



Its Meaning

The steam clings to the air, a warm shroud that softens the edges of the bathroom Lucy steps into. Her bare feet press against the cool tile, a fleeting shock against her skin as she pulls the towel tighter around her shoulders. The shower's hum still echoes in her ears, a fading lullaby, and the house beyond the door is silent—too silent, the kind of quiet that presses down like a held breath. She exhales, her breath mingling with the mist, and turns to the mirror.

It's fogged over, a silver haze blurring her reflection into a ghostly outline. She reaches out, intending to swipe a hand across it, to see herself clearly, but her fingers pause midair. Beneath the condensation, faint streaks of red cut through the haze—jagged, deliberate lines that don't belong. Her heart stumbles, a quick thud against her ribs, and she leans closer, squinting. The red isn't random; it's letters, smeared in her own crimson lipstick—the shade she'd worn on their last anniversary, now a stark wound against the glass. But the letters are wrong, twisted backward, a jumble that teases her mind: *eybdoog*.

Her breath catches, a sharp little gasp that clouds the mirror further. She blinks, trying to make sense of it, the reversed script like a riddle she's not sure she wants to solve. Her hand trembles as she fumbles for the small makeup mirror on the counter, its round face cool against her damp fingers. She angles it, tilting it

toward the larger mirror, and the reflection shifts—letters flipping, aligning, until they spell it out in a quiet, devastating clarity: *goodbye*.

The word lands like a stone in her chest, heavy and cold, sinking through the layers of her shock. *Goodbye*? From him? The air feels thinner now, the steam suffocating rather than warm. Her eyes dart over the message again, tracing the loops and smears, the way the lipstick clings unevenly to the glass. It's his handwriting—she'd know it anywhere, the slight slant he could never quite shake—but it's distorted, fragile, like he'd pressed too hard and then faltered. The red is vivid against the fog, a scream in the silence, and yet it's so soft, so impermanent, as if one swipe could erase it. Could erase him.

Her knees weaken, and she grips the counter, the makeup mirror slipping from her hand to clatter against the sink. The sound jolts her, sharp and real, pulling her from the haze of disbelief. Why backward? Why like this? Her mind races, tumbling over memories—his quiet sighs at breakfast, the way he'd lingered by the door last night, his voice low and unreadable when he'd said he'd be late. Had she missed something? Had she not seen him fading?

The towel slips slightly, and the chill of the room seeps into her skin, but she barely notices. Her eyes lock on the word—*goodbye*—and it stares back, unblinking, a finality she can't unsee. But it's more than a word; it's a plea, a puzzle, a piece of him left behind. She imagines him standing here, her lipstick in his hand, his breath fogging the glass as he wrote it. Did his hand shake? Did his eyes blur with the same ache now tightening her throat?

The silence presses harder, and she realizes the house isn't just quiet—it's empty. His absence yawns around her, a hollow she hadn't felt until this moment. But then, a flicker of something else catches her—on his desk, beyond the bathroom door, a stack of papers waits, lyrics printed in his careful script, a playlist scrawled at the top. She doesn't move yet, rooted by the mirror, the backward *goodbye* still burning into her. It's not just a farewell; it's a thread he's left her to unravel, a map to his heart she's not sure she's brave enough to follow.

The towel slips from Lucy's shoulders as she steps toward the bedroom, a soft thud against the hardwood floor that she barely registers. The cold air rushes in, a sharp, unyielding wave that bites at her damp skin, prickling goosebumps along her arms and chest. Her breath hitches as the chill tightens her body, her nipples hardening against the sudden exposure, but it's the ache in her chest that anchors

her, pulling her forward. Her eyes stay fixed on the folder resting on his desk, a beacon in the dim light, its edges worn and familiar, like a piece of him waiting for her.

The bedroom feels vast and hollow, the silence thicker here, unbroken by the hum of his presence she'd once taken for granted. Her bare feet pad softly across the floor, each step a quiet tremor against the cold, her wet hair dripping faintly onto her shoulders. The air smells faintly of him—cedar and ink, a ghost of his cologne—and it twists the knife deeper. She reaches the desk, her fingers trembling as they hover over the folder, the song list and lyrics spilling out from its open flap. Her breath is shallow, her pulse a frantic drumbeat in her ears, and she can still see the red *goodbye* burning behind her eyes, its backward scrawl a wound she can't close.

She slides the papers closer, the rustle loud in the stillness, and her gaze falls on the playlist—his handwriting, meticulous yet hurried, as if he'd poured himself into it. The titles leap out at her: *Fix You*, *Don't Walk Away*, *Traitor*, *Goodbye Love*—each one a shard of glass, cutting deeper as she reads. Beside them, the lyrics are printed, pages he must have spent hours compiling, and her heart lurches as she notices the highlighted words, streaks of yellow marking his intent like a trail of breadcrumbs through his pain.

Her fingers trace the first song, *Fix You*, and the highlighted line glows under her touch: "And I will try to fix you." The words blur as tears well up, hot and sudden, spilling onto her cheeks. She sees him in that line—his quiet resolve, the nights he'd held her through her storms, the way he'd tried to mend what she hadn't known was breaking. Her chest tightens, a sob catching in her throat. Did he think he'd failed her? Or had she failed him?

She flips to *Traitor*, and the highlighted words sting like salt in a wound: "You betrayed me." The accusation lands hard, her breath shuddering as she clutches the page. Betrayed him how? Her mind reels—his distance these past months, her sharp words over petty fights, the silences she'd let grow. Had she pushed him away without seeing it? The cold bites deeper, but it's the guilt that chills her now, wrapping around her like a second skin.

Then, *Goodbye Love*, and the highlighted "Goodbye, love, goodbye" stares up at her, a mirror to the lipstick on the glass. Her knees buckle, and she sinks into his chair, the leather cool against her bare thighs. The tears fall freely now, dripping

onto the paper, smudging the ink. She imagines him here, pen in hand, choosing these words, his sadness seeping into every line. The highlighted phrases—"I will try," "You betrayed," "Goodbye, love"—weave a story of effort, hurt, and farewell, a confession he couldn't say aloud.

The folder trembles in her hands, the weight of his absence crashing over her. The highlighted lyrics are his voice, raw and unfiltered, pleading with her to see him, to feel what he felt. She presses a hand to her mouth, stifling a cry, the cold air forgotten as the warmth of his love—and the pain of losing it—floods her. The desk, the papers, the backward *goodbye*—they're all he's left her, a fragile bridge to his heart, and she's not sure if she's strong enough to cross it.

