

“Nice dress!”

Vivi spun around, confused, before recognizing the man waving at her from across the dance floor.

Viraj Agarwal.

Despite officially being unemployed, he has access to a suspiciously large stash of money. Dirty money, made by some of his more... underground business opportunities. Many had tried to pin him down for his crimes. By now, all of them were gone—likely having something to do with the mass of “antique” torture materials located deep in his basement.

“Thank you!” she yelled back, to be polite, but Agarwal took her response as a welcome. He crossed the dance floor, avoiding running into the crowds of people with a practiced ease, before coming to a stop next to Vivi. Quickly, she snatched up her glass, keeping it out of his arm’s reach.

“Where’d you get it?” Agarwal asked at a normal volume, nodding at the dress again.

“A friend made it,” Vivi said, taking a sip of her drink. The dress was beautiful indeed—a brilliant blue watercolor that reached all the way to her ankles. “She asked that I wear it to every dance I can.”

Agarwal’s eyebrow raised at that— it wasn’t becoming, after all, for powerful CEOs to constantly be wearing the same outfit. Still, he asked no questions. “I can see why she’d want it shown off. The dress is lovely— the fine detailing on the embroidery is exquisite.”

“Hm?” Vivi asked, distracted. She was already thinking about another topic, scanning the crowd.

After a long wait, Agarwal let out a quiet, polite laugh. “Do you want another drink?” he asked, watching Vivi’s eyes trail after one of the waiters.

Vivi gave no response, and Agarwal began to turn away, searching for better tides—

“I’ll sleep with you.” Vivi asked abruptly, and Agarwal’s eyebrows shot straight up.

“That is why you came over here, right?”

Agarwal said nothing, eyes glimmering as he offered her a hand that she easily took.

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There was a person in the middle of her living room.

Vivi froze in her doorway as soon as she noticed. Carefully, she took off her shoes, ignoring Agarwal’s muffled question as she pressed a hand over his lips. She reached into her purse, pulling out a can of mace, before approaching the room, flipping the light switch as fast as she could.

The sight she was met with... was morbid.

In front of her was the CEO of her worst competitor in the business— Ko Incorporated, was the name— sitting in an elegant armchair. Her eyes were artfully closed, and if it weren’t for the thin line marring the slope of her neck and the way her skin— normally a caramel brown— was an unnatural, ghostly white, Vivi would have thought she had simply fallen asleep. Her limbs had been arranged just so, in a way that hid even the slightest trace of anything grotesque. Her hands were clasped together tightly, as if in apology, and in them was held a white rose, painted brightest blue, with a note tied carefully around it.

She was dead, no questioning it.

Vivi stepped closer, carefully, only to stop short at the sight of the floor around the body. Painted on it were intricate designs, painstakingly detailed— a mandala, depicting an array of images, from crimes the CEO had committed to meaningless pictures, like a jaguar with a rose in its mouth. The entire design was made with the same dark red ink, and something inside Vivi

was willing to bet that if she were to disturb the art enough to take a sample, it would undoubtedly have been created with the same blood that the corpse was now empty of.

“A note,” Agarwal observed, and Vivi jumped, having not noticed him enter. He stepped past her, tearing the white paper off of the rose. He peeled it open, scanning it quickly before passing it off to Vivi. “Written in blood.”

A gift, for our darling Miss Le. May you have good health and prosper.

Something inside Vivi began to tremble. If asked, she wouldn't have been able to tell you exactly what.

“This is interesting, now, isn't it?” Agarwal mused, a catlike grin spreading across his face.

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“How are you planning to track him down?” Agarwal asked a few weeks later. He had stopped by her office to drop off a check— her winnings from the poker game they'd played at the most recent party they'd both attended.

“I have my ways,” Vivi said. In truth, she had no leads— only a measly private investigator who shook at the very sight of Vivi herself, let alone anything bloody— but Agarwal didn't need to know that. Vivi let her attention drift slightly, focusing on the blue rose carefully kept in a vase on her desk— the one that the killer had mimicked.

Agarwal followed her line of sight. When he caught a glimpse of what she'd been looking at, he sighed loudly, shaking his head as he slipped into the seat across from her. “You do realize,” he said, eyes cat-like, his characteristic smile spread wide across his face, “That with my connections, I could find the person who did it in seconds?”

