shrank, the dimple flattening on the plane of his cheek. He seemed thrown off his topic but picked it back up after a moment.

“We met, she and I, in the fall of ’85. Married three years later. Two beautiful daughters.”

Fohl paused.

“Now you’re thinking, Who’s the missing person?” he said.

Vega still didn’t speak but leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, mirroring Fohl’s position.

Fohl clasped his hands together and let out a heavy breath.

“Before Carmen met me, she dated someone seriously, and he’s the one I’d like you to find. And this,” he said, holding up his index finger, “this is where it gets complicated.” Fohl took another, even heartier breath than the one before. Then he delivered the name quickly: “It’s Zeb Williams.”

Vega watched as Fohl rubbed his palms on his knees. Fohl’s expression was somewhere between a scowl and a grin. Then it turned to confusion.

“Zeb Williams,” he repeated, in case Vega had suffered moderate hearing loss within the past few minutes. “The Cal kicker,” he added, now with a forgiving sort of look, as if this new information was all Vega would need to jog her memory.

“Okay,” said Vega. “When did you last see him?”

Fohl pressed his lips together, anxious.

“Nineteen eighty-four,” he said. “November 17, 1984. It was the last time anyone saw him.” He scratched his chin, said, “You really don’t know who Zeb Williams the football player is?”

“No,” Vega said, without hesitation or apology.

Fohl laughed and shook his head. “I’m sorry—it’s just that I thought everyone did,” he said.

Vega raised her hand, keeping her arm tight against her torso, like she was about to speak under oath.

“I don’t,” she said.

“Right,” said Fohl, still stunned. “I’m just not sure quite where to start now.”

His incomprehension seemed genuine, so Vega thought it best to help him out.

“Let’s assume that I can find out what everyone knows from the Internet,” she said. “Why don’t you tell me what everyone doesn’t know. Just what you know.”

This made sense to Fohl. He nodded vigorously, relieved.

“They, my wife and Zeb, they met in a California natural-history class. Dated for two years,” he said, another cough slipping into his

fist. “She knew him very well, or thought she did, and was deeply hurt when he disappeared.”

“He never contacted her after he left?” Vega asked.

“No,” said Fohl.

Vega believed him. Still, there was a thing that didn’t fit. A jangly gold lid for a too-small Mason jar.

“And you never met him personally,” she said.

“No,” said Fohl. “Only from what Carmen’s told me, and, you know, what everyone knows from the media.”

Vega paused, briefly peering at her reflection split by the black branches.

“This might be easier if I can ask your wife about him directly,” she said.

Fohl scratched his knee. “She’s not home right now,” he said.

Vega let a moment pass before speaking. Then she said, “Happy to wait.”

“Well, that’s just it,” said Fohl. “If I’m being up front with you.”

Another cough.

“She doesn’t know I’m speaking with you right now,” he said with a note of humility. “She doesn’t know I’m trying to find Zeb.” Then he sighed—he was growing wearier with each sentence—and said, his head bowing, “And I suppose you’d like to know why that is.”

“Not really,” said Vega.

Fohl lifted his head, startled. “Not really,” he repeated. “Why not?”

“None of my business,” said Vega. “If I take the job, you’re the client, not your wife, unless you indicate otherwise.”

“That’s great,” said Fohl, relieved. “I thought, I assumed, you would have to speak to her first.”

“No,” said Vega. “If there comes a time when I can’t move the case forward unless I speak with her, then that will have to change.”

“Of course,” said Fohl. “Cross that bridge.”

“Without her, it may take longer for me to get certain pieces of information, but I’ll get them.”

“I admire your confidence,” said Fohl. “Seeing that many, *many* people have tried to find Zeb Williams and failed. For over thirty years.”

Vega checked her reflection in the mirror on the wall, still behind the branches.

"They don't have my resources," she said.

"Which are?" said Fohl, suddenly haughty, as if he hadn't been the one who'd invited her there.

"By resources I mean my experience," said Vega. "And my specific skill set."

"Of course," said Fohl. "That's why I reached out to you. Because of your work on . . ." He lingered, searching for the words. ". . . specialty cases."

"If I were to take the case, you would have to pay the rate I set, and then, when I find him, you would have to pay a little more," she said.

"*When* you find him," said Fohl, clarifying.

"Yes," said Vega. "When."

"That's fine," said Fohl. "I'll pay whatever you think is fair. There is one more thing, a piece of information you should have."

Fohl unfolded the sheet of paper he'd been holding, leaned forward on the couch, and handed the paper to Vega.

It was a printed copy of a photograph, four people at an outdoor cafe: A woman with dark hair and eyes, wearing an apron. She appeared to be in conversation with two older men sitting at a table, one in a white suit, the other holding a cane. At a neighboring table was a younger man, gazing up at the woman.

"Carmen's father hired a private detective after Zeb disappeared. He traced him to a town in Oregon called Ilona. That picture, that's the last record of Zeb, you know, confirmed. There's been a lot of conjecture between then and now."

"Does anyone else have this picture?" asked Vega. "Would I be able to find it online?"

"No, that's from the PI. Carmen's father didn't like loose ends and had an unlimited amount of capital, you see."

Vega examined the photograph: the four people, their faces, their points of focus.

Fohl continued: "Her maiden name is Wirth."

The young man—Zeb Williams, apparently—stared at the dark-haired woman.

"My wife's," said Fohl. "Same family that owns Pacific Airlines."

Vega recognized that Fohl wanted her to acknowledge this, not

to impress her but because he thought it was important, how rich his wife and her family were. Vega was not so sure it was important at all and had other ideas.

“Do you know who this is?” she said, pointing to the woman in the picture.

Fohl sat up even straighter, looking pleased. He took his phone out of his pants pocket.

“I do,” he said, tapping the screen. “Cara Simms. Cara with a ‘C.’”

“That was from him, your father-in-law’s private detective?”

“Yeah.”

“What about these other men?” said Vega, holding the paper up so Fohl could see it again.

“Nothing about them—all he found out was the name of the town and her name, Cara Simms.”

Vega folded the paper back up into a rectangle.

“Do you have his name, the detective?”

“Died in the late nineties, unfortunately,” said Fohl. Then he made a sad face that ranked about a five on the genuine scale.

Vega thought about that. She would have to go about this a different way. First, she would have to learn about football.

She stood, said, “I’ll need forty-eight hours to think about it before I accept. If I do, I’ll have some additional questions for you.”

Fohl, taken aback, stood as well.

“Of course . . . Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ll call you the day after tomorrow,” she said, shaking his hand firmly.

“Yes,” said Fohl, concern grazing his face.

Vega didn’t wait for his offer to show her out and headed toward the entryway. Fohl hurried and cut right in front of her as she reached the door. Vega took a small step back to let him in.

“This lock’s a little tricky,” he said, then turned a small gold bolt under the knob which did not seem tricky at all.

He opened the door, and Vega went outside, down the front steps.

“Thanks very much for making the trip,” he said from the doorway.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “Speak with you in a couple of days.”

She turned away from him and walked to her car, heard him say, “Yes,” and then the sound of the heavy door rattling closed.

The fog had burned off completely by then, and Vega looked up at the sun before opening the car door and wondered how quickly she could get to SFO and get on a flight to New York, Newark, or Philadelphia. She knew it would probably end up being a red-eye, but it never bothered her to take night flights. She was not big on sleep.

The sun warmed her face. It was a nice bit of relief and surprise, getting the heat like that.

She couldn't really enjoy it, though. She missed someone.