Lucy's footsteps falter as she drifts through the bedroom, her tears a quiet stream tracing the contours of her face. The air feels heavy, thick with the echo of what once was, and her bare skin prickles against the cold, though it's the hollow ache inside her that numbs her most. Her eyes, blurred and stinging, sweep the room aimlessly—past the dresser where his watch still sits, past the chair where his jacket once hung—until they settle on the bed. Their bed. The sanctuary where they'd tangled together years ago, limbs entwined, laughter and whispers filling the dark. Now, it looms before her, vast and silent, its emptiness a cruel mirror to the void he's left behind. She can almost hear the ghost of his breath, the way it steadied beside her in the night, but it's gone—never to return, never to cradle love again.

Her chest heaves with a ragged sob, and she moves closer, drawn to it like a moth to a dying flame. The sheets are untouched on her side, but his—his side calls to her, a pull she can't resist. She sinks onto the mattress, the fabric cool against her thighs, and her fingers brush the pillow where his head once rested. Her tears fall faster now, soaking into the cotton, and she presses her face into it, searching for him—for the faint trace of his scent, his warmth. But it's faint, fading, and the loss cuts deeper.

Then, something catches her eye—a flash of white peeking from beneath the pillow's edge. Her breath hitches, and she hesitates, her hand trembling as she reaches for it. She tugs gently, and it slips free: a pair of her underwear, delicate and worn, folded with care. Not just any pair—the lace-trimmed silk from their wedding night, the ones she'd slipped into with a shy smile as he'd watched her, eyes alight with adoration. Her heart stutters, a fresh wave of tears blurring her

vision as she lifts them to her face. The fabric is soft against her cheek, and there it is—her perfume, the jasmine and vanilla she'd dabbed on her wrists that night, still clinging faintly to the threads. It's a time capsule, a relic of their beginning, and it shatters her.

She clutches the underwear to her chest, curling into herself as the memories flood in—his hands on her waist, the way he'd whispered her name against her skin, the promises they'd made under that same moonlit sky. That night, the bed had sung with their love, alive with every touch, every sigh. Now, it's a mausoleum, and this fragile piece of her past is all she has left of him. Why here? Why this? Her mind reels—did he place it there as a final goodbye, a silent tether to what they'd been? Or had he kept it hidden all this time, a secret he couldn't let go of until he had to?

The tears soak into the silk, mingling her scent with her sorrow, and she rocks gently, the cold forgotten as the warmth of that memory wraps around her. The backward *goodbye*, the highlighted lyrics, and now this—they're fragments of him, scattered like ashes, each one a wound and a gift. She presses the underwear to her lips, tasting salt and perfume, and whispers his name into the empty room, a plea or a prayer she's not sure he'll ever hear. The bed creaks beneath her, a hollow echo, and she wonders if it's her heart breaking—or the last of him slipping away.

Lucy's shivers ripple through her, the dampness of her skin and the cold air conspiring to rattle her bones. Her teeth chatter softly as she pulls herself up from the bed, the wedding-night underwear still clutched in one hand, a fragile lifeline to a moment long gone. She's bare and vulnerable, the chill seeping deeper, and she stumbles toward the dresser, desperate for warmth. Her fingers, stiff and trembling, fumble through the drawer, pushing aside the soft folds of her nightgowns—cotton, silk, worn flannel—searching for something to shield her from the cold, from the emptiness gnawing at her.

Then, her hand brushes something unexpected, something delicate and out of place. She pauses, her breath catching as she draws it out: her garter belt, ivory lace with its tiny satin bow, nestled between the nightgowns like a forgotten secret. Her heart lurches, a sharp pang that steals the air from her lungs. It's from that night—their wedding night—another relic of the day they'd promised forever.

She lifts it carefully, as if it might crumble under her touch, and the memories rush back, vivid and merciless.

She sees herself in the hotel suite, the mirror reflecting her nervous grin as she slid the garter up her thigh. Her hands had trembled then, too, but with excitement, not sorrow. The lace had hugged her skin, a whisper of anticipation as she'd adjusted it, imagining his fingers tracing its edge later that night. She'd felt alive, electric, her laughter bubbling up as she'd twirled for him, his eyes dark with desire and love. That night, intimacy had been effortless—his touch igniting her, her body yielding to his in a dance they'd only just begun.

But now, holding the garter, the weight of what followed crashes over her. The excitement had faded, hadn't it? Not all at once, but slowly, insidiously, like a tide receding from the shore. The lack of intimacy that crept into their marriage, a silent rift that widened with every passing year—it wasn't him. It was her. The realization stabs through her, cold and sharp, and she sinks back onto the edge of the bed, the garter dangling from her fingers.

She remembers the nights she'd turned away, her back a wall between them, claiming exhaustion or distraction. The mornings she'd rushed out of bed, avoiding his tentative reach. It wasn't that she didn't love him—God, she did, she always had—but something in her had dimmed, a flame she couldn't rekindle. She'd blamed work, stress, time, but deep down, she knew: she'd pulled away, locked herself behind a door he couldn't breach. He'd tried—his hands seeking hers, his voice soft with questions she'd dodged—and she'd let him drift, let the silence grow until it swallowed them.

The garter trembles in her grasp, its lace a mocking contrast to the nightgown she finally pulls over her head, the fabric sliding coolly against her shivering skin. She presses the garter to her chest, over the ache that won't relent, and the tears come again, quieter now, a steady drip of regret. This was why he'd left the *goodbye*, the lyrics, the underwear—because she'd left him first, in all the ways that mattered. The bed behind her stretches out, empty and accusing, and she wonders if the garter was his last plea, a reminder of when she'd wanted him, when she'd let him in. Now, it's too late, and the cold she feels isn't just the air—it's the absence of his warmth, a loss she carved herself.

Lucy's night unravels in restless fragments, the bed a battlefield where sleep eludes her. She tosses and turns, the sheets twisting around her legs like

restraints, the nightgown clinging to her damp skin. When exhaustion finally drags her under, it's not peace that greets her—it's nightmares, vivid and cruel. She's alone in them, adrift in an endless void, her voice swallowed by silence as she calls for him. She reaches out, her fingers clawing at empty air, and wakes with a start, her hand stretching across the bed to his side—cold, untouched, a chasm where he once lay. Her face is slick with tears, her body drenched in cold sweat, the sheets beneath her sodden not from heat but from the torment seeping out of her. She gasps, her chest heaving, the darkness of the room pressing in like a living thing.

