

Excerpt

The resemblance is uncanny. Filth and grassy hair aside, the woman emerging on the doorcam video is the feature vocalist of The V.V.S. Band, Lucretia Hughes, better known by her stage name, Lulu McQueen. There's a scratch by her sideburn from which dried blood-tracks contour over her cheeks as if she'd been lying face down for quite some time.

Lulu hurries nimbly up the porch steps, overwhelmed, like a castaway's dirt-caked astonishment of finding civilization – of finding herself now on the brink of rescue from a death she once thought imminent. Her blood-dyed palm abuses the doorbell, leaving DNA to match against the hairbrush sample her mother would deliver to the precinct.

She comes right up on the camera, unaware she's being filmed, glancing back over each shoulder. Her brow wrinkles. Something's off: the residents taking too long; the house too quiet. Lulu puts an ear to the door and holds her breath to mute the sound of her own breathing. There's no stirring inside, just the TV left on, in what's probably an empty house.

Hope of someone answering the door is costing precious time. Hope is the proverbial limb Lulu must gnaw away and leave in the snare if she intends to hobble on and survive the night. She chokes down that one hard gulp that precedes plunging face first into the unknown, but the instant Lulu twitches to run, she freezes mid-action, blurred by the butterfly effect of the paused video.

The remote-control lowers on the arm of Detective Ryan, who appears to have stepped out of a television detective series from the eighties, with his clean-shaven cleft chin and thick mustache. He sits across from the prime suspect, Charlene Hamilton, the mayor's daughter, who sits upright in truculent southern piety. Detective Ryan says, "I get it – how you must feel about Miss Lulu Hughes, for effectively running off with your groom. Still, I figured that, on some basic human level, you might find this video disturbing," he says. "Seems you enjoyed it."

Charlene, gazing at the paused video, submits, "Gotta hand it to her. That performance... Oscar-worthy."

"Performance? You didn't see her bleeding from the face? Do you really think she'd put her mother and daughter through a scare like this?"

Charlene tires already of the questions. She's here merely as a show of humility, to purport that she is not, in fact, above the law. She is without legal counsel, to lend the perception that she has nothing to hide. Charlene waves a lazy backhand. "Mark my word: it's a stunt, coming after Russ put an end to their little whatever, and came crawling back to me. Either that, or she just wants publicity for her little concert."

Ryan's brow lifts in delightful confusion; mockery posing as fascination. "*Russ* came back crawling, to *you*?"

"If he told you any different, he's a damn lie."

Detective Ryan clears his throat. "I'll just say that your fiancé has this funny way of saying by *not* saying. You see, the things he *didn't* say makes me think, maybe you were the chess move, so that Russ could, by way of marriage, stand to inherit two empires."

Detective Ryan, over a gentle palm, offers, “The affair was your doorway out – unless you prefer being just a wax seal on a social contract between two wealthy men: your father, Wade Hamilton, entrusting the care of his legacy to Russ Rutledge.”

Charlene looks away, as if the detective’s cynicism is a hot oven, but her eyes cut back to him, emblazoned with this warning: “I’m here to answer questions – not to sit here and be insulted. Do keep in mind, detective, that I can make one phone call from the parking lot, and by the time I reach my doorstep at home, you’ll be cleaning out your desk.”

Detective Ryan smirks at the find, because beneath every threat lay the insecurity he could use to break a suspect. “Be that as it may, I’d much rather be the one serving such a dish, than be the one having to eat it. One phone call, you say?” Ryan huffs. “You’re not as impressive as you think. You could’ve followed your father into politics – would’ve made the old man proud, but no. You want the easy route, to be a kept woman, your appointment calendar scribbled with spa days, shopping, brunch and sangrias with Fran Haulsey and them.” Ryan dips to keep eye contact with Charlene, who looks down in shame. Ryan adds, “Russ doesn’t have to say it... It takes only a man to see that, in marrying a woman like you, love is the casualty – a casualty Russ thought he could stomach, until about a month ago when he finally happened to run into Lulu, his old flame – his ex-wife, in fact—”

“—A cokehead and unfit mother,” Charlene boasts. “What can a woman like her possibly bring to the table?”