“Sure,” Vivi said with an easy smile, relishing in the quick flash of surprise that crossed his face, “If that’s what you wanted.”

“Is that what *CEO Le* wants?” Agarwal asked, tilting his head slightly.

Vivi gave him a mysterious smile in return.

Something about that response seemed to disappoint him.

Vivi shrugged, not looking at him. She’d already been distracted again, eyes drifting back to the blue rose.

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When Vivi stopped by Agarwal’s office with the money he’d won against her in golf, she found an old jacket of his sitting on the chair in his office. The sleeves of it were soaked in something red.

“The rumors are true, then?” she’d asked, when he finally entered the room. But all he’d done in response was give her a mysterious smile, accepting the bag of winnings easily.

His shirt, she noticed, was white.

“Tell me,” she asked, before she could stop herself, “Why do you do it?”

Agarwal gave her a catlike grin, but said nothing at all.

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Today was a bad day.

“Fr-From what we’ve found, there are three main options.” the PI stuttered, nearly dropping his pen when Vivi moved to look over his shoulder.

Amateur, she scoffed privately, but she said nothing, scanning over what he had written down.

Ko Inc. Secretary, Ko Inc. President, Ko Inc. CFO...

“You have to be kidding me.” Vivi said, unable to stop herself. The PI flinched, subtly stepping away from her, and in the corner of the room, Agarwal glanced up curiously from the book he’d been reading. For a moment, Vivi questioned why he was here, before remembering the bet they’d made last time they played pool that she had yet to pay off.

But that was a matter for later, she decided, returning her focus to the PI’s list of suspects.

“Seeing as the note the perpetrator left said that the corpse was a gift for me,” Vivi said, her voice dangerously low, “Wouldn’t the obvious thing to look in to be people around me, instead of people related to her?”

The PI reached up as if to fiddle with glasses that weren’t there, before realizing what he was doing, putting his hand back down. He would not meet her eyes. “We h-have to look into all the possibilities—”

“Bullshit.” Vivi said, cutting him off. “Why would you look at all the maybes BEFORE the obvious choices?”

The PI still wouldn’t meet her eyes, glancing around her room— pointedly avoiding a particular corner. “The— Out of the people near you, the most important option is—”

He trailed off, still pointedly avoiding that corner of the room.

“Agarwal?!” Vivi asked, incredulous. “Your only REAL suspect is Agarwal?”

“He’s the obvious choice,” the PI defended, his voice trembling.

“I already told you that Viraj Agarwal was with me *all night*.” Vivi said, over-enunciating each and every syllable. “He has a clear alibi, and several witnesses.”

“He could have hired someone else—”

In the corner, Agarwal shut his book, slamming it down on the table, and the PI flinched, inching toward the door.

“Leave.” Vivi said coldly, making a mental note to have her attorney go after this puny man. “Your assistance is unneeded.”

The PI didn’t need any other hints, immediately turning tail and racing for the door.

“Aw, have you lost your only lead?” Agarwal teased as Vivi sank back into her chair. “Poor baby... can’t even find her little lover boy. Does she need help?” he asked, sliding her checkbook across the table.

For a moment, she wondered where he’d gotten it, before shrugging it off. She tore a check out, scribbling the amount she owed him for pool onto it before passing it back.

“The exact amount, down to the cent...” Agarwal noted, scanning the check.

“I have a good memory.”

“Doesn’t seem to be helping you find Loverboy, though.” Agarwal said with a Cheshire grin, and Vivi didn’t have the time to deal with this. She gave him a small shrug, gesturing toward the door.

“I’m just saying,” Agarwal continued, making no move to get up, “I could be of great help, and you know it. All you have to do,” he said, eyes trailing down to the checkbook, “is ask.”

“Trust me, I won’t.” Vivi said, mustering the strength to return his calm smile. She pulled open a random folder from in front of her, skimming through it— a clear dismissal.

Still, Agarwal didn’t leave. “What is it you want to do with Loverboy when you find him, anyway?”

Vivi felt her patience start to splinter away. “Are you going to get out, or will I need to call security?”

