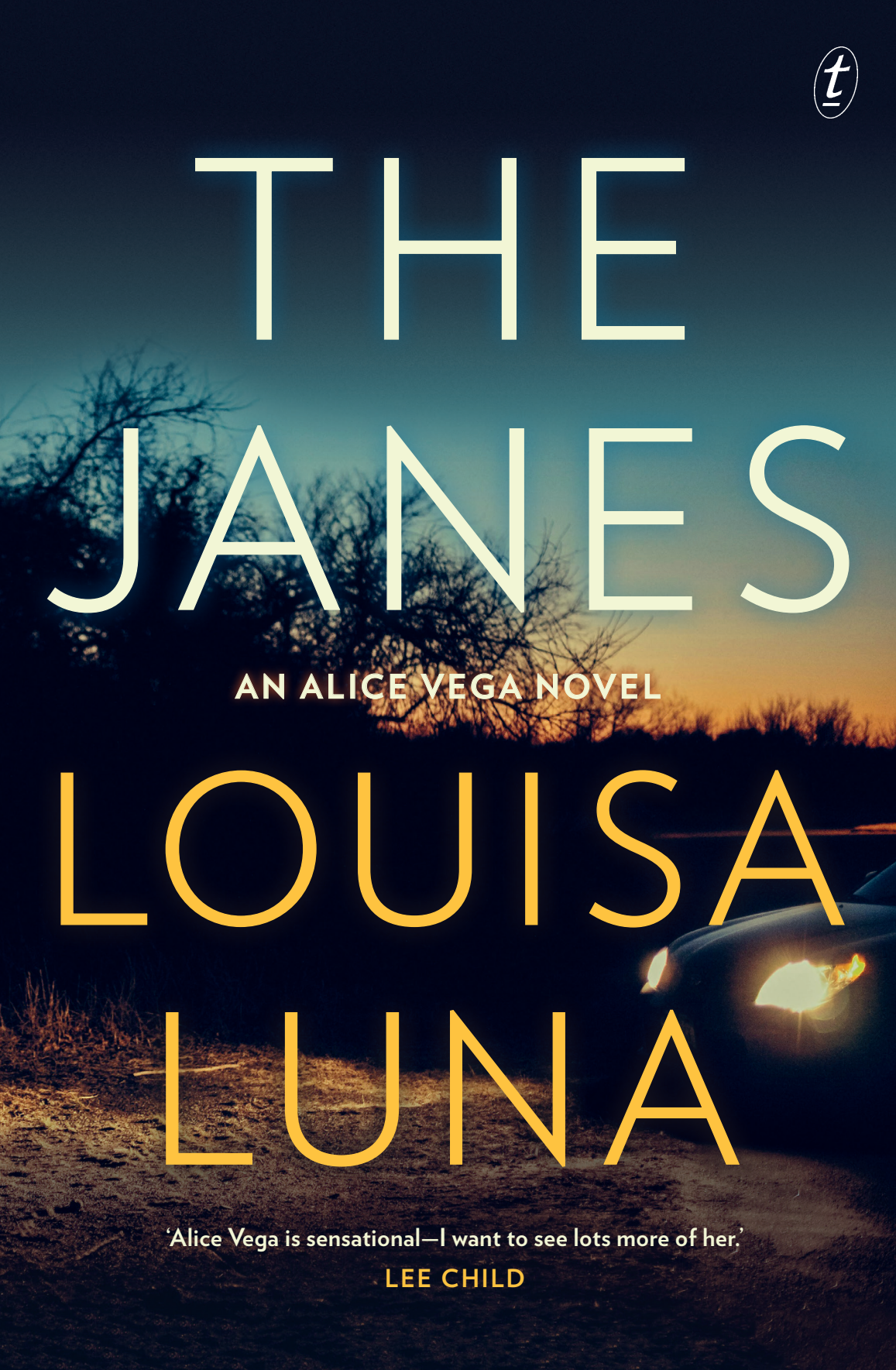
THE JANES
AN ALICE VEGA NOVEL
LOUISA LUNA
'Alice Vega is sensational—I want to see lots more of her.'
LEE CHILD

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MEET OUR GIRL: SEVENTEEN, ARRIVED HERE A YEAR AGO FROM A rough and dusty town in Chiapas, considered pretty by most standards because she is young, her face unmarked by scars or wrinkles, her body boasting the tender snap of fresh muscle. Our girl's brain, on the other hand, is at war with itself and others: with memories of her mother's worry and her father's pain, subtle with her own simmering meditations on sex and violence, with fear of all the men that come through the door with their eyes so stark and full of want it's like they've eaten her up before they've even selected her from underneath the butcher's glass.

Our girl walks in bare feet, unsure if she is dreaming. Her dreams these days are collisions, collages, bursts of fire and color that all start normally enough—she is playing paper dolls with her sister on the porch under the umbrella with one panel missing, or fluffing up yellow rice in a pot right after it's done steaming. But then they turn; the dolls become scuttling cockroaches in her hands; the rice bowl fills with blood; her own teeth grow into blades and shred her tongue to streamers.

The house is divided, two floors: the ground floor, where she and the other girls sleep on towels side by side in the bedroom they share, and watch TV and wait in the living room; and there's downstairs full of boxes that pass for rooms—no windows, no air. The working rooms.

