

Viv Thraves Goes Missing

MEL HAS STOPPED waxing her bikini line. Soon we won't match at all. I smack her ass extra hard. She's supposed to moan now, but she just keeps staring at the drapes like she's choosing a flavor.

He lies on the big bed, naked, sticky white, and Mel and I lie on the floor, panting more than we need to. It's a good idea to stay entwined in case he looks at us, but Mel is hugging herself, and he's talking to us but looking at the ceiling. The usual wife-talk. She's such an intellectual that she neglects her body, doesn't see to his physical needs, never lost the baby weight. He has one of those accents. He's from London, on business. "Over from London," Mel will say later, doing the accent perfectly. She's the one that needs the drama.

All the games we played were for her. I would have played it straight, kept my mind on the money.

He orders strawberries from room service. "Please," Mel imitates later, "are you sure you won't have a berry, Viv? They're quite good."

ALIASES: Octavia Orange, Trudy Fletcher, Tiff Mercury, Veloria Van Pelton, Frances Key Scott, Immaculata Invitigo, Peggy Organza, Rosemary Snow, Mandy Becky Bird, Wellsley Wellington, Sara Rule, Skye Lesser, Prominence Locke, Martina Cadillac, Lana Under, Tori Kingdon, Twyla Tee, Shirley Christchurch, Penny Frock, Easter Vigil, Colleen Savage, Ann Marie Kozcelny, Lady Zam, Jeannie Goodjeans, Dominga Kurtz, Dinah Eyre, Amy G. Dala, Vivian Thraves.

I ALWAYS KEEP ONE CARD. I'm not the sentimental one. It's for Mel. I get the collection out on long Sunday nights during January and February, the months when it rains and I realize I haven't gotten my

hands on any of the money in this city, not really, and begin to suspect that I'm wasting my life and should go to New York where the weather is bad and the men are hunchbacks-in-training, but they roll big.

If it were up to me, I wouldn't be interested in remembering. I keep it all present tense.

But Mel loves the cards. She has a story for each name, doing everyone's voices, making me look foolish for getting too wasted and telling off the bouncer or following some luscious Latino right into the men's room before I can even make eye contact with him. I have to admit, I laugh.

I only used the Vivian Thraves card once, so it's funny that that's what they end up calling us.

IN THE ELEVATOR, I tell Mel she has strawberry juice on her chin. I could also tell her that her hair's not even brushed. I spend literally two hours blowing out my curly hair and setting it so we can look the same, but Mel has stopped caring. I reach over to rub the red juice off of her face, and she swats me away. "What the hell?" I demand, but she's back to her zombie contest with the wall. "What do you think her name is?" I ask.

Mel perks up in spite of herself. She carefully shrugs her shoulders. "Juliet Trusley-Hall," I announce. Trusley-Hall is actually his last name. I saw it on the room service bill. We work on a strictly cash basis, so they think we don't know their names, but I have my own game of finding out, and there is no creature so sloppy as a man who's just come. I prefer a touch of reality, but I play it off to Mel as if I made up the name.

"No," Mel says. "Vivian Thraves." Then she makes the remark about the strawberries. She answers herself. "No, no, Julian. You know very well I'm watching my figure lest you go off hiring a pair of whores to wank off to." I let Mel win. She lets me rub the strawberry off her skin, but makes a face like I'm hurting her.

MELODY AND MELANIE. I know it's a coincidence, but Mel takes it as a sign. I want to come up with new names, but Mel insists that we both go by "Mel."

I MAKE THE CARDS right away on the computer, to make Mel happy.

Vivian Thraves

Mel is unhappy with the font, so I change it. I ask her what time she wants to go out. She says that Viv Thraves doesn't go out on weeknights, and certainly not without an escort. I tell her as far as I'm concerned, Viv Thraves will be going to Spaceland tonight at eleven, and she can come or not come. I stand in my closet looking for a good Viv Thraves outfit, something in that school-marm-whose-hair-you're-just-dying-to-take-down look. I realize I'm shaking because I'm afraid Mel won't come with me. I divide the stack of cards and put Mel's half on the dresser. She comes in and puts on a wide-brimmed black hat, still not talking to me. Then she spins around and says, "Fancy me, do you, love?"