Sleep abandons her fully then, and she stumbles from the bed, her bare feet hitting the floor with a shiver. The house is a tomb, its silence deafening, and she moves through it like a ghost, searching for something—anything—of him. The bathroom mirror still holds the faint smear of red, *goodbye* a fading scar, but beyond that, she begins to see the truth. His toothbrush is gone from the sink, his razor vanished from the counter. In the bedroom, his side of the closet yawns empty, hangers bare where his shirts once hung. The dresser drawer that held his socks, his worn t-shirts—it's hollow now, not a trace of him left behind.

She drifts to the living room, her steps unsteady, the garter and underwear clutched in her hands like relics of a lost faith. The couch where he'd sprawl with a book, the coffee table where his mug once sat—all stripped of him. His coat no longer drapes the armchair, his boots absent from the door. The house is hers alone, a shell scrubbed clean of his presence, and the realization breaks her. She collapses onto the couch, the fabric cool against her trembling frame, and the sobs erupt—raw, uncontrollable, tearing from her throat in jagged waves.

Her body shakes as she curls into herself, the garter pressed to her lips, the faint jasmine of that wedding night now a cruel taunt. She cries for the love she let slip away, for the intimacy she'd walled off, for the man who'd tried until he couldn't anymore. The lyrics echo in her mind—“*You betrayed me*,” “*Goodbye, love*”—and she sees now how they fit, how she'd carved this emptiness with her own hands. The house creaks around her, a hollow witness to her grief, and she wonders if he'd taken everything to spare her the reminders—or to erase himself completely from her life. The sobs slow to a quiet keening, her tears pooling on the cushion, and she sits there, alone in the wreckage of their home, the weight of her regret heavier than the silence.

Lucy lies sprawled on the couch, her body sinking into the cushions as the sobs ebb into a dull, throbbing ache. The garter and underwear rest limply in her lap, their delicate lace a stark contrast to the heaviness settling over her. The silence of the living room wraps around her, thick and suffocating, and her mind begins to churn, picking at the threads of their past with a clarity that stings. She stares at the ceiling, her eyes tracing the familiar cracks she'd once ignored, and a bitter thought unfurls, quiet at first, then louder, insistent: *I was always so annoyed when he wanted to make love.*

Her breath hitches as the memories surface, unbidden and sharp. It wasn't always like that—not in the beginning, not on that wedding night when the garter hugged her thigh and his touch set her alight. But over time, something shifted. She remembers the nights he'd reach for her, his hands eager, his voice low with want, and how it grated on her. *It was all about him*, she thinks, her fingers tightening around the garter. He'd press himself against her, his desire a weight she couldn't match, and she'd feel it—the unspoken expectation that she'd transform into someone else, someone bolder, freer, a version of her she couldn't find. She wasn't that woman, not anymore, and the disconnect grew, a silent resentment festering beneath her skin.

She shifts on the couch, the fabric catching against her nightgown, and her mind replays those moments she'd buried. There were times she didn't want to—times she'd felt hollow, detached—but she'd given in anyway, out of duty, out of habit, out of some warped sense of keeping the peace. She'd lie there, legs parted, staring at the ceiling much like now, her body a reluctant offering. *Just hurry up and finish*, she'd think, her jaw tight, her heart closed, waiting for him to be done so she could roll away, pull the covers up, and reclaim herself. It wasn't love in those moments—it was endurance, a transaction she resented even as she allowed it.

The realization twists in her gut, cold and jagged. She'd blamed him for wanting her, for needing her in ways she couldn't give, but she'd never said no—not really. She'd let it happen, let the distance widen, let her annoyance calcify into a wall he couldn't climb. And he'd felt it, hadn't he? The way she'd gone still beneath him, the way her sighs turned to silence. Maybe that's why the lyrics screamed "*You betrayed me*"—not some grand infidelity, but the slow betrayal of her withdrawal, her refusal to meet him halfway. She'd thought it was his selfishness, his

demands, but now, lying here in the wreckage, she wonders if it was hers too—her refusal to fight for what they'd lost.

Her tears have dried, leaving her face tight and raw, and she presses the garter to her chest, its lace a faint echo of the woman she'd been. *He wanted me to be someone else*, she thinks, but maybe he'd just wanted her—the real her—before she'd locked that part away. The couch creaks beneath her, the house looms empty, and she's left with the bitter truth: she'd hoped he'd hurry up and finish, but now that he's gone, all she wants is for him to come back.

The morning light filters through the curtains, pale and unforgiving, as Lucy stirs on the couch. Her body aches, stiff from the night spent curled into herself, the garter and underwear still tangled in her fingers like remnants of a dream she can't shake. Her eyes, swollen and heavy, blink against the dawn, and she reaches instinctively for something to anchor her—her hand sliding under the coffee table where the photo albums sit, a dusty stack of memories she hasn't touched in months. She pulls one out, the leather cover cool against her palm, and settles it on her lap, her breath shallow as she opens it.

Her fingers tremble as she thumbs through the pages, expecting the familiar comfort of their past—his lopsided grin, their hands clasped, the blurry candid from their first date. But the pages are gutted. Every photo of him, every snapshot of them together, is gone, leaving behind empty slots and faded outlines where they once lived. She flips faster, her heart pounding, until she reaches the wedding section—the one she'd spent hours curating, pasting their joy into permanence. Nothing. The pictures of her in that lace garter, him sliding it off with a laugh, their first kiss as husband and wife—all missing, torn out like pages from a book he didn't want her to read anymore. She slams the album shut, her chest tightening. *He took them*, she thinks, the realization a fresh wound. *Why erase it completely?*

The emptiness of the albums mirrors the house, and she's left with the jagged pieces he's scattered—the backward *goodbye*, the highlighted lyrics, the garter, the underwear. A puzzle, a trail of clues, and she wonders, her mind spinning, if there's more to find, more of him hidden in the wreckage. The thought propels her up from the couch, her legs unsteady, the nightgown clinging to her sweat-damp skin. She needs to wash it away—the rough night, the cold sweats, the weight of

her regret. She stumbles to the bathroom, the tiles icy under her feet, and twists the shower knob to cold—deliberately, defiantly—before stepping in.

