

The Red Dress

Vivian Westwood

It was just another average day in New York City for anyone who wasn't me. I'm Vivian Westwood, a big time art thief. The beauty and tranquility of the day was almost lost on me. I was in deep thought as to exactly how my team and I were going to successfully pull off our next big heist. Today's target is *Persistence of Memory*. It's in the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York City. It was painted in 1931 by Salvador Dalí. It is one of my all time favorite pieces of art. Tonight is the Museum's Ball for all the snooty, rich folks who always donate a small fortune. This was the chance I had been waiting for. I forged an invitation to the Ball, since it would be the perfect cover. I had to make sure that I fit in with the rich crowd, but I also wanted to stand out. I had decided to wear a red dress created by Calvin Klein. Have I mentioned my alias? It's *The Red Dress*.

Ethan Neel

The Ball was tonight, and I *knew* she was going to steal something, I just didn't know what. I am the FBI agent who was supposed to catch the thief, *The Red Dress*, a year ago. I've come so close on so many occasions, but she somehow consistently manages to get away. Her signature calling card that she always leaves at the scene of the crime has definitely started to get old. I plan to stop catching only her calling cards and actually catch her. Thankfully, I got an invitation to the Ball tonight, so I will be there when she steals whatever it is she plans on stealing. Some of the other guys on the team keep asking me why I think she is going to be there. It's a hunch or a premonition if you will. I just know she is going to be there. Period.

Vivian Westwood

The dress I picked was tight, but it would do until I could change to the outfit I'm going to wear when I steal the painting. The Ball was beautiful, but I was not here for the scenery. I was here for the painting. There was one, particularly handsome person who caught my eye. His hair was short and black, he had piercing green eyes, and he was quite tall, I'm guessing maybe 6'2". He looked strong, like he worked out often.

As I was standing there, contemplating if he had brought a special someone with him this evening, he looked my way and we made eye contact. With a somewhat cocky grin, he walked over to me and he said, “If I received a nickel for every time I saw someone as beautiful as you, I’d have five cents.”

With a smirk on her face, Vivian sarcastically responded, “Does that line ever actually work for you?”

He laughed and said, “If you don’t like that pick up line, let’s try a different one. If a thousand painters worked for a thousand years, they could not create a work of art as beautiful as you.”

Well, that one was at least a little better, but it was still really cheesy. However, it did make sense, with being in an art museum and all. I looked up at him and really studied him for the first time. Phew! He was hot...

For some ungodly reason, I suddenly became nervous for the first time in forever. He smiled a gorgeous smile as his eyes gazed deep into mine, almost as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. I bet he was used to having girls swoon all over him.

I abruptly shook my head. I had a job to focus on! I couldn’t let a guy distract me from my goal, no matter how attractive he may be.

Ethan Neel

Man, this girl was stunningly beautiful, and frustratingly quick with her comebacks. Why did I say those dumb pickup lines? God, I haven’t really noticed a girl in years, not since my girlfriend, Ashley, died.

What’s going on with me? I haven’t felt butterflies like these with anyone. I can’t even think straight... Come on, Neel! Get a grip! I have to avoid distractions like this woman in front of me. I have a mission. If I don’t catch *The Red Dress*, I knew I would be fired in a couple of weeks. But still... Her hair, her eyes, and those never ending legs drove him crazy. Before he knew it, he was stumbling to form words.

“What was your name again?”

“I didn’t tell you my name,” she said with a sly grin.

“Oh. Well in that case, my name is Ethan Neel. May I ask yours?”

“Lily. Lily Carlson.”

Vivian Westwood

She liked this guy already, but she didn't dare give her real name to him. Why would she? Just for a moment, she thought she should tell him her real name, but that was a stupid thought. She hadn't come all this way just to blow it all on some smooth talking guy.

She could tell now, from getting the chance to really look at him, that he wasn't rich. While studying him, she noticed that he was not wearing a designer suit, like all the other well-to-do men were, and his shoes weren't as shiny as one would expect from a crowd such as this.

"So Ethan Neel, what do you do?"

"Would you believe that I'm super rich, and as my hobby, I buy paintings?"

She laughed and replied, "Well, I would believe you if you were wearing a designer suit like all the rest of these bozos. And considering how much you're talking to me and not looking at the art the way a buyer would, I'm going to venture to say that's a lie as well," she teased with a chuckle. "So, I'm guessing you're either in some kind of security business, or you're from a newspaper."