Agarwal finally began to stand up, and Vivi felt a wave of relief crash over her. He walked over to the door, whistling under his breath. He paused right with his hand on the doorknob.

“My offer is still open,” he reminded with a jaunty grin.

And then he shut the door behind him.

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The next time Agarwal came into her office, he wasn't smiling.

“What's the occasion?” Vivi asked, caught off-guard. She didn't owe him any money at the moment—

“Loverboy struck again,” he said, something unreadable in his eyes as he dropped a few photos onto her desk.

Immediately, Vivi picked up the pictures scanning through her, and her breath caught slightly at the sight.

This was even more complex than the last death that had occurred. The body of an old man lay in the center of an empty room, his skin an ungodly white. All four walls of the room were covered in one word— “payment”— repeated over and over again in barely-legible handwriting. The body's arms were crossed, and he lay, spread out, as if he were only sleeping.

One photo showed a close-up of the body, revealing bite marks crawling up the man's arm. Vivi's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“We found his dog under the floorboards.” Agarwal said as explanation. “It'd been choked to death— but we found traces of blood in its teeth. We think the dog found the body before the blood had been let, and, well... it saw him as dinner.”

Vivi nodded, mulling it over. “Who is he?” she asked at last.

“James Marset.” Agarwal said. “Paid us monthly to protect him from his crazy ex-wife. When we came to collect, we found... all of this.”

“How do you... how do you know it was the same person as...?”

“He left a note,” Agarwal said, throwing another picture onto her desk.

Take this as... payment for the amount of time you've spent around my Vivi. I've been forgiving, this once— I only took one. Next time, trust me, it will be so much more.

“No one takes from me and gets away with it.” Agarwal said, voice cold.

Vivi said nothing, pushing the pictures back towards him.

Agarwal didn't pick them up, something Vivi couldn't read shining in his eyes. He turned away, touching a hand to the gun he always carried at his waist. “He left a postscript on the note. Apologized for the ‘mistake’ he'd allowed to happen to his ‘art.’ From what it looks like, we think he was referring to what the dog did.”

Before Vivi could respond, he walked away.

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“How is what he did any worse than what you did?” Vivi asked, desperate, the next time they met. Agarwal hadn't been at any of his usual haunts— from the gambling tables to the clubs— so she'd eventually had to go to Agarwal's actual office to find him. He was sitting at his desk, nose deep in a manilla folder filled with papers.

Agarwal looked up, dark circles surrounding his eyes. He grinned, and yet again, Vivi was struck by how catlike he looked. “Nothing personal against him— I just can't have him getting away with hurting someone under my protection.”

“But you wanted to get him before he did anything!” Vivi said desperately.

Agarwal blinked at her. “What?”

“Back when I was first looking into him, you were practically begging me to hire you—”

“That?” he said easily, meeting her eyes, “I just wanted to see if you would give up that damned pride of yours.”

Vivi froze.

“You didn’t, so—”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Vivi burst out. “You cared about the criminal, you wanted to know who did it—”

“YOU wanted to know who did it.” Agarwal interrupted.

“You said the crime was beautiful! You were wondering how they didn’t get blood all over the clothes—”

“When did I—”

“YOU WANTED TO KNOW WHO DID IT!” she screamed, loudly, and Agarwal slammed a hand over her mouth.

He doesn’t want me to say it, he knows I’m right, Vivi thought viciously. He just needs to stop denying—

“I have workers doing actual work in the other room.” Agarwal said, removing his hand. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t distract them.”

He stood up, and fuzzily, Vivi tried to remember when she ended up sitting on her knees.

“Tell Loverboy,” Agarwal said, and *were his eyes always this cold?* “That I only tolerated his games. I do NOT tolerate challenges.”

Agarwal turned away. He counted down, under his breath, from ten. By the time he turned back, Vivi was gone, leaving only a torn strip of her blue dress behind— caught on the bush next to the door.

He sighed deeply. With her gone, the room already felt so much brighter. Whistling a simple tune under his breath, he headed to the window, opening the blinds, before returning to his seat and picking his folder back up.

Briefly, he glanced back at the torn cloth on the bush.

From a distance, he mused, eyes flickering back to his papers, it looked almost like a rose.