The water hits her like a slap, a cascade of frigid needles that steals her breath and prickles her skin. She doesn't flinch, doesn't turn it warm. She lets it pour over her, immersing her fully, her hair plastering to her face, her nightgown soaking through until it's a second skin. The cold seeps into her bones, sharp and relentless, and she welcomes it—a punishment, a cleansing, a mirror to the chill he's left behind. Her teeth chatter, her body shivers, but she stands there, eyes closed, the red smear of *goodbye* still faintly visible on the mirror through the steamless glass.

She wonders if this is what he felt—the slow freeze of her withdrawal, the sting of her silence. The water runs down her face, mingling with tears she didn't know she had left, and she presses her hands to the shower wall, steadyng herself. The albums, stripped bare, echo in her mind. He didn't just leave; he erased them, took their shared history and left her with fragments to piece together. *Why?* To hurt her? To free himself? Or to force her to chase the truth he couldn't say aloud? The cold water numbs her skin, but not the ache, and as she stands there, drenched and trembling, she resolves to search—to find the next clue, to understand the man she lost, and the woman she let herself become.

The shower's cold grip lingers on Lucy's skin as she steps out, water dripping from her hair onto the floor, her nightgown a sodden weight she peels off and discards. She wraps a towel around herself, the fabric rough against her chilled flesh, and moves toward the closet, her steps slow, deliberate, as if drawn by some unspoken pull. The door creaks open, revealing rows of her clothes—dresses, sweaters, the mundane pieces of her life—but her eyes drift to the far end, where a ghostly shape waits. Her wedding dress, encased in plastic, hangs pristine and untouched, its white fabric glowing faintly in the dim light. Above it, perched on the shelf, sit her white heels, their satin scuffed but still elegant, staring back at her like silent sentinels of a day she'd tried to preserve.

She reaches for the dress, her fingers brushing the plastic, crinkling softly under her touch. She'd taken such care of it—ironing out every wrinkle before sealing it away, a monument to their beginning. Her breath catches as she lifts it down, the weight heavier than she remembers, and she unzips the cover, the scent of old fabric and faint jasmine wafting out. Her hands tremble as she runs them over the

lace, the bodice she'd worn with such pride, and then she sees it—a small, folded note tucked into the folds of the skirt, its edges worn as if handled too many times. She pulls it free, her heart thudding, and unfolds it. His handwriting, tight and jagged, spills across the page: "*I'm sorry, I couldn't tell you how I felt.*"

The words hit her like a punch, stealing the air from her lungs. She sinks to the floor, the dress pooling around her, the note clutched in her shaking hands. *He was hurt. In pain. Suffering.* And she sees it now, clear as the cold water still clinging to her skin—suffering she'd caused, year after year, with every turn away, every silent resentment, every time she'd lain there, legs open, wishing him gone. He'd carried that pain, buried it beneath his quiet tries, his steady presence, until it became too much to bear. She'd thought him selfish, demanding, but this note—it's a confession, a fracture, a man breaking under a weight she'd helped pile on.

Her mind reels back to last year, the night she'd found him in the garage, the engine running, his face streaked with tears. She'd pulled him out, screaming, shaking him, and he'd crumpled into her arms, sobbing. She'd thought it was Cathy—his first love, the one he'd mentioned in passing, a shadow she'd dismissed as old history. "*Oh, it was Cathy he was crying over,*" she'd told herself then, brushing it off, relieved it wasn't her fault. But now, the truth claws at her, raw and unrelenting. It wasn't just Cathy. It was her. Her distance, her coldness, her refusal to see him fraying at the edges. He'd nearly ended it, and she'd missed it—missed him—because she'd stopped looking.

Regret floods her, thick and bitter, pooling in her chest until she can't breathe. She presses the note to her lips, tasting ink and salt, her tears soaking into the paper. The dress lies across her lap, a shroud of what could have been, and she sees him now—standing here, slipping this note inside, his hands trembling with the words he couldn't say aloud. *I'm sorry.* Sorry for leaving? For staying silent? For loving her through the pain she'd caused? She'd thought he'd erased them—taken the photos, the memories—but this dress, this note, they're his final cry, left where she'd find it, where it would hurt most.

She curls into herself, the heels watching from above, and sobs into the fabric—her wedding vows, her failures, her regret all stitched into the lace. He'd snapped, and she'd been the breaking point, and now she's left with the pieces, wondering if she'll ever forgive herself for not seeing his pain until it was too late.

Lucy's hands tremble as she sets the wedding dress aside, the note still clutched against her chest, its words—"I'm sorry, I couldn't tell you how I felt"—echoing in her skull like a mournful refrain. Her eyes drift upward to the white heels on the shelf, their satin catching the light, and something compels her to reach for them. She pulls one down, its weight slight but laden with memory, and as she turns it over, a folded slip of paper tumbles out, landing softly on the dress in her lap. Her breath catches, a tight knot forming in her throat, and she unfolds it with unsteady fingers. His handwriting greets her again, raw and unfiltered: *"All I wanted was to feel like a man, be loved and to be wanted. You were cold and distant. We no longer smooched, no long embraced. Even foreplay was gone."*

The words pierce her, each one a shard of glass sinking into her heart. She lets the heel slip from her grasp, clattering to the floor, and presses the note to her forehead, her eyes squeezing shut as the truth washes over her. *She was the cause.* His pain, his longing, his quiet unraveling—it all traces back to her. She sees it now, vivid and undeniable: the way she'd recoiled from his touch, the nights she'd brushed off his advances with a sigh or a curt excuse, the slow erosion of their intimacy. No more kisses that lingered, no more arms wrapped around each other in the dark, no more playful moments that once sparked between them. She'd let it all fade, brick by brick, until he was left grasping at shadows.

Her mind whirls with questions, sharp and relentless. *Why did he wait so long? Why didn't he leave sooner?* She'd felt his frustration, seen the hurt flicker in his eyes, but he'd stayed—endured her coldness, her distance, year after year. And then it hits her, a memory she'd buried: the times she'd heard the bathroom door lock late at night, the muffled sounds she'd pretended not to notice. He'd taken care of himself, alone, in the only way he knew how, rather than step outside their marriage, rather than betray her with someone else. The realization twists the knife deeper—he'd chosen fidelity, even when she'd starved him of love, even when she'd left him to fend for his own needs.