"WHERE THE FUCK did you get this?! Huh?! Think I'm playing?" The Cop is waving around the Trudy Fletcher card. It's his wife's real name, which was admittedly stupid, but you can't be in this business if you think you're ever going to get caught. I could tell him that her name was printed on the order form sticking out of the family-sized bottled water delivery on the front porch of his ratty little Manhattan Beach house, where Mel and I wouldn't have been caught dead if he hadn't forced us to meet him there. And what the hell happened to your "protection?" I could ask him.

He's finally materialized in my jail cell, after ignoring my SOS text for six hours. I'm so dead bored by now that I actually listen to his rant, focus on the little white card in his motioning hand as if I'm trying to win a shell game. I shiver in my paper-thin counties, wipe my nose on my sleeve. This gesture somehow dishonors his wife. He comes at me, smacking his billy club into his open palm. My cellmates raise their dark eyes and stare at The Cop just long enough to let him know they're all potential eyewitnesses, but they remain lurking in the corners. I'm nobody's sister. I'm not used to this. I grew up in the suburbs, Orange County. If I was ever abused, I don't remember it. My father loves me. I came to LA to go to college. I just wanted more money than I could ever earn. I wanted Mel to have nice things, too. That's not what I call using someone. I told her she was going to starve, studying drama.

I tell The Cop that no matter how many times he hits me, I will drag myself up to testify, and maybe he should think about that. He stands there, a bad dog not quite associating the slap on the rump with the behavior problem, still thumping his stick. "I'd sure as fuck hate to have a friend like you, Mel," he sneers. Now that Mel is missing, he's decided she's a damsel in distress, the reason he went into law enforcement, forget the free drugs and bear claws and blowjobs. At his house six weeks ago, he couldn't tell us apart.

I think about the rough piece of trade I picked up at Aftershock in the Valley the night we were both Trudy Fletcher, mine saying he's into S & M and trying to wire me to his guitar amp. "A mild shock," he says, and Mel and I use this phrase for comic relief whenever a customer asks for something scary-ridiculous. Mel picks up an actual cop that night. She is so good at being their wives it's eerie.

MEL'S MOTHER'S. Utterly dismal. No matter how much money Mel gives her, she won't quit her just-shoot-me-in-the-head job as a dispatcher at a shipping yard. She lives in San Pedro, which was even farther from LA when Mel was growing up than it is now. All that flat freeway just to get anywhere. So grindingly bleak and so close to the oasis of LA that only the most frightened people in the world choose to stay there.

Mel's mother sewed her own polyester outfits, stuck with a black and white TV, to send Mel to UCLA, then Mel defied her by studying acting. If Mel hadn't been so terrified that she was going to go broke and let her mother down, she never would have agreed to work with me. We sit in the front room with the ceramic elephants and sip Lipton tea. Mel's mother isn't sure why she doesn't like me one bit. She's the only person who hasn't noticed that Mel and I look alike. I never wear makeup when we visit her.

Mel slides her mother an envelope full of cash and tells her she got the money from acting in a gum commercial that's only shown in the Midwest.

I'M NOT SURE why Mel and I sleep in the same bed. It was my apartment first. Then she moved in. Neither of us likes to be alone.

"THERE'S THE GIRL that looks like you," and Susan Somebody points out Mel across the cafeteria. We only look similar at that point. Our hair is wildly different and Mel has brown eyes while mine are blue.

With our hair that different, men would never equate us. I don't have a business plan at that point. I stare across the room at Mel and see the first woman I've ever liked at first sight.

OUR SECOND OR THIRD week out, driving home from the Encino Hilton in my new Mustang which I convinced my father to cosign for. I want those monthly car payments hanging over my head to force myself to make our business a success. Mel is meek and moody like she always is after. I talk to her about the money, wondering out loud if we can raise our fee, calculating how many appointments we'll have this week, if we should risk a photo ad without the black strips blocking our eyes.

