

A Fair Trade

Transcript of SVN Emergency Broadcast on 10/18/38:150 at 9:13 A.M.:

[music fades... then fades out.]

Announcer: *Breaking news on SVN! Terrorism in the duchy capital!*

Tyler Laurent (TL), Lead Anchor: *An attack on the L'ourette estate, home to the Duke and Duchess as well as their daughter and their grandchildren, is thought to be an act of terrorism meant to threaten the line of succession.*

Celine Jackson (CJ), Anchor: *The explosion occurred at approximately 2 A.M. this morning, waking nearby residents. Reports came flooding in soon after as the fire and smoke were visible from several blocks away.*

TL: *First responders arrived promptly on the scene and evacuated the building. The fire was then contained and put out. Authorities tell us that that the blast was caused by a small homemade bomb with most of the structural damage being caused by the fire that started after the explosion.*

CJ: *The bomb was found hidden in the bedroom of one of the Duke's grandsons and heirs, Olivier de L'ourette, and had a small initial blast radius making this appear to be an attempt on the young lord's life.*

TL: *As of currently, Olivier de L'ourette remains missing and no body has been found. His twin brother, Lucas de L'ourette, also remains unaccounted for as he was seen leaving the estate some time before the attack and has not been able to be contacted since.*

CJ: *No other casualties have been reported and no more information has been released by the authorities. They have yet to name any suspects.*

TL: *Stay tuned to SVN to get updates about this rapidly developing story.*

[music fades in]

Announcer: *SVN, your news for you. Now back to your regularly scheduled programming.*

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"I didn't know he wasn't one of yers, miss, I swear." Vivianne can see the sweat beading on Pierre's forehead as he pleads for mercy with his eyes. She continues to tap her acrylics on the cheap plastic counter for a few seconds before eventually deciding to cut him loose.

"I believe you," she says simply. The man looks like he might have dropped to the floor in relief if he wasn't already too terrified to move. "You said he was here an hour ago? What did he look like?"

"Well, he was dressed just like the fella over there." Pierre gestures over to the single guard that make sup her escort for today. They have on slacks and a suit jacket, both in a deep burgundy. Very unassuming and professional. It's the same getup that she requires for any of her people while they're on the clock, though color can vary. It doesn't tell her anything except that this person stealing her money has been watching the route for a while. The rest of the description is also less than helpful, but it matches what she's been told at the last four places. At the very least, she knows it's one person and that no one is lying to get out of paying their fees.

She spends the rest of their short visit to Pierre's store placating the man and assuring him that he won't be blamed for the loss. It takes considerable effort for him to be convinced and by the

end, Vivianne is clenching her jaw just trying to resist the urge to put the poor, pathetic man out of his misery.

When they finally make it back to the car, she opens the door herself before her escort can even attempt to and slams it shut behind her. Once out of view behind the car's tinted windows, Vivianne sighs loudly and puts her head in her hands, not even bothered that two of her subordinates can see her. They, at least have enough sense to pretend ignorance. The same cannot be said for the idiots she left in charge of this route. No, the ignorance there is very much real.

Vaguely, she registers her escort getting into the passenger seat and directing her driver. The car smoothly pulls away from the curb while Vivianne directs all her focus into not throwing a tantrum like some overgrown toddler. She sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly.

Someone is stealing from her. There has to be. It's the only explanation that makes sense. Already they've been to five stops and every single one says they've already paid their fees to a man with the same description, mere hours before she arrived. What doesn't make sense is that they're using such a simple tactic to do it. Six weeks she's had her people looking into this. SIX. And you're telling her that someone has just been walking in and collecting her money like it's theirs? No one thought to have the route fucking watched? That's fucking unacceptable. She's going to string up every idiot that's had their hands on this route by their ankles and beat them like a sack of meat there until they pass out.

Vivianne doesn't realize she's fallen several minutes into the fantasy of it until her phone rings. She's fully prepared to answer and tear into whoever dared to call her while she's cleaning up their mess, but the line connects and the person on the other side speaks first.

"Hey. I need a favor."

The voice doesn't register for a moment. Then, a smile creeps onto her face with a viciousness she can feel. "Well, I certainly wasn't expecting to hear from you anytime soon. But of course, I should have known. You only call me when you need something." She says this with a hint of irritation, but in reality, she's very pleased. She's been trying to cement herself as someone Lucas can't go without for years. Perhaps it's finally paying off.