Guilt crashes over her, heavy and suffocating, pooling in her chest until she can barely breathe. She should have taken care of him—not out of obligation, not because it was expected, but out of love, the way he'd tried to care for her. She remembers his hands, tentative and seeking, the way he'd look at her with a quiet hope she'd stopped returning. She'd been cold, yes, distant, yes, but it wasn't just indifference—it was her own walls, her own fears, her own retreat from the man

who'd only wanted to feel wanted. And he'd borne it, carried that ache, until it broke him.

She sinks lower, the dress and note crumpling in her lap, the heel lying abandoned beside her. Her sobs come again, softer now, a keening for the love she'd let wither, for the man she'd pushed away. *"All I wanted was to feel like a man"*—his plea rings in her ears, a simple, human need she'd denied him. He'd stayed faithful, stayed silent, stayed suffering, and she'd missed it all, too wrapped in her own detachment to see his heart bleeding out. Now, with his things gone, his photos erased, these notes are all she has left—his voice, finally speaking the pain she'd caused, and the guilt she'll carry forever.

Lucy sits there, the weight of the garter, the dress, and the notes pressing into her like anchors, her mind a storm of regret and revelation. A sudden thought jolts her, sharp and insistent—she hasn't checked everything. Her eyes dart to the desk where the folder of lyrics still lies, but beside it, tucked beneath a stack of old bills, she spots the edge of their marriage license, its official seal peeking out. Her heart lurches as she reaches for it, her fingers brushing the worn paper, and she pulls it free, expecting another empty relic. But as she turns it over, something else slips out—a photograph, glossy and intimate, fluttering to the floor.

She bends to retrieve it, her breath catching as she sees herself: a nude photo, her standing tall in lingerie, confident and radiant, her body framed by the soft glow of a long-ago night. Her younger self stares back—bold, unashamed, the fire in her eyes unmistakable. She flips it over, and there, in his familiar scrawl, a message: *"This is how I remember my beloved wife. Always remember us. I miss you so much."* The words tremble on the page, a quiet ache woven into every letter, and they unravel her all over again.

She clutches the photo to her chest, tears welling as the truth sinks in: he missed *her*—the old her, the woman who'd once burned with love, who'd stood proud beside him, who'd welcomed his touch with a hunger that matched his own. The woman in this photo was fearless, alive, the one who'd laughed with him, who'd melted into his arms when they were young and wild and in love. Back then, the fire between them had blazed white-hot, an inferno of passion and promise. He'd been her rock, stepping into her life with her three children—kids from a past she'd carried alone—and raising them as his own, no hesitation, no questions, just love.

She sees it now: the late nights he'd soothed their cries, the mornings he'd packed their lunches, the way he'd beamed at their milestones like they were his blood.

But then another memory surfaces, recent and raw, cutting through the haze. Just a few months ago, he'd sat across from her at the kitchen table, his voice low, tentative. "*I've always wanted children of my own,*" he'd said, his eyes searching hers, "*but I know you can't have any more.*" She'd brushed it off then, a quick nod, a change of subject, too tired or too distant to see the weight behind his words. Now, it crashes into her like a wave: *Is this another reason he left?* Not just her coldness, her withdrawal, but the unspoken ache of a dream he'd buried for her—a family of his own, a child with her eyes and his smile, a longing he'd silenced until it festered.

Her sobs break free again, ragged and deep, as she presses the photo to her lips, tasting salt and the faint tang of old gloss. He missed the woman she'd been, the love they'd built, the life they'd shared—and maybe he missed the future they'd never have. She'd dimmed that fire, let it gutter out, and he'd carried the loss of both her and that unfulfilled hope. The marriage license lies beside her, a contract he hadn't taken, and this photo—his final keepsake of her at her brightest—tells her he still loved her, even as he walked away. "*Always remember us,*" he wrote, and she wonders if he left these pieces not to wound her, but to beg her to see what they'd lost, what she'd let slip through her fingers. The guilt coils tighter, and she realizes: he didn't just leave her—he left the ghost of who they'd been, and the children they'd never have.

Lucy's legs carry her to the kitchen, a numb autopilot guiding her through the house that feels more like a mausoleum with every step. Her bare feet slap against the linoleum, the cold biting into her soles, but she barely notices. The photo of her in lingerie, the marriage license, the garter—all of it weighs on her, a gallery of regrets she can't escape. She reaches the counter, her hands shaking as she fumbles for her cigarettes, the pack a familiar crutch tucked beside the coffee maker. She tears it open, craving the burn, the brief escape, but as she pulls out a cigarette, something else slips free—a folded note, small and deliberate, fluttering to the counter like a final whisper from him.

Her breath catches, a tight knot forming in her chest. He knew her habits too well—knew she'd reach for this eventually, that her addiction would draw her here. She picks up the note, her fingers trembling as she unfolds it, the paper crinkling

in the silence. His handwriting stares back, stark and accusing, and she reads it aloud, her voice cracking with each word: *"Your addiction, your destructive habit, it destroyed our finances, our relationship, and me. You disrespected me, our home."* The words hang in the air, heavy and sharp, slicing through the haze of her grief.

She freezes, the cigarette dangling between her fingers, the note a mirror she can't look away from. Her addiction—smoking, the endless packs she'd burned through, the money she'd funneled into it despite his pleas. She sees it now: the arguments over bills, his quiet frustration as she lit up in the house, the haze of smoke curling through their home like a trespasser he couldn't evict. She'd waved him off, rolled her eyes, told him it was her choice, her stress relief, but she hadn't seen the cost—not just the dollars, but the way it chipped away at him, at them. *"It destroyed our finances, our relationship, and me."* Her disrespect wasn't just in the act—it was in dismissing his hurt, in choosing the cigarette over his comfort, over their life together.

Her chest tightens, a surge of anger and shame flooding her, and she hurls the pack across the kitchen with a guttural cry. It smacks against the wall, cigarettes scattering like shrapnel across the floor, a chaotic echo of the mess she's made. She sinks against the counter, her hands gripping the edge, her breath coming in short, ragged bursts. *Another thing that pushed him away.* The coldness, the distance, the unfulfilled dreams of children—and now this, her addiction, a slow poison she'd let seep into their marriage. She remembers his coughs, his pointed glances at the ashtray, the way he'd leave the room when she lit up. She'd thought him nagging, overreacting, but he'd been drowning in it—financially, emotionally, physically.