"What do you think her name is?" Mel says.

"Who? Whose name?"

"You know. The one he was talking about. His wife."

"Who cares?"

"Do you think she knows what he does?"

"I don't think about it, Mel. Why would you want to think about that?"

Mel is silent but blinks her eyes very fast. So I add, "That's between him and her. If it wasn't us, he'd just be paying someone else."

"How does he hide the money from her?"

"They're probably rich. He gets bonuses from his company or something. He's in sales and he gets commissions and she never knows exactly how much he's earning."

Mel trapped me into playing the game, I can see that now. She's the quiet one, but she's very good at getting what she wants.

"Honey, I want you to have this set of pearl earrings. Take it, now. I just sold another jet ski machine. Don't Daddy always take care of his sugarpussy?" Mel does him to a T, raspy fake southern twang, a sleazy good ol' boy act.

"You are my mountain of love fo' sho'," I say in the strained high register of Monty Python women, doing a southern accent even though I suck.

"No, no. She's not southern. She's from Idaho and she's the only one who doesn't know he's faking the accent. 'Beauregard, a man called from the credit card company. Our account's over the limit again. I sure as hell haven't been out charging anything. Stuck here all day in this heatbox. When are you going to order that part for my car? How long am I supposed to sit here?"

His name isn't Beaugard. It's Nelson. Nelson Orange. It was engraved on his brass key ring. But I don't tell Mel. "Wall, sugarpuss," I drawl, "you just let me worry about the money."

"Finances," Mel corrects me. "He would say 'finances.' Ayyaaak. He's so gross." Then she's back to the wife. "I swear to God, Beau, one day you'll stumble in late like you always do with excuses on your breath, and you'll get a big surprise from me. I still know how to draw and quarter a calf, mister."

I bust out laughing at that, but Mel has a dark, concentrated look on her face. "What's her name?" she demands.

"I don't know. Mrs. Orange."

"Octavia Orange."

She was our first.

IN THE NEWS, they're calling us "Viv Thraves" and also saying we're both madams, which is completely untrue. We've always worked alone, from day one. We don't make arrangements for anyone else. We aren't anyone's hos. We're small business entrepreneurs. We set our own prices, never have to split money with anyone but each other. We never get threatened or beat up. I did my research beforehand. Voyeurs are the harmless ones. It's all a show. They watch us and pay us for it. How is that different from this simpering anchorwoman on TV? I can answer that: she's eating at The Ivy and Mel and I never got out of my one bedroom in Miracle Mile. I expected to earn a lot more money, and on paper, we should have. The problem is, it's a profession with a high burn-out rate, and sometimes you just have to say fuck it all and not work again until the rent is due. And, okay, Mel's drugs ate up a lot of our profit. Not to mention the rehab.

I try to look out for her, but when we go out, she likes to stay as far from me as possible so people won't see we're the same. Personally, I can't really imagine being dependent on anything, so I didn't see her addiction coming.

Viv Thraves. Wrong. The picture they're showing on the shitty jail TV is Mel dressed up as Lady Zam, very mod and Continental, someone in a Fellini movie. Viv Thraves would never make such a spectacle of herself. Since it is the LA news, Viv is the lead story, before whatever happened in Washington today, and all the other world disasters. Nobody in the jail common room recognizes that I am a dead ringer for the girl on the screen.

“ARE YOU ACTUALLY TWINS, then, girls?” He raises himself to his elbows as we’re getting our stuff together to leave, lewdly slurping strawberries through his bad teeth.

“That’s right,” I say. Almost all of them realize that I can’t actually ask for the money, and sometimes they fuck with us at the very end. There’s way too much info on TV these days. Too many vice cop shows.

“Ah. I was just curious, you see, because you, darling, have got blue eyes, and—look this way, dear. There’s our girl. Your ‘sister’ has got brown, hasn’t she? And that, ladies, is genetically impossible.” He smiles that tight-lipped smile that men who think they’re good looking learn in countries without dentistry, smug times one hundred. I wonder if I can somehow get him deported or lift his passport or plant drugs in his suitcase or something.