"I can ask someone else if you want."

Or not.

"Don't be like that. You know I'm always willing to provide some assistance. I'm assuming this has something to do with the untimely death of your twin."

"Am I that obvious?"

"No, the news is. They've been lamenting that his death all week." She rolls her eyes, exasperated, even if Lucas can't see it. "Go on. Tell me what it is you want from me."

Lucas hums, then says, *"I need to get out of the country."*

How utterly trite and predictable of him. "Surely, you don't need my help for that," she says, "Aren't you rich?"

"My ride left without me."

"Well, that was rude of them." But even as she says this, she knows she's stalling. If she hadn't paid so much to get her nails done, she'd be gnawing them to flesh right now. As it is, she still kind of tempted.

"Can you help me or not?"

"Oh, there's nothing I *can't* do, darling. That was never even a debate. The question is why should I?"

"I'd pay you."

If it were anyone else, that would be enough. She's a businesswoman. Charging desperate people exorbitant prices is her calling. But it's *Lucas*. He is the last person that she wants leaving the country and, more importantly, her sphere of influence. He is *wasted* playing politics. She could do so much more than that with him. But if she pushes too hard, too fast, she'll spook him. If she denies him now, she has no doubt that he will hang up and find a different way. Lucas is not a beggar. Pleading isn't in his nature. She'd lose a critical opportunity to tie him closer to her.

So what to do?

Her mind is racing, hyper aware of the silence on the other end as she thinks, and then suddenly, it comes to her. She had given up on it, but it's perfect. She knows exactly how to keep him in her pocket.

"I don't want your money," she says, "You are a criminal, you know. A terrorist. Did you really think you'd get my regular rates?"

She hears what might be a sigh. Then, *"What do you want then?"*

"If I send you out the country, I'll need you to take something with you. Hold it for safe keeping for me while I work my magic."

"Fine. What is it? Drugs?"

"Camille Osman."

Lucas swears. *"You want me to kidnap someone?"*

"Technically, I'd be the one doing the kidnapping."

"Isn't that Sir Osman's daughter? Why the fuck are you kidnapping a gent's kid?"

Vivianne hums. *"There are some laws being voted on in the next Gentry session. You know how it is."*

"You want me to hold her for ransom?"

"Gotta change his mind somehow, and he's been surprisingly resistant to bribery," Vivianne says, *"So? Your freedom for hers. It's a fair trade, wouldn't you say?"*

There's a long silence on the other line, but she isn't worried. If he'd really been opposed, he would have hung up already. Deep down, Lucas is just like her. Morals don't matter so long as he gets what he wants.

"Done. Call me when you have the details." Then he hangs up without waiting for a response. Asshole. But he agreed. It worked.

She's still smiling at her phone when there are two taps on the car window. Vivianne realizes suddenly that the car is stopped, and she's not sure when that happened. She returns the two taps against the window, and a second later her escort opens the door for her.

For a moment as she steps outside, she's confused. Then she looks around and realizes where she is. They've skipped several stops along the route, and even then, they're about a block away from the bakery they're supposed to be collecting from. Her driver already knows the route and wouldn't have deviated without someone telling him to. Vivianne didn't obviously, which leaves her new escort. They're really only supposed to be acting as a guard today, so she's surprised they had the balls.

"Explain," she says, deciding she might as well give them a chance.

"Based on the accounts we've been given," they start, "I suspected that the thief was on foot, which means that even if they had a few hours head start, they would still be collecting now. I had the driver go to the last stop to wait to try to catch them in the act, and someone matching their description just walked past and entered Martin's." There's not a hint of anxiety in the explanation, which Vivianne finds interesting.

"Impressive," she says, because it is. Even if they're wrong, it's better than going along the route like normal and coming out empty-handed. "What's your name?"

"Toni, miss."

"You're in charge of this route now, Toni. You report directly to me. No one else."

"As you say, miss."

"Wonderful. Now, let's hurry. We don't want to give the rat bastard time to scurry off, do we?"

They make their way into Martin's and a little bell announces their arrival, briefly causing everyone inside to look their direction. This isn't very many people at all, considering the morning rush has just passed. There are two employees behind the front counter, one of which she recognizes as the owner's son. There are two more that could pass as customers, one in front of the register and another at a table in the corner.