The note lies crumpled beside her, and she stares at the wreckage of the cigarettes, her lifeline turned traitor. He'd stayed through so much—her withdrawal, her refusal, her silence—but this, this habit she'd clung to, had been another nail in the coffin of their love. *"You disrespected me, our home,"* he wrote, and she feels it now, the depth of his pain, the man she'd worn down with every drag. She slides to the floor, the linoleum cold against her skin, and buries her face in her hands, the guilt a tidal wave she can't outrun. He'd left her these notes not just to confess, but to make her see—every piece a wound she'd inflicted, every word a plea she'd ignored until he had nothing left to give.

Lucy sits there on the kitchen floor, the scattered cigarettes a jagged constellation around her, the note's accusation—"Your addiction, your destructive habit, it destroyed us"—still ringing in her ears. Her hands drop from her face, trembling as they rest on her knees, and her mind churns, peeling back another layer of their fractured marriage. She knows her coping mechanisms were unhealthy—smoking, retreating into herself, building walls of smoke and silence to numb the strain. But he had his own, didn't he? Pornography, the late-night rustle of the bathroom door, the quiet shame she'd pretended not to notice. Masturbation, a solitary release she'd left him to, cornered by her refusal.

She leans her head back against the cabinet, the cold wood pressing into her skull, and a bitter clarity washes over her. *What was he left to do?* She'd shut him out, turned away from his touch, left him stranded with his desires unmet. All he'd wanted was her—her warmth, her surrender, her willingness to meet him fully in those moments when intimacy called. She sees it now: the nights he'd reached for her, his hands tentative but hungry, asking her to give herself completely, to let go of the distance and melt into him. *"All I wanted was to feel like a man, be loved and wanted,"* he'd written in the heel, and she'd denied him that, time and again, leaving him to his own devices—literally, figuratively—because she couldn't, or wouldn't, bridge the gap.

Was that too much to ask? She exhales, a shaky breath that fogs in the cool air, and the answer cuts deep: *Yes, it was.* For her, it had been too much—too much vulnerability, too much effort, too much of herself when she'd already felt stretched thin. She'd seen his needs as demands, his longing as pressure, and instead of meeting him, she'd retreated further, puffing on her cigarettes while he turned to screens and solitude. She'd cornered him there, trapped him in a cycle of wanting and waiting, until his only escape was to fend for himself. And she'd known—deep down, she'd known—every time she heard the shower run too long, every time his eyes lingered on her with a quiet plea she ignored.

Now, the weight of it crashes over her: he's gone, moving on to find another, someone who'll fulfill the needs and wants she couldn't. The thought twists in her gut, a jagged mix of jealousy and guilt. She imagines him with someone new—someone warm, open, eager to give what she withheld—and it stings, a sharp, selfish ache. But she can't blame him. She'd left him no choice, pushed him to the edge with her coldness, her addiction, her refusal to surrender. He'd stayed loyal, hadn't cheated, had turned inward rather than outward, but even that fidelity

couldn't save them. Her unhealthy coping had met his, and together they'd built a chasm too wide to cross.

She pulls her knees to her chest, the linoleum biting into her skin, and stares at the cigarettes strewn across the floor. *He moves on*, she thinks, and the finality of it sinks in. The notes, the clues, the erased photos—they're not just a goodbye; they're a release, a man letting go of a love she'd starved. She'd thought his pornography a flaw, a weakness, but now she sees it for what it was: a desperate grasp at feeling wanted when she wouldn't give it. The guilt coils tighter, and she wonders if he'll find peace with someone else—someone who'll smooch him, embrace him, love him the way she once did, before she let it all slip away.

As she remains on the kitchen floor, the cold seeping deeper into her bones, the scattered cigarettes and crumpled note a silent testament to the ruin she's sifting through. Her chest aches with a new kind of sorrow—not just for what she's lost, but for what lies ahead for him. She pictures him out there, vulnerable again, opening himself to someone else in time, and the thought stings, a quiet, mournful pang. He'd bare his heart, share his warmth, offer the love she'd once held in her hands and let slip away. It saddens her, this inevitability—someone else would know his gentle touch, his steady presence, the way he'd give everything when he felt safe to love.

She knows him too well, though. He wouldn't rush into it. He'd wait, patient and deliberate, piecing his life back together—his finances, his spirit, the fragments of himself she'd helped shatter. He'd take time to heal before committing again, before letting another woman step into the space she'd vacated. That's who he was: careful, loyal even to his own brokenness, unwilling to burden someone new until he could stand whole. And that waiting, that pause, makes her ache more—because it means he's not gone yet, not fully, still lingering in the aftermath of her failures.

The divorce papers loom in her mind, a shadow she can't outrun. She cringes at the thought of them arriving—stiff, official, final—delivered to her door like a guillotine's blade. She knows they're coming, a day she dreads but can't avoid, and she braces herself, steeling for the moment she'll have to sign her name to the end of them. He didn't want this, she's certain of it. Every note, every clue—the "*I'm sorry*," "*I miss you*," "*Always remember us*"—screams a man who'd fought to stay, who'd loved her through the pain until it broke him. But he had to do it, had to

file those papers, to free himself from the suffering she'd woven into their life—her coldness, her addiction, her refusal to meet him where he stood. It was his release, his only way to move on from a marriage that had become a crucible of hurt.

Her fingers trace the edge of the photo still tucked against her, the confident woman in lingerie staring back, and she wonders: *Could he ever love again?* He was broken—shattered by her distance, her disrespect, the years of unmet needs and unspoken wounds. She'd seen it in his near-suicide, felt it in the weight of his words: *"It destroyed me."* Had she crushed something essential in him, something that might never mend? Or would time and a new love—one warmer, kinder than she'd been—stitch him back together? The uncertainty gnaws at her, a fresh layer of guilt atop the pile. She'd left him vulnerable, yes, but also hollowed out, and she fears he might carry her scars into whatever comes next.

She pulls herself up, leaning against the counter, her legs weak beneath her. The kitchen feels vast, empty, a stage for the end she'd authored. The divorce would come, and she'd face it—head high, heart heavy—knowing he'd had no choice but to let her go. He was broken, but maybe not beyond repair. She hopes, in some quiet corner of her soul, that he'll find someone who'll love him as he deserves—fully, fiercely, without the walls she'd built. But for now, she's left with the wreckage, the notes, the echoes of a man who'd loved her until he couldn't, and the looming papers that will sever them for good.