He holds up our envelope and I go over to grab it. He holds firm. “Not that it matters, dear. Your whole city is built upon third-rate imitation, isn’t it? I’d have to be well daft to expect the real thing here. Give us a kiss, then, you nasty little fakey.” I stab him with my tongue, remembering how tightly he’d screwed shut his eyes while we were performing. If he wasn’t even going to look at us, why did he need us there? Some kind of warped loneliness, or a need to pay a fine for masturbating. It’s not like me to think about this stuff.

He lies back and keeps his eyes closed as I take the money. I quickly lift the sterling platter of strawberries so I can get his name off the room service bill. Simon Trusley-Hall. I don’t know why I memorize their names. It seems like it might come in handy someday.

“Do you want a business tip, love? Totally gratis, of course.” I freeze with the heavy strawberry tray in the air. My arm shakes as I try to ease it down without him catching me snooping. But he doesn’t bother to look at me. “Choose a partner with a bit of enthusiasm about her. Someone cheery, right? It’s the mistake I made in choosing my wife. And look where it’s got me, dear.” Then I know why he keeps his eyes closed. He knows he’s white and soft as a glowworm, passion doesn’t fit him and never will, he looks ridiculous, and no matter how much of a snob he tries to be to me and Mel, in the end we’re going to take his money and leave him with one less secret. He’s pathetic but I don’t feel sorry for him or scornful of him. I don’t have time. The hour’s up. We got paid. He’s over.

I’m all set to lay into Mel for not wearing her colored contact lenses, but she looks so glum it’s not worth my breath. She has strawberry juice on her chin and she’s hunched inward. She looks like a girl that no one’s ever looked at twice.

“MRS. OCTAVIA ORANGE DRINKS two sea breezes at home,” Mel says, mixing our drinks on the cluttered coffee table in the living room. “She borrows her girlfriend’s car and drives too fast over Mulholland to Sunset Strip, but she doesn’t have the guts to go into any of the clubs alone. She ends up going downtown to Park Plaza because she’s read about it in the *LA Times*. She’s wearing something with flowers on it.”

“Okay,” I say. “We can wear the red rose dresses with our black boots.”

“No,” says Mel. “We’ll each wear a different outfit. Octavia Orange is nobody’s twin.” She tilts back the cup and downs her drink, then slams it on the table. Every once in a while, she does things too big, and I am reminded that she is an actress.

MEL DIDN’T KNOW their real names, and I sure as hell never wrote them down, so where did the cops get this list? Was somebody following us? The Cop? It’s entirely unlikely that someone who spends all day following his dick around with flashing red lights would have the patience to lay low and track us for six months. Maybe some figure of justice, an adultery avenger, came galloping into town and struck them all down. After the rehab, Mel was convinced she had a guardian angel named Melvin. They told her she had to choose a higher power, but that never made sense to me, because she already had me.

My only hope now is that another one of them bites it while I’m locked up in here, which will prove I didn’t do it. But no, they’re all alive and well, out ramming their cocks into the soft give of a hotel mattress while some other team shows them the professional writhe and moan. And Viv Thraves is still At Large.

ME AND MEL and that bitch Simone at the Beverly Center Hard Rock, the end of freshman year. My original plan is to be their manager. Simone doesn’t look as much like Mel as I do, but she’s in the Theatre Department and she likes costumes and adoration. I present it to them in a highly professional manner over burgers and fries and fuzzy, persistent music out of Seattle which is supposed to be so new and full of stubble that it’s revolutionary.

Mel is quiet. She won’t look at either of us. She’s engrossed in scraping the cruddy hard ketchup remnants off the neck of the bottle. Simone speaks up. “Hell, no. I’m not a prostitute.”

I give the figures: the amount she can expect to net this summer by temping or waitressing or working retail, versus the amount she’ll net, in tax-free cash, in just a few hours working with me.

“God.” Simone uses her whole body to express her outrage, flailing around in her chair. “Where are you from? Money isn’t everything.”