"That's him, miss," Toni says, gesturing to the man at the register.

"Grab him."

Toni swiftly comes up behind the man and grips him by the back of his collar, dragging him away from the counter. The man struggles for a bit, then very suddenly goes stiff. If Vivianne had to guess, Toni's gun is probably giving the man some incentive to stay still.

She walks up to the counter, replacing the man in his spot in front of the register. The owner's son is there, frozen in front of her, eyes wide. He has an envelope in his hands.

"Are those your fees then, little Martin?"

The boy's eyes dart to the man behind her. He licks his lips. "They are. Is he... not one of yours?"

"No, that man doesn't work for me. He's a thief," she says gently, "I'll be taking this." She grabs the envelope, and flips it open to check the amount. After confirming that all the money is there, she takes a few bills out and places them back on the counter. "Two of the sausage chou-de-pain—wait. Toni, are you vegan or anything?"

"No, miss. Sausage is fine."

"Right, so two of the sausage, then. You can keep the change; I'm feeling gracious today."

There's a second where the boy doesn't move, and Vivianne thinks she's going to have to say something to get him moving, but then he turns away quickly to complete her order. The other employee, a young girl, follows after him, asking him questions about who Vivianne is and what's going on in fervent whispers.

Vivianne turns away from the counter and back towards the bakery at large. The table at the corner is empty now, so it's just Toni and the thief. The man still isn't struggling, though now sweat has started gathering on his brow.

"I have ways of dealing with people like you, you know," Vivianne says, "Ways of getting my money back. I don't like passing on the misdeeds of hoodlums to my clients, you see. That's bad business. Why should little Martin here suffer just because he was tricked by a rat like you?"

"No, I'd make you pay me back yourself. Give you a little something, then watch you break your back just to get a little more. Give you a nice room at La Ruche and give you plenty of clients of your own." Vivianne laughs. It's not a nice laugh. "By the time you've paid back everything you owe, you don't even want to leave. And why would you? I'd be giving you a steady supply so long as you did the work you were supposed to."

"I like watching the men break the most," she whispers, "You all think you'll hate it; that you'll somehow come out the other side with your 'manhood' or whatever intact." She shakes her head, smiling. "But by the end, you're begging for it, just like all the other whores."

When she stops speaking, the only thing left is the panicked breathing coming from the man in front of her. Even the girl had stopped her incessant questions to listen to Vivianne describe the poor bastard's fate. Eventually, the little Martin does break the silence, albeit quietly.

"Your order, miss."

"Oh, thank you," she says, turning briefly to pick one of the... loafs? Do you call a bread puff a loaf? Or would you call it a pastry? But this one is savory... She takes a bite out of hers while she thinks about it, then a second later, realizes she's gotten distracted.

"Right. Well, you're quite lucky because I'm having a very good day as of twenty minutes ago. So I don't need you to pay me back, really. Go on, Toni, let him go. You can't exactly eat this holding him at gunpoint, can you?"

Toni immediately releases the man and comes to get the chou-de-pain that Vivianne is holding out for them. The thief, however, isn't quite as quick. He stumbles when Toni lets go of him and then just stands there, seeming stunned. His face is a bit wet, like perhaps he'd started tearing up at some point, which is a little pathetic in Vivianne's opinion. Nothing even happened.

Then, haltingly, the man turns toward the entrance of the bakery, throwing glances back all the while. He starts walking, slowly at first, then more confidently as nothing happens to him. By the time he reaches the door, he's stopped glancing backwards, so he likely doesn't see Vivianne reach inside her blazer. The man whips the door open and takes a step outside.

Then Vivianne shoots him and he falls to the ground, bullet lodged in his throat. The door is held awkwardly ajar by his body. He's not dead yet, she knows, but based on how fast the blood in pooling on the concrete outside, he will be soon.

The girl screams and Vivianne turns around. "You're a little late," she says, then says to the little Martin, "You can call Mr. Martin, but wait about ten minutes after I leave before calling the police. I apologize for the mess. My men will come take care of everything, alright?"

Vivianne waits for the little Martin to nod before turning away and gesturing for Toni to follow her out of the bakery. It's a little awkward trying to step over the cooling body in the doorway without getting blood on her heels, but she manages well enough. And honestly, even if she hadn't, it would be fine. This really has been just the best day.