“No man ever fell in love with a table, Miss Hamilton. He doesn’t even look at that table if his heart is full,” Ryan says, with

the conviction of a man who has walked away from a full table himself. He says, “You’ve been Russ’s girlfriend – more off than on – for a decade, for good reason, Miss Hamilton. This wedding was out of obligation, but Lulu made him forget y’all’s *title* of love and remember the *feeling* of love... the passion... like hot sauce in his veins.”

Charlene leans under a fresh new perspective. “So, *this* is what you do? Pound away at a person’s insecurities, send them reeling to explain themselves right smack into the bombshell confession? Sorry to disappoint you, Ryan. I can’t confess to something I didn’t do.” She crosses her legs. Eyeing the cigarette pack in Ryan’s shirt pocket, she says, “Spare me one, will ya, if that’s allowed in here.” The detective taps one out of the pack for Charlene; lights it, then whips the chrome lighter back to his pocket.

Charlene takes a long draw and then deflates in a cloud of smoke. “You’ve got a whole grown-assed man in custody, right now. Found him near the scene, shirt ripped half off his body and you’re wasting time in here chatting with me.”

“I’m not trying to hem you up, miss, I swear. I’m offering you the advantage of being first.” Ryan, observing Charlene’s irreverent disbelief, shrinks between two earnest palms. “Seriously, I’ve seen it – I don’t know how many times. The one who talks first gets to control the narrative. You go second, and everything you say seems retaliatory, which is especially bad for you, being that the only known person with a motive – and a damn good one – is you. Osman has no reason to harm a hair on Lulu’s head, but for that cloud of debt hanging over his. Word is that he’s got bank debt, family debt, street debt, and even casino debt; ungodly amounts.

Had to be one hell of a slick talker to borry that kinda money, but now he won't talk at all – *can't* talk, it seems.”

Confusion and humor mixes in Charlene's face. “So, you think I'm paying his debt for him to kidnap Lulu? Well, if you all got the sense to put together such a theory, then tell me how is it that you all *lack* the sense to figure maybe he was near the scene because he was *helping* Lulu. Maybe *she's* paying him?”

“Paying him with what? Lulu's 'bout broke as a joke.”

“Broke? There is no such a thing to a woman.” Charlene peeps the detective's confusion, and rolls her eyes at it. She elaborates by slapping both palms on the desk, lifting herself out of her chair, and leaning over the support of locked elbows. “A woman, Detective Ryan, is never without means,” she says, with a surly underbite.

Facing Charlene's perfumed cleavage, the logic erects in his mind.

Charlene smooths her dress under her, quite ladylike, as she lowers into her seat. “Lulu was hell-bent on stopping my wedding. I have texts of Lulu threatening to harm herself. Said if she can't have Russ in this life, she'll 'have him in the next.” Charlene gathers her hands on the tabletop in rest, along with her case.

Ryan turns an ear to her. “All this time, and you're just now mentioning texts? Lemme see 'em, for God sakes.”

Charlene is bashful, suddenly. “Well, now, the thing is... That string of texts is from a broader conversation – personal matters that I will not have go down in a statement and end up in the papers. You know Charleston is to gossip, as a hog is to slop... My lawyer will turn over the messages once she can protect my

personal business as much as the law will allow.” Detective Ryan tries responding, but Charlene cuts him off. “I’ve said too much already, and I won’t say another word more, absent of legal counsel.” She pulls her purse strap over her shoulder.

Detective Ryan raises a hand to halt her. “Miss Hamilton. You act as if there isn’t a life at stake. I’m not asking you to submit the texts into evidence or nothing. Just let me see, just in case—”

The room door bursts open. Without even a glance, Ryan yells, “I’m busy!” After a half-beat of not hearing the door close, Ryan turns.

A young, wide-eyed cop says, “Mr. Osman’s finally talking, but he’s talking crazy – saying he’s an angel.”

Charlene produces a smile, to which Detective Ryan points a finger. “Oh, believe me, you won’t be smiling for long.”

Charlene blows a plume of smoke in Ryan’s face. “Thanks for the cigarette, detective.”

Ryan, shaking his head, enters the hallway to go question Mr. Osman.