“But it’s very useful if you want to eat,” I say, plunking a wad of cash down on the check. It’s mostly ones and all the money I have in the world. If they won’t do this, I’ll have to spend the summer in OC, hostessing at a family steak restaurant, letting all those overfed assholes ogle and flirt for minimum wage.

“Forget it, Melanie.” Simone is already onto the next thing, some shellacked glory boy at the bar she’s locked eyes with, probably not a single credit card in his wallet.

Mel and I sit alone. I chain-eat my fries, not registering the synthetic taste. I ask Mel if she wants a malt, even though I’ll have to scrape for loose change if she says yes. She shakes her head. We can hear Mr. Pretty flirting with Simone at the bar.

“Introduce me to your friends over there. I fucking love twins.”

Mel looks up at me quickly. We both have our hair pulled back. “It’s a lot of money,” I say, and somehow I know to say it softly. Mel nods. Her face doesn’t harden slightly like I thought it would.

THE NEWS PLAYS that fucking porno video. The beginning where Mel and I are both dressed in schoolgirl uniforms, holding a portrait of two bald babies, saying something stupid about how we were born in the Appalachian Mountains just after midnight on a night with a full moon. We look like dumb cows. I never, never, never, never should have done a video. Worst business decision I ever made. Mel is just out of rehab so we haven’t worked in a while and bills are flooding in through all the earthquake cracks in our dumpy apartment. That tape is the beginning of our troubles. I’ve always been able to eat whatever I want—I don’t think about it—and half the time I forget to feed myself. Mel spends a lot of time imagining the taste of chocolate. She’s always sitting still and gaining five or seven pounds which she then has to starve off. The porno has no lighting, no stage makeup, it’s supposed to look “real.” Mel was just off the meth and compared to me, she comes off looking chubby.

“Viv Thraves,” the news anchor says for the thousandth time. They’ve cut the video so the frame ends just above Mel’s breasts, and I’m not in it at all. Mel gazes off camera while I say my line. For a split second, I see a look of hatred flicker across her face. She keeps her eyes vacant, but there’s a tightening of her nose, and an indication of ravenous hunger fleets over her mouth. I’m not even sure I saw it. I’m dying to rewind the tape, but

this is a newscast in the Sybil Brand Common Room, and a woman with orange hair and a scar that looks like someone held her down and poured battery acid over her cheek, then relented and tried to wipe it off, switches the TV to a rerun of a game show.

I HAVE A REAL SISTER, five years younger than me. We're not close. She's studying to be a dental assistant. Who in the free world would do something like that?

“IF YOU'RE OCTAVIA ORANGE, who am I?”

“We're both Octavia Orange.”

“But we're dressed in different outfits.”

“People can be more than one thing at a time, you know.”

HERE'S HOW IT WILL END: Years from now, I will happen to run into Mel in some supermarket in the Valley. She'll have two fat kids, each singing a different commercial jingle, a midriff-baring top, sunglasses too dark to see her eyes, and a pitch-perfect Valley inflection, all of her sentences rising up at the end like the muscular outstretched arms of a synchronized swimmer. She will be playing somebody's wife for good, no little cards to hand out. Her shopping cart will be crammed full of meat and sugar cereals. And what will I have in my basket? Medicine and yogurt. Dirty pigeon feathers off a useless archangel named Melvin. A secret hole left by Viv Thraves, who couldn't be bothered to say goodbye.

“IF YOU KNOW WHERE SHE IS, you should tell us. She really is selling you out.”

The lawyer sounds ridiculous trying to use street lingo, and it's hard to tell her apart from the cops, with her uniform of cheap navy suits, and her eagerness to be the hero who puts Mel and me back together, Superglues the broken toy so they can wind us up and see how it works. Viv Thraves would never turncoat a friend. She went to public boarding school where she learned a strict code of honor.

BEFORE WE START taking appointments, we actually have arguments over which music to use, what color to wear; we choreograph as precisely as cheerleaders or thieves. About ninety seconds into our first time, I

realize that they couldn't care less about this flashy stuff, it's something they endure as politely as their kids' piano recitals. They put up with it because they think we like it. I would have chucked the whole routine, but this is the part Mel gets into. We keep up the big show until Mel gets too twitchy with speed to keep it straight in her head. She's the one who notices that we're still using the same alt rock music we chose when we were in college, and the radio is now calling it "retro."

