

TRANSCRIPT: "SVN EMERGENCY BROADCAST
10/18/38:150-9:15AM; 'Terrorist Attack at L'ourette
Estate!'"

[MUSIC FADES IN... MUSIC FADES OUT]

ANNOUNCER: BREAKING NEWS ON SVN!

ANCHOR1: A TERRORIST ATTACK HAS OCCURRED IN THE DUCHY CAPITAL.
AN EXPLOSION IN THE EAST WING OF THE L'OURETTE ESTATE WOKE UP
RESIDENTS NEARBY AT APPROXIMATELY 2AM THIS MORNING. A COUPLE OF
PARTYGOERS WERE ABLE TO CATCH THE INCIDENT ON VIDEO AS THEY WERE
PASSING BY THE ESTATE.

[FOOTAGE STARTS]

MAN [OFF-SCREEN]: ...AIT! DO IT AGAIN! AGAIN!

WOMAN: (LAUGHING) OKAY, OKAY! GIVE ME, GIVE ME A SECOND...

[THE WOMAN ATTEMPTS TO STOP LAUGHING AND STRAIGHTENS OUT HER
EXPRESSION. SHE GESTURES BEHIND HER WHERE THE L'OURETTE ESTATE CAN BE
SEEN.]

WOMAN [STILL POINTING]: THIS, THIS IS MY BILLION-DOLLAR HOUSE.
IT'S WHERE I KEEP MY, MY HORSES AND MY H---[LAUGHTER]---HOES. I RIDE
THE HORSES AND THE HOES RIDE M---[EXPLOSION]---HOLY SHIT!

[A FLASH OF LIGHT CAN BE SEEN AS THE CAMERA SHAKES. BLACK SMOKE
BEGINS POURING OUT OF THE ESTATE. FLAMES CAN BE SEEN.]

MAN [OFF-SCREEN]: OH MY FUCKING GOD! IT'S ON F---! S-STACY,
CALL THE POLICE, CALL THE FUCKING POL---

[FOOTAGE ENDS]

ANCHOR1: FIRST RESPONDERS PROMPTLY ARRIVED ON THE SCENE AND
EVACUATED THE BUILDING. THE SMALL FIRE WAS CONTAINED AND PUT OUT.
AUTHORITIES TELL US THAT THE EXPLOSION WAS CAUSED BY A BOMB PLANTED
IN THE BEDROOM OF ONE OF THE DUKE'S GRANDSONS, OLIVIER DE L'OURETTE.
THE BOMB WAS HOMEMADE AND HAD A SMALL BLAST RADIUS, MAKING THIS SEEM
TO BE A TARGETED ATTACK ON THE YOUNG LORD.

ANCHOR2: LORD OLIVIER IS KNOWN TO BE FAVORED BY HIS GRANDFATHER AS THE NEXT HEIR TO THE DUCHY OF VALLES. THE YOUNG LORD WAS MEANT TO BE ADDED TO THE BALLOT IN TWO YEARS ONCE HE CAME OF AGE. AS OF CURRENTLY, THE POTENTIAL HEIR IS MISSING, AND WHILE NO BODY HAS BEEN FOUND, AUTHORITIES FEAR THE WORST. HIS TWIN BROTHER, LUCAS DE L'OURETTE, ALSO REMAINS MISSING, HOWEVER, DEATH OR INJURY IS UNLIKELY DUE TO THE SMALL BLAST RADIUS. SOME EYEWITNESS REPORTS CLAIM LUCAS DE L'OURETTE MAY HAVE LEFT THE MANOR SOME HOURS PRIOR TO THE INCIDENT THOUGH THE REASON AS TO WHY HAS YET TO BE DISCOVERED. NO MORE INFORMATION HAS BEEN RELEASED.

ANCHOR1: AUTHORITIES SUSPECT AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, THOUGH THEY HAVE YET TO NAME ANY SUSPECTS. STAY TUNED TO SVN TO KEEP UP WITH THIS DEVELOPING STORY.

[MUSIC FADES IN... MUSIC FADES OUT]

ANNOUNCER: BACK TO YOUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED PROGRAMMING.

Vivianne doesn't wait for her escort to open the car door for her. Instead, she snatches it open herself and slams it shut behind her with as much force as she can manage. The car rocks, but still, she's left too hot and *furious*. 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.

"I need a favor."

And just like that, the tension drains out of her. Lucas has finally decided to contact her. She'd wondered how long it would take. A little over a week, apparently.

"Don't you always?" she says, "It's a wonder I keep you around with how needy you are. What is it then?"

"Abduct someone for me?"

Vivianne stills where she'd started mindlessly tapping her acrylics against the leather car seats. "That's an interesting request. This wouldn't have anything to do with the untimely death of your twin, would it?"

"It might."

She hums, now hopelessly curious. "Who?"

"Camille Osman."

"A girl?"

"Presumably."

She rolls the name around in her head, trying to pinpoint why it sounds familiar. "What for?" she asks, "I didn't take you for the kind of man to pine for a warm body."

A sigh. Then: *"Is everything about sex with you?"*

"Of course not," she replies smoothly, "It's about business. Is it ransom, then? Have you run out of money already? You know I'd give you a loan."

"Yeah, in exchange for my eternal servitude, maybe. Whatever happened to 'no questions asked'?"

"That's only for paying customers, which you certainly are not," Vivianne says, "Can you blame a girl for being curious? Last I heard of you, you bombed your own house trying to kill your brother. Now, you're asking me to kidnap some girl I've never heard of? As a favor, mind you? The least you could do is answer a few questions."

"And here I thought that the hundreds of thousands of dollars I've helped make for your little organization had earned me some goodwill. My mistake." Lucas' voice is deadpan, but there's a scathing note to it that tells her at least some of the sentiment is genuine. *"What exactly do you want to know?"*

"Why her? Who is she?"

"You sound like a jealous ex," Lucas says, then he laughs. Had it been anyone else, Vivianne wouldn't have suffered the insult, but well... it's Lucas. *"She's a gentleman's daughter,"* he continues eventually, *"Sir Antoine Osman. I'd be surprised if you've heard of him; he typically keeps his nose clean. A moderate."*

"Which means he can be swayed," she says, finally connecting the dots, "Kidnapping his daughter is a bit heavy-handed, isn't it?" She's not a politician, but surely bribing the man would have been easier.

"Have you not been paying attention to the news," Lucas asks dryly, "I hardly count as subtle."

"Maybe you're not, but I have to be," she snaps, "All of a sudden, the police want to do their jobs. I pay good money to keep those pigs out of my business, but now they're asking questions. I've had three guys arrested for being *blond* this week." They hadn't even been on the clock. "Meanwhile, you want to snatch some gent's kid. I can't take that kind of heat just because you want me to. Even in *typical* circumstances, I'd charge thousands of dollars for that."

"How much then?"

"I just said I wouldn't do it."

"Actually, what you said is you wouldn't do it just because I asked and that typically you charge thousands. That just means the price is higher than normal. Name it."

"You can't possibly have that kind of money right now."

"Try me."

"Why don't you just ditch politics and come work for me instead of trying to make yourself into a pauper?"

Lucas laughs again. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? No. Tell me how much before I hang up and ask someone else."

Vivianne wants to ask who else he could even ask beside her, but she bites her tongue. *It pays to be patient*, she tells herself, *One day he won't be able to walk away, but for now...* "Give me fifty thousand on delivery. If you don't have it, I'm taking the girl as collateral."

"Done. I'll call with details in a few days." Then he hangs up without waiting for a response. Asshole.

She's still scowling 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 about to come into a lot of money. 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. Her day is really starting to look up now.