Lucy's sobs echo softly in the kitchen, her tears pooling on the counter where she rests her forehead, the photo and note clutched against her chest like a lifeline. The silence is shattered by a sudden knock at the door—sharp, insistent, pulling her from the depths of her grief. Her head snaps up, eyes wide and red-rimmed, a jolt of panic coursing through her. She's a wreck—bare beneath the thin robe she grabs from the chair, her hair a tangled mess from the night's turmoil, damp strands clinging to her tear-streaked face. She fumbles with the robe, wrapping it tightly around herself, her hands shaking as she ties the sash. *Please go away*, she thinks, willing the visitor to leave her to her misery, but the knocking persists, growing louder, more urgent.

"Lucy, it's Theresa. Please open the door and let me in," a voice calls, firm but laced with worry. Lucy freezes, her breath catching. Theresa—her sister-in-law, his sister—someone she hasn't faced since this all began to unravel. She doesn't

want this, doesn't want company, doesn't want anyone to see her like this: a hot mess, raw and exposed, drowning in the wreckage of her marriage. But Theresa's voice cuts through her resistance, and the knocking doesn't stop. With a heavy sigh, Lucy shuffles to the door, her bare feet dragging across the cold floor, and cracks it open, just enough to peek out.

Theresa stands there, her face etched with concern, her eyes softening as they take in Lucy's disheveled state. "Your husband wanted to make sure you were okay," she says, her tone gentle but resolute. Before Lucy can protest, Theresa pushes past her, stepping into the house with a determination Lucy can't muster the strength to counter. The door swings wider, and Theresa's gaze sweeps the living room, then the kitchen beyond—a slow, deliberate scan that lands like a judgment.

The house is chaos, a cluttered testament to another habit Lucy knows he despised: her hoarding, the piles of papers, the unwashed dishes, the odds and ends she'd clung to while their life fell apart. Boxes teeter on the edges of tables, old magazines spill across the floor, and the scattered cigarettes from her earlier outburst glint in the morning light. Theresa's lips press into a thin line, but she doesn't comment—not yet. Instead, she turns back to Lucy, her expression softening again, though the worry doesn't leave her eyes.

"He asked me to check on you," Theresa says, stepping closer, her voice low. "He's hurting, Lucy, but he still cares. He didn't want you to be alone with... all this." Her gesture takes in the mess, the robe, the tear-streaked face, but Lucy knows it's more—the notes, the pain, the unraveling she's been wading through. She wants to snap back, to tell Theresa to leave, that she doesn't need pity, but the words stick in her throat. *He sent her.* Even now, after everything—her coldness, her addiction, her distance—he's still reaching out, still worried, and it breaks her all over again.

She sinks against the wall, the robe slipping slightly, her hands clutching the photo tighter. "I don't know what to say," she whispers, her voice hoarse, her eyes darting to the floor. Theresa moves closer, hesitating, then rests a hand on her shoulder, a small anchor in the storm. The house looms around them, a cluttered shrine to a life Lucy let decay, and she realizes: he's gone, but not entirely—not yet. Not if he's still sending Theresa to her door.

Theresa stands there, her hand still resting lightly on Lucy's shoulder, her presence a quiet tether in the chaos of the cluttered living room. She shifts her weight, her eyes scanning Lucy's face before she speaks again, her voice steady but tinged with something softer—compassion, maybe, or resolve. "He didn't leave you with nothing," she says, meeting Lucy's gaze. "He didn't want you to be without. Check your account."

Lucy blinks, the words sinking in slowly, a lifeline she hadn't expected. Her hand fumbles for her phone on the counter, nearly knocking over a stack of unopened mail in the process. Her fingers tremble as she unlocks it, the screen's glow harsh against her tear-streaked face. She opens her banking app, her breath shallow, and there it is—a large sum deposited into her account, a figure that makes her heart stutter. She scrolls further, her eyes darting over the details: all the bills paid—electricity, water, internet—the car loan cleared, the mortgage covered for months ahead. Her job, steady and full-time, had kept her afloat, but this... this is more than she'd anticipated, more than she'd dared to hope for.

She sets the phone down, her hands falling limp into her lap, the robe slipping open slightly as she stares at the screen. He knew—knew the separation would hit her finances, knew the weight of their shared life would shift onto her alone. And even now, from a distance, he's still caring for her, still providing, not out of obligation but because he can't fully let go. The realization washes over her, a bittersweet tide that stings as much as it soothes. He didn't have to do this—legally, morally, after all she'd put him through—but he did. He still cares, still feels the pull of her well-being, even as he walks away.

Theresa watches her, her expression softening further. "He asked me to keep an eye on you," she adds, her voice quieter now, almost a confession. "To report back. He's worried, Lucy. Emotionally, physically—he didn't want you falling apart alone." She glances around again, at the hoarded clutter, the scattered cigarettes, the disarray that mirrors Lucy's inner storm, and Lucy feels the weight of it: he's gone, but not entirely detached. He's sent Theresa as his proxy, a bridge between them when he can't cross it himself, a way to ensure she's okay even as he heals from the pain she caused.

Lucy's throat tightens, a fresh wave of tears threatening to spill. She pulls the robe tighter around herself, her fingers clutching the fabric as if it could hold her together. "He didn't have to," she whispers, her voice cracking. "After everything..."

why?" Theresa steps closer, crouching slightly to meet her eyes. "Because he still loves you, in his way," she says simply. "He's broken, Lucy, but he doesn't hate you. He just couldn't stay."

The words land heavy, a truth Lucy can't unhear. He's left her money, paid the bills, secured her life from afar—and sent Theresa to watch over her—because his care lingers, even through the hurt, even through the divorce papers she knows are coming. She thinks of the notes—"I miss you," "Always remember us"—and now this, a final act of provision. He's moving on, yes, but he's not abandoning her completely, and that paradox tears at her, a mix of gratitude and guilt she can't untangle. She nods faintly at Theresa, her eyes drifting to the phone, the numbers glowing like a silent promise, and wonders how she'll live with knowing he's still out there, loving her enough to let her go.

Theresa's voice cuts through the haze of Lucy's thoughts, firm yet laced with a tenderness that makes it impossible to tune out. "Mental illness is at work here," she says, her eyes steady on Lucy's, unflinching despite the mess of tears and tangled hair staring back. "You need to pull yourself together and get help, and I can help you as that's what I do—for everyone, including you." The words land like a lifeline tossed into choppy waters, and Lucy feels them settle, heavy but not unkind, into the raw space between them.