"Well I'm not from the newspaper, that's for sure. I guess you could say that I'm sort of part of a security business."

I almost started to panic once he said that. What security business? Does he know who I really am? Will this be the man who will foil my carefully thought out plans? He instantly lost all the goon-ish handsomeness he had been so ruthlessly controlling me with. Or maybe he had actually just become a million times more attractive...

"So, what kind of security business are you 'sort of' in, Mr. Neel?"

Ethan Neel

Why is she so interested in what I do? Is she just another gold digger, panning for a rich man? Sadly, the FBI doesn't pay that well, contrary to common belief.

"I'm an FBI agent," he said with a wink.

"Oh really? Is there some kind of super-secret operation going on right now?" Lily played along.

With a hardy laugh, Ethan responded, "Why Miss Carlson, there's always a super-secret operation going on. But don't you worry. I'll be sure to keep you out of harm's way."

“Well thank goodness. A knight in shining armor is just what I needed,” she said with seductive eyes. “Will you excuse me, Mr. Neel? I must attend the ladies room.”

Vivian Westwood

I should have known. My senses are getting weak. Damnit. Now I remember Ethan Neel. He’s the agent on my case. I knew the name sounded familiar, but he tricked me by being so good looking. I can usually spot an agent in seconds. I’m off my game tonight, and it’s all his fault. Now my plan could be ruined.

No, I’m still going through with my plan. I need that painting. My team will have already stolen the *Persistence of Memory* before Ethan Neel has any idea what hit him.

Faya

God, what was taking Vivian so long? All Faya could think about was how much money they would make. If Vivian ever found out that Faya stole other paintings too, and that’s why Vivian is the number one art thief, she would be furious. With Vivian, it’s all about the code: you cannot kill, and you cannot steal anything but what we talked about. Those rules seriously pissed Faya off.

Sometimes I think that I should take over the team. It would be so much more fun, and the team could steal whatever they wanted. I guess I can understand Vivian’s rule about not killing anyone, considering how that could get very messy, but if it came right down to it, we could kill anyone that got in our way without having to deal with Vivian’s wrath.

However, Faya knew that most of the team would leave if she tried to take over. Faya tended to be somewhat selfish, looking out for herself and nobody else. On the other hand, Vivian was always such a good person, looking out for others before herself, and always disgustingly supportive.

Suddenly, her cell phone went off. Finally, it was Vivian.

“Vivian, where the hell are you? We’re way behind schedule!”

“Faya, I got held up by a guy.” Vivian always had some kind of excuse for everything.

“Of course you did. I keep forgetting it’s you.”

“It is not like that, Faya,” Vivian said with an exasperated sigh. “He is an FBI agent.”

“What? You mean to tell me the FBI is here? Then why are *we* still here?!”

“Faya, calm down. It’s just one agent. Remember the agent assigned to our case?”

“Yeah I remember him. Ethan something or other... Well I guess we’ll have to teach him that he should have picked a different profession,” Faya said with a maniacal chuckle.

“The only way we can do the job is if we work faster than ever before.”

“Obviously. Okay Viv, it’s a done deal. I’ll tell the others.”

“Sounds good. I will be there in five minutes.”

Vivian Westwood

Thank goodness she was able to meet the team quickly after talking on the phone with Faya, otherwise Faya would have started a riot. She went over the plan with her team again. Faya would deactivate the alarms while Steven turned off the power. Percy would go through the vents, belay down, and grab the painting. We would all scatter the scene in different directions, eventually meeting back up at the van once we were sure we weren’t being followed. Oh, and this would all be done in less than three minutes.

Faya, being cocky as usual, said with a smug grin on her face, “Don’t worry guys. I’ll have the alarms disabled in fourteen seconds flat. And I won’t screw up and almost get everyone caught like someone I know.”

“Shut the hell up, Faya.” Percy was pissed. It really wasn’t his fault that the alarm system had somehow powered back on towards the end of the last heist. We all made it out fine, but it definitely wasn’t something Vivian wanted to repeat.

“Faya, back off. And lose the attitude while you’re at it.” Vivian was starting to lose her patience. “We don’t have time for your crap.”

Soon, everyone was ready to go. “Let’s get started.”

