

**The Vagabond Virgins**, set in 1979 ▪

A Holy Virgin who appears in Mexico is dedicated to the overthrow of the corrupt and tyrannical PRI. And a woman who claims to be the Virgin's sister brings San Diego private investigator Alvaro Hickey a chance to help reform the country of his birth.

"*The Vagabond Virgins* delivers a story in the tradition of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and B. Traven's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Kuhlken knows the brutal reality of border Mexico," Gene Riehl, author of *Quantico Rules* and *Sleeper*

Library Journal asserts, *The Vagabond Virgins* "features the originality of plot and memorable characters that make Kuhlken's series so outstanding."

From Booklist: "a fast-moving adventure that effectively combines mainstream historical fiction with the conventions of the hard-boiled detective novel. Kuhlken has another winner."

Publishers Weekly writes "Kuhlken's engaging fifth novel featuring the eccentric Hickey family ... easily blends adventure with a classic PI staple: the appearance of an alluring woman, full of secrets."

## THE VAGABOND VIRGINS

1

Alvaro Hickey liked old movies and books about tough guys from the '30s and '40s, Pop's era. They were one reason he brought his work from the penthouse suite of his employers to the shabby fourth floor office on Broadway. There he could break from his desk work and imagine scenes like the long legged blonde standing in the doorway, or like the phone call he would get today.

The placard on the door read Hickey and Sons, Investigations. The white paint on the plaster walls had yellowed long ago. The wooden floor creaked. Venetian blinds shaded the small window that overlooked Broadway and the city bus turnaround in Horton Plaza, a favorite hangout for the folks Alvaro grew up calling "bums" and "winos." But such names had gone out of fashion like the term wetback, which Alvaro remembered too well.

The only light came from a lamp on the ancient wooden desk. Photos on the walls were of old Tijuana's Agua Caliente Casino, Lane Field where the Pacific Coast League Padres had played, and the tent city on Mission Beach during WW II.

Alvaro had given up squinting at the scribbled applications for green cards, visas, and citizenship, which Garfield et al paid him to translate and polish. He was checking his watch to decide whether he needed to run for the ferry when the phone rang.

"Mister Hickey?"

He would've bet nobody could sound so gentle. Yet she spoke with confidence, and her diction was precise. He barely detected a Spanish accent with the hint of another language he couldn't make out. "Speaking."

"An attorney in Tijuana believes Tom Hickey and Sons can help me?"

"Which attorney?"

"Señor Quartilho."

"Okay," Alvaro said. If Augie Quartilho even talked to the lady, she either looked as good as she sounded or she was part of the Mexican oligarchy Augie took pleasure in fleecing.

Hickey and Sons was only a name on a door. Alvaro hadn't worked as a P.I. in three years, since he started law school. Still, he said, "Your name is...?"

"Lourdes." She paused. "Garcia."

Even an angelic voice can lie, he thought. But he cautioned himself against judging hastily. The pause could've meant a fly landed on her. Or somebody might've stepped on her foot.

"Can I come to your office?" she asked.

"Where are you?"

"I am at the Greyhound bus depot Señor Quartilho tells me is very close to your office."

"Wait out front," he said. "I'll be there in five minutes."

"I can find my way to you."

Admirable, he thought. "No need. I'm due for a break and a stretch." In truth, he didn't like the idea of any woman, especially one as young and lovely as she sounded, walking the downtown streets in twilight.

"I am wearing a green hat," she said.

The Greyhound depot was a few blocks south, at the corner of 1st Street and Broadway. He loped down the four flights of stairs. On the sidewalk, he walked at twice the speed of his usual amble. In cotton slacks and a sport coat over a polo shirt Garfield et al allowed as long as he buttoned it to the top, he got more than his share of stares. People, especially women, admired his wavy black hair and casual grace.