"How long do you think we can keep this up?" she asks, her hands moving compulsively back and forth over her pants as if she's erasing something. I'm not sure which part of it she's asking about. I haven't noticed that we've gotten any older.

"TELL PEOPLE YOUR NAME. Say, 'Octavia Orange.'"

"That sounds—you don't give your last name in a club. You just say, 'I'm Octavia.'"

"She's old fashioned. She's from a potato farm in Idaho."

"But still. It sounds retarded."

"She has those little—calling cards. Beauregard gave them to her after they had a fight. He told her all the ladies in the South use calling cards. She hands them out because she can't hear over the music. Use your computer. We'll cut the paper into little cards." Mel clip-clips the scissors in the air, happy as a castañeta player.

"What about her phone number?"

"No phone number. Just her name. It's mysterious."

AT HOME we never touch each other.

"YOU BLOODY DAFT CUNT," she mutters under her breath, while we are drinking our morning coffee.

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. Yes, sorry. You see, those words aren't nearly so... shocking where I'm from as they seem to be over here. But even so, yes, we're eating, and I did speak out of turn. I didn't mean to be nasty at all. I do apologize."

"I'm sick of Viv Thraves, Mel. Come off it."

She doesn't answer. Then: "We usually have tea with our breakfast, but coffee's rather nice, too, don't you think? One mustn't get too set in one's ways."

MY INTRO TO ECON PROFESSOR at UCLA invites the top boys in the class to have dinner with some president of a Wall Street firm who is in town. I confront him about why I wasn't invited. He shuffles papers indignantly. He still has a typewriter on his desk. The worn keys stare up at him expectantly, neat rows of mannerly scholars with distinct hair parts and hats on their knees, crowded into a lecture hall.

"I can no longer afford to have female students over to my home, Miss—sexual harassment policies. Speak to the administration."

I begin to argue. He cuts me off. "And quite frankly, Miss, I'm not convinced that you could have held up your end of the conversation. If you want to force me to speak to you man-to-man, I'll tell you that I find your manner rather abrasive. Now. Report me if you will. When you're older, you'll find that some things are worth running afoul of the officials. Good afternoon."

So fuck him and fuck Wall Street and fuck those cloying toadlike boys. Some people call me hot-headed. I call it being decisive. I decide then and there to start my own business.

"OCTAVIA, LISTEN. I don't say this to many girls. You listening?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, listen. You're the type of female I could see spending time with. What do you say to that, Octavia?"

"I'm married."

"Yeah, but you're out at a club by yourself, aren't you? That right there tells me something."

"What does it tell you?"

"I've got a condo in Santa Monica. You can almost see the beach."

"Almost?"

"Don't bust my balls, Octavia. I'm opening my heart to you here. I'm—damn. Isn't that you?" He shifts unsteadily and points out Mel at the other end of the bar, cozied up to a surfer trapped in a suit.

"No. I'm right here."

"She's your sister, isn't she? What's her name—fucking—Oct—no—Rrrr—Rocktavia?"

I could go for a threesome, for the added security. The bar scene is dangerous. But Mel won't even look over at me.

"I don't know her. Are you taking me home or not?"

MEL NEVER WENT on a single audition that I know of. She never even got headshots made or looked for an agent. I don't know why.

VIV THRAVES IS SIGHTED everywhere. The Mint, Dragonfly, Bar Marmont, Red Rock, Eden, Molly Malone's, Giant, Bang, Cane's, El Coyote, Cherry, Sinamatic, the late night line outside Pink's Hot Dogs. People trying too hard to have a good time parade across the news, flashing little Viv Thraves cards they claim she handed them after ordering a Cape Cod or a mudslide. Viv Thraves doesn't go for sweet drinks. Her drink is straight vodka, and she calls it "vodkar." Only one of the cards on the news is in the right font, and that one could be an accidental match.