I was going to stay at the Ball longer to discourage any suspicions that I might be *The Red Dress*. When I walked back in, I started scanning the room for the FBI agent. I knew I had to find him quickly and distract him. It was only a matter of time before the whole plan would begin, whether I was ready or not.

Abruptly, I stopped in my tracks. Standing right beside the *Persistence of Memory* was Ethan Neel himself. I summoned my ability to somehow stay strong despite his good looks. In as flirty a voice as I could muster, I said, “Well hi there stranger.”

He turned, and once he saw her, a huge, radiant smile lifted his face. Vivian felt her knees go weak. He had amazing white teeth and a perfect smile. He had kind, loving eyes, and the cutest little dimple under his left eye. God, I could stare at this man all day...

Oh my goodness. I seriously had to get a grip. He's just a guy for crying out loud! But he's so sexy...

He smiled and jokingly said, "That was a long bathroom break."

"Sorry, I was talking to a friend of mine." At least that wasn't a complete lie.

"No worries."

I looked up at the painting Ethan had been viewing when I walked over. *The Starry Night* by the Dutch post-impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh. "I love this painting. His brush strokes created such beautiful swirls. What do you like about this painting?"

He shrugged his shoulders and said "I'm not really sure. It just makes me feel calm I guess..."

I paused for a moment, not really knowing what to say. It was a comfortable silence.

The mood changed in the silence, and when they made eye contact again, Vivian asked, "Do you want to go for a walk, get some fresh air?"

Ethan Neel

This woman is mesmerizing. And now she wants me to leave with her? Nothing sounds better. But what about *The Red Dress*? What about my mission?

Hesitantly, Ethan found himself accepting Lily's invitation. She smiled, and he realized all over again how incredibly attracted to her he was.

They began walking around the massive museum, talking about funny stories of their past.

"... So then, my little sister scrunched up her face, lifted her leg like a dog, and proceeded to pee on our mother's yellow Tweety Bird slippers."

They both died laughing. Wow, it felt good to laugh. It had been such a long time since Ethan had really been able to loosen up and have a good time. Lily was incredible, and Ethan realized that he did not want the night to end.

Suddenly, a deafening noise erupted all around them.

Vivian Westwood

Damnit Faya!

Vivian hurriedly looked toward Ethan to see his reaction. At first he seemed bewildered. However, just as quickly, his expression changed to one of alarm, and then anger. He swiftly turned and began running in the direction they had come from.

As much as it hurt Vivian to see him go, she knew it was time to make her exit as well. “So long Ethan Neel,” she whispered after nothing, and briskly headed for the nearest exit.

The van was parked two blocks away. If only she weren’t wearing the tallest pair of stilettos known to mankind.

Looking over her shoulder, she noticed someone running in the shadows. She stopped to get a better look. The figure seemed to be carrying something. Was that... “Percy!” she whispered loudly. “Percy!” He stopped midstride and started looking around. I began crossing the street to get closer to him when he spotted me.

“Viv? Is that you? Oh my God, we have to get out of here! Faya’s always talking shit about everyone else, and now she screwed up big! We have to get away before we’re caught.”

“It’s okay, Percy. Calm down. Look, give me the painting. We need to split up. I’ll head north, you head east. We’ll meet back at the headquarters just like we had planned.”

Percy seemed very hesitant, but after a few seconds he begrudgingly agreed. “Please be careful, Vivian...”

Vivian blew him off. “*You* be careful. I’ll be just fine. I’ll see you soon.”

Percy Hoston

The farther Percy walked, the more upset he became. It was obvious she liked that Ethan guy. Why couldn’t she notice what was right in front of her?

Vivian only liked guys that were smart enough to know her next move. That was the one thing Percy did not know. Since the moment he first set eyes on Vivian, he knew that she was the women for him. He made haste to learn about her and her interests. A few months later, he joined her team and she taught him everything he knew about stealth. She had to be the most amazing women out there. But she never looked at him the way he looked at her. She always teased that they were brother and sister, but every time she said that, he felt a little part of him die.

What happened tonight made him angry. Why did she have to like other guys? And why did she like Ethan, of all guys? He's the one who is always trying to put her in jail for crying out loud! Faya always told him to go after another girl, but he couldn't. He loved Vivian too much. I'm going to tell her tonight. I have to. If I don't, I'm going to burst with hate and love and jealousy, and that will ruin everything. I just hope she feels the same...