He stopped for the light at 1st Street and spotted the

woman in the green hat. She was under a street lamp near the side entrance to the depot. Standing only a couple arms' length from two hookers. Either she was a tough character or naive,

She appeared not much shorter than Alvaro's five feet and ten inches. Her Kelly green hat featured a wide, flat brim. She had wound her honey brown hair into a loose bun that rested on her long neck. She wore large, round glasses tinted yellow, a modest white blouse, and a yellow unbuttoned sweater with a green pleated skirt that fell just below her knees. Bare legs or sheer nylons the same color as her face, the brown of *cafe con leche*. Her waist was just slender enough to complement the generous hips and full breasts. Carrying a large embroidered canvas purse on a shoulder strap, she listed to the side where the purse hung, as if it weighed plenty. She stood flush against the lamp post beside a canvas suitcase. She watched his approach. He was still yards away when she reached out to shake his hand. "I believe you are..."

He nodded and took her pretty right hand. Her nails were manicured but short and unpainted. He glanced at her other hand. No ring.

From his first close look, even with the big tinted glasses that hid her eyebrows and part of her temples, he recognized her face. Though he couldn't remember where he'd seen it, she was familiar, like somebody he either saw, thought of, or dreamed about every day. Her face was rounder than oval, her cheeks soft and pooched like a healthy child's. Her mouth was wide, her lips medium-full. He had known and dated more striking women, but striking wasn't everything. She was the Mona Lisa kind that looked better the longer you gazed. And all the pieces of this lady, posture, figure, voice, and the rest, matched as well as her outfit did. Besides, the way she stood perfectly still, and the way her mouth curved up at the sides but not quite into a smile, made him imagine she knew exactly who she was.

"Thank you for--"

"*Por nada,*" he said. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"So we'll get dinner while we talk?"

"That would be nice."

He offered to carry her canvas suitcase. She appeared to consider a moment before she agreed.

The weight of the suitcase surprised him. At least fifty pounds, he thought, and wondered if she carried gallons of mineral water. Or dumbbells.

A drunken conventioneer in a Hawaiian shirt and green trousers stopped in front of the Lyceum Theater across the street, stared for a while then whistled and waved. Alvaro waved back. He and the lady rounded the corner and turned toward the harbor.

The balmy night with stone gray clouds advancing off the Pacific reminded him of his birthplace in the tropics. Though summer storms rarely came to San Diego, he felt one on its way. He wished the rain would hurry and fall. Overcast skies could grate on his nerves. But tonight it wasn't clouds that made him edgy. Though he was hardly shy around women, even the most alluring or aloof, this lady touched him in places too deep for comfort.

She walked with short steps, leaning to her right under the weight of her shoulder bag. They passed a tattoo parlor out of which Steppenwolf hard rock blasted, and a diner Alvaro had tried once and discovered the world's worst tacos.

"What kind of visa are you using?" he asked.

"I am a tourist."

"And you want a green card?"

"No. A detective."

They passed peep show arcades teeming with sailors who plunked quarters into the slots, pressed their eyes to the

lenses, then moaned and sighed. A cluster of old *pachucos* stared dreamily out the window of a pool hall.

Beyond the Santa Fe depot and the tracks, they hustled across Pacific Coast Highway. All those several blocks, the lady had kept her head tilted down so the hat brim shadowed her face. She said, "A man on the airplane told me Señor Quartilho was intelligent and knew many people. He told me the Hickeys are brave. And he said they are perhaps a little..." She looked up and stared at him. "Perhaps a little wild."

"I'll bet the word he used was *loco*, right?"

She gave him a smile he might've mortgaged his duplex to see. "Yes, *loco*."

"I won't argue that point. So, you want our help with what?"

"To find somebody." Without seeing her eyes, he perceived from her look that she was both humble and proud. He sensed all her hopes rested on his answer, yet she would refuse any help he wasn't anxious to give.

He stared too long, wondering why she looked so familiar. Maybe she acted on Mexican television or movies, he thought while he led her across the intersection to the tourist excursion docks. As they strolled past whale watching boats, he asked, "Find who?"

He had to lean closer to hear her soft voice over the creak of docks, the slap of tidewater on pilings, the whir of tires, and gulls that screeched like nagging women.

"My sister Lupe. I need to find her."

"She's missing, or you just lost touch?"

"Missing."

"How long."

"Ten years," she said, and blushed.

Alvaro cocked his head toward the harbor, watched the Coronado ferry cut its turn toward the landing, and wondered if

he should mention the odds that her sister was dead, rather than string her along.