People are warned not to approach Viv because she is considered armed and dangerous. There is a shot of two girls standing in the line outside Make Up in Viv Thraves wigs, their torsos bare except for two calling cards taped over their nipples. They notice the news camera and lift their arms and open their mouths silly-wide, giving hoots of victory at the feat of being spotted.

"WE'RE NEVER GOING to be anybody's wives, are we?"

I snort. "We don't have to be anybody's wife. Thank God for that."

THE BRITISH GUY is the first to go. There is no sign of forced entry. The wound is neat, like the killer has been practicing for a long time. The hotel lobby security cam shows a grainy black and white image of a person who looks like Mel and me, entering alone, then leaving one hour later. The desk staff say they've seen us there before and could have sworn they saw two of us that day, too.

WE NEVER SPEND the night. Even if we don't wake up until five a.m., we each call a cab. We crank down the window and toss the rest of the cards out into the deserted early morning streets, streets that don't look tired but like they are napping with all their might, vigorous babies that will pop up at the appointed hour, wide awake and cheerful.

No matter how late it is, we meet up back at home. We make it back to our big bed and tell each other the story of what happened to Mrs. Octavia Orange or Mrs. Rosemary Snow or Mrs. Frances Key Scott after she left the club.

Viv Thraves is already asleep when I get in, and when I shake her awake, the accent is already slung up like a slingshot. “Leave me to my bloody rest,” she snaps. I tell her how Vivian Thraves went to a spread in Hollywood Hills with a studio marketing VP, how he comes up with those one-liners you see on movie posters: “He’s back and he’s mad.” He rubbed massage oil all over my thighs, went down on me, then passed out. I laugh, but she doesn’t join in.

“And what did Viv Thraves do tonight?” I ask.

“Ah, but a lady never tells, does she?” She rolls over, giving me her back.

She hasn’t thrown out her extra cards. They are sitting on the dresser, spread out in the shape of a fan. Two weeks later, Viv Thraves leaves the Polo Lounge with a record label exec and never comes home.

I SCAN THE WANT ADS for jobs I could conceivably do, but I don’t want to do any of them. Wouldn’t do these if you paid me.

THEN NELSON ORANGE’S wife finds him tied to the driver’s seat of his yellow Corvette, carbon monoxide darting around the garage, his stiff fingers just inches from the ignition keys he couldn’t quite reach to turn off. His wife’s name is Tracy and I want to see a photo of her, but the paper doesn’t print one. I’m sure she’s not the type of person Viv Thraves would associate with.

Nobody witnessed anything out of the ordinary. The cops find Polaroids of Mel and me locked in his safe. We don’t allow photos or videos, but this was when we were new at it and scared of them all and somehow he did it without us seeing. On the back of one of the photos, he scrawled: “PHOTO RIGHTS \$ 500 PAID IN FULL.” Then there’s supposedly a signature, but I was there the whole time and nobody signed and I sure as hell never saw any money.

“Is it possible that your girlfriend was also working alone, on the side?” asks the lawyer. No, it’s not possible. Mel didn’t enjoy it. She did it for me. I had no idea being a lawyer was so tedious. It makes me glad I left college after freshman year.

I WAIT AROUND for Mel. Not a peep. I Google “Viv Thraves” over and over, but she’s no one to anyone but me at this point. I have to cancel all our appointments. None of them asks why. They’ll book someone

younger and we'll never hear from them again. I am trapped in constant conversation with Mel, cursing her then begging her to send me a sign.

Herr Zam is killed in his mansion in Pacific Palisades. Well, it's close to a mansion, if it's not one technically. The wound is identical to the one that killed the Brit. His housekeeper says she saw two girls run across the lawn, but she can't say what they looked like, and she has been watching the news reports about the two Viv Thraves.

I am at home eating wheat toast and wondering if it's worth it to go to Trader Joe's for jelly since I ran out. But I don't like to leave in case Mel calls. The cops pound on the door and when I open it, they shove me inside and pin me against the wall.