Then there is the garage, which is separate from the house, but there are no cars inside. There is just a table and some machines and tools. Our girl hasn't been there yet but this is what she's heard. Only girls who cry and act stupid are taken there and our girl keeps her head down and does what she's supposed to do. She doesn't ask questions and doesn't make trouble, but she watches everything.

She avoids the bosses. Coyote Ben is easy to avoid because he comes and goes, although when he's around and there's no work he grabs the

hair at the back of her neck and whispers in her ear. He speaks English so she doesn't really understand everything he says, but she knows he doesn't expect her to respond. He lets her make the drinks.

Fat Mitch is always there, and he's got the gun on a belt that looks like it's strangling all the fat on his stomach. He has named the gun, Selena, after a singer, and he is always reminding the girls the gun is there. He'll say things in Spanish like "Selena got a lot of sleep last night and wants to have some playtime today." And then there's Rafa.

Rafa is the one who takes the girls to the garage. Fat Mitch tells them Rafa only does what he does because he has to, but our girl doesn't buy it. She knows Rafa does it because he likes it. It's not like on a farm when they make the runtiest worker shoot and drown the sick animals to toughen him up. The house may be a farm but Rafa's no runt—he's bigger and stronger than Fat Mitch, and our girl has heard he smiles when he does what he does to the girls in the garage. That is what they get when they act stupid.

Our girl's not stupid, and she stays away from the stupid girls: Isabel, Chicago, Good Hair. They cry and try to steal food. Stupid. The girl called Maricel is new, one of the girls from the city, and while it's usually not a good idea to get to know the new girls, our girl actually likes her and Good Hair both. In another time and place they may have all played card games and shared secrets about boys in their class. Instead they wait to be picked. Which is better than the alternative. If a girl doesn't get picked from the TV room for a month, she's out, not taken to the garage—*out* out, out of the house and dropped somewhere in the desert because she's not worth the Wonder bread.

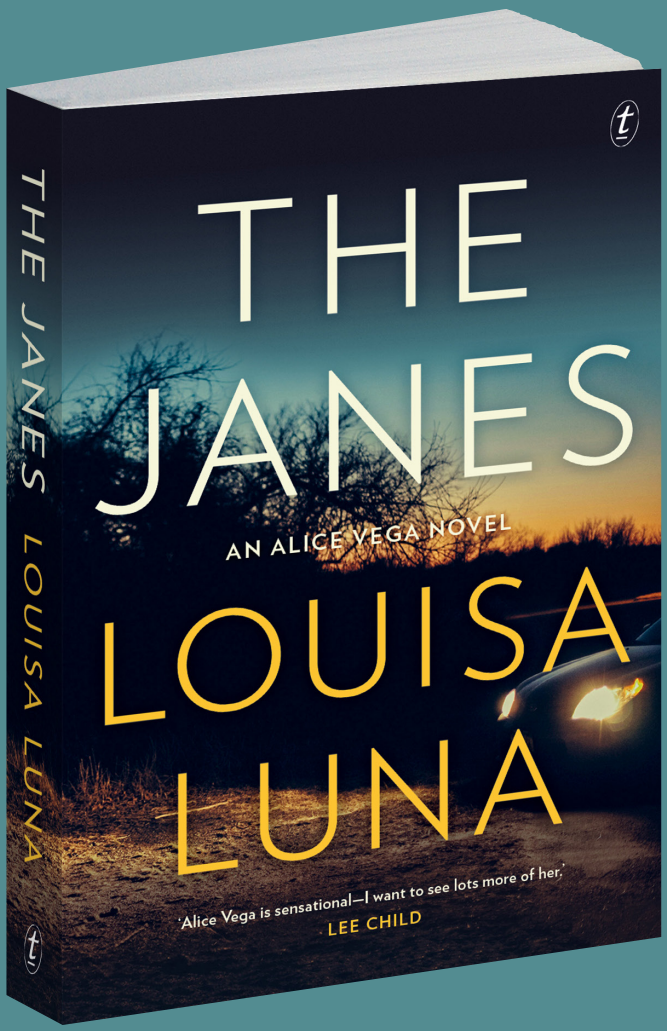
Our girl has learned a little English here and there from TV. She pays attention to the American news. Police, homicide, catch, release. She watches a news show about a boy who looks her age, and Mexican too, but American. She tries to wrap her mouth around a word the newswoman keeps repeating, which sounds like something about a duck flying up. Duck-ted. Up-duck-ted. The boy talks to the newswoman, points to a picture of a fish tank. Then there is another woman, not the newswoman; 2014 it says in the corner. Her name is at the bottom of the screen. Our girl notices: American first name, Mexican last name. She looks like she is police. Or a lesbian. Or a gangster. She wears black clothes and sunglasses.

Back to the boy. Over and over he says the same thing: "She safes me, she safes me." Our girl watches the boy's top row of teeth, the way

they scrape his bottom lip as he cries. The word is not "safes." It's "saved." "She saved me," the boy says, again and again.

Our girl watches Maricel get up close to the TV. Maricel doesn't take her eyes off it. The boy on the screen says, "She saved me. Alice Vega, she saved me." Maricel begins to cry, along with the boy. Our girl watches her and realizes her own hands are shaking.

Our girl has a thought out of nowhere: you treat us like dogs; we're going to act like dogs. A map unfolds in her mind, square by square. She saved me, the boy says. She saved me.



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