It's stupid to think I had anything to do with killing those people. I haven't thought about them once since I last saw them. What kind of businessperson would I be if I wished harm upon my customers? I've lived in LA for fifteen years, and at least once every six months, I come outside to find my car window smashed, piles of round green glass pebbles glittering on the curb. Nothing's ever done about it. But somehow it's important to keep people from paying to watch me lick my best friend's pussy? What kind of fucked up world is this? I tell the lawyer I want to say this on the stand, but she says absolutely not because most people wouldn't agree with me.

“YOU COULD AT LEAST TRY to be tender, Mel.”

What is she talking about? I look at Mel, and she's a little fat these days. I think it's cute, but I have a business to run. I realize she must be reading and doing things that I don't know about. Tender? Where did she come up with that word? Why does she think it should apply to me?

MEL'S NEVER BEEN arrested, so they don't have her fingerprints.

AM I IN LOVE with Mel? She's my partner. Learn a tap dance with someone. Do it together for years and years, until you have a perception of when the other person will move, until you can instinctively fill in for her tired legs or distracted arms. See if you can keep from crying when you're sitting alone and you hear that music. It's the reason people still tear up when they watch Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. To become truly great dancers, they would have had to dance on their own. Instead, they chose to stick together.

“WE FOUND HER.” The Cop is not supposed to discuss my case with me without my lawyer present. As usual, he’s too thick with gloating to care. “Naked. In a dumpster. On Venice Beach. She left a suicide note. Said all she ever wanted was to be an actress. She didn’t mention you at all, Mel. Looks like you’re on your own.”

Where was the suicide note if she was naked? Under her tongue? I don’t believe a word he says.

Later, the lawyer says that Mel’s death is what will save me, because now the whole truth will never be known, and as the defense, I don’t carry the burden of proof. She sounds disappointed.

I IMAGINE MEL tracking down the real Viv Thraves, Mrs. Trusley-Hall. They meet on Rodeo for coffee, and Mel convinces her that her husband is a philandering pig.

“I see. Thank you very much,” says Mrs. Trusley-Hall, and without me there, Mel doesn’t think to charge her for the info. Or does she? Maybe she’s picked up a few tricks along the way. The security camera in the Brit’s hotel shows a statuesque, glacial blonde woman entering and leaving that afternoon, but no one focuses on her. She is one of those people who fits in too well to be noticed.

Then Mel gathers together Mrs. Tracy Orange, Mrs. Lady Zam, Mrs. Trudy Fletcher, and all the rest, in a conference room at a hotel by the airport. Over complimentary continental breakfast, she tells them what pricks they’re married to. They butter their croissants slowly and take their domestic troubles into their own hands. Mel has thrown her little drama queen fit, and now she will come home.

OUR VERY FIRST time. We’ve rehearsed for weeks. We’re wearing short, tight green dresses that make us look like whores, but we’re young enough to pull it off as UCLA girls who watch too much TV and don’t know any better. We pull up to the condo high-rise on Millionaire Mile. Red uniformed guys rush to open our car doors. I don’t want them to touch me because minimum wage is unlucky.

We announce ourselves at the front desk, and the concierge is too discreet to say anything, but he gives off that little flutter of excitement people get when they see a praying mantis or a rainbow or twins.

Mel’s new contacts are bothering her and in the elevator, she keeps tilting back her head and squirting in drops of saline, smudging her mascara and giving her eyes a deep-set, purplish, desert nomad look.

“Here,” I say, grabbing the saline bottle. I drip some into my raw eyes and smear my mascara so we can match.

“You look beautiful,” Mel says suddenly.

“You look hot,” I say. We’re both eager to laugh, both staring only at ourselves in the elevator’s mirrored panels.

“Mel?”

“Yeah?” I’m arranging my cleavage with one hand, balancing the mini boom box against my hip.

“So, are we actually—Do you think—I mean, when the time comes, do you think we’ll actually have to....”

“Violate each other?”

We both howl with laughter. I notice that Mel really is a knockout and I figure in three years we can retire and go our separate ways. And right up to the last possible moment, we both believe that it’s only going to be an act.