She knows Theresa's heart—knows her sister-in-law's boundless giving, the way she pours herself into her friends, her church, her community, her family.

Theresa's a pillar, a steady hand for anyone who stumbles, and Lucy's seen it: the meals delivered to grieving neighbors, the hours spent counseling at the church, the quiet strength she offered when Lucy's husband—her brother—nearly broke last year. Now, that strength turns toward her, and Lucy feels exposed, fragile under Theresa's gaze, but there's no judgment there—just a call to rise from the ashes she's been wallowing in.

Theresa steps closer, her shoes crunching faintly on a stray cigarette, and crouches to Lucy's level. "It's not just you," she continues, her voice softening. "There's a mix here—mental illness, codependency, for both of you." Lucy's breath hitches, the truth of it slicing through her fog. She'd leaned too heavily on him, hadn't she? Her smoking, her hoarding, her withdrawal—they'd become weights he carried, burdens she'd dumped onto his shoulders without seeing how they bent him. And he'd leaned on her too, in his way—his disability, the quiet

neediness it bred, a subtle reliance she'd once accepted as part of their bond. They'd tangled themselves into a knot of dependence, each feeding the other's struggles, a cycle neither could break alone.

She sees it now: that's why he stayed so long. Breaking the codependency broke him—it was a wrenching, brutal tear, a severing of the lifeline that had tethered them together, however unhealthily. He'd clung to her, to their fractured life, because letting go meant facing himself, his pain, his unfulfilled dreams, without her as his crutch. But staying—staying meant sinking deeper, the weight of her habits, her coldness, her mental storms dragging him toward that garage again, toward the suicide he'd nearly embraced. *"It destroyed me,"* he'd written, and she understands: he had to rip her away, had to leave, to save himself from the unhappiness that was drowning him.

Lucy's hands tighten around the robe, her knuckles whitening as the guilt twists anew. Theresa's right—mental illness wove through them both, her depression and avoidance clashing with his own silent struggles, their codependency a glue that held them together until it became a noose. He'd left the money, sent Theresa, because he still cared—but he'd had to break free, to rip the bandage off and let the wound breathe, even if it left him shattered. Could he love again? Maybe. But only if he healed from this, from her.

Theresa reaches out, her hand gentle on Lucy's arm. "I can help you," she repeats, her voice a quiet promise. "You don't have to do this alone." Lucy meets her eyes, sees the sincerity there, and feels a flicker of something—hope, maybe, or just the faint stir of resolve. She nods, barely perceptible, her tears slowing. The kitchen, the notes, the money—they're all pieces of a life she needs to face, and Theresa's offer is a start, a chance to untangle her own mess, just as he's trying to untangle his.

Theresa turns toward the bedroom, her steps purposeful, her voice cutting through the stale air of the kitchen with a gentle authority. "Come, Lucy," she says, glancing back over her shoulder. "Time to put on some clothes and take a walk—get you out of this environment." There's no room for argument in her tone, only a quiet insistence that pulls Lucy along like a current she's too tired to fight. Theresa moves ahead, her presence filling the cluttered space, and Lucy follows, her bare feet dragging against the floor, the robe still clutched tight around her.

In the bedroom, Theresa heads straight for the dresser, navigating the mess with a practiced ease. She pulls down a simple t-shirt—soft gray, one Lucy hasn't worn in months—and a pair of black leggings, tossing them onto the bed with a nod.

"Come on, put this on," she urges, her voice firm but kind, like a sister coaxing a child from a tantrum. Lucy hesitates, her eyes drifting to the wedding dress still pooled on the floor, the notes and photo beside it, but Theresa's steady gaze draws her back. She shuffles to the dresser, her hands trembling as she opens a drawer and pulls out a pair of underwear—plain, practical, a far cry from the lace of her wedding night. She slips them on, the fabric cool against her skin, and then dresses in front of Theresa, peeling off the robe to tug on the t-shirt and leggings. There's no self-consciousness, just a numb compliance, and Theresa watches with a faint, approving nod.

"That's it," Theresa says, her tone softening as Lucy smooths the shirt over her hips. "Let's have coffee." She turns toward the door, expecting Lucy to follow, and though every fiber of Lucy screams to stay—to curl back into the cocoon of her grief—she knows Theresa's right. The house, with its clutter and echoes, is a trap, a suffocating loop of regret and smoke. A diner, the public eye, the hum of strangers—it's the last place she wants to be, her hair still a tangled mess, her face raw from crying. But the change of scenery, the break from this environment, feels necessary, a lifeline she can't refuse.

She trails Theresa back to the kitchen, her steps sluggish but steady, and watches as Theresa rummages for the coffee pot, sidestepping the scattered cigarettes without comment. "We'll go somewhere quiet," Theresa says, reading her reluctance as she fills the pot with water. "Just coffee, fresh air—baby steps, okay?" Lucy nods faintly, leaning against the counter, the weight of the morning still pressing down but lightened, just a fraction, by Theresa's resolve. She's in no mood for this—for people, for light—but the thought of staying here, drowning in the debris of her marriage, is worse. Coffee, a walk, Theresa's steady hand—it's a start, a pull toward something beyond the notes, the guilt, the ghost of him she's been clinging to.

The diner hums softly around them, a low buzz of clinking dishes and murmured conversations, the air thick with the scent of coffee and grease. Lucy sits across from Theresa, her hands wrapped around a chipped mug, the warmth seeping into her palms but doing little to thaw the chill inside her. The t-shirt and leggings feel foreign against her skin, a thin armor against the world she's been thrust into, and

she stares into the black swirl of her coffee, avoiding the curious glances of strangers. Theresa sips her own drink, her presence a steady anchor, her eyes occasionally flicking to Lucy with quiet concern.

Then, the jukebox in the corner crackles to life, and a song spills out, its melody curling through the diner like a thread of memory: *"Be my little baby, my one and only one..."* The lyrics hit Lucy like a freight train, sharp and sudden, piercing through the fragile wall she'd built around herself. In an instant, a flash, she's back—back to a night years ago, his arms around her, swaying in their cramped living room, his voice humming those words against her ear. It was their song, a silly, sweet promise from when love was new and uncomplicated, before the coldness, before the smoke, before the notes. Her breath catches, a ragged gasp, and tears flood her eyes, spilling over in a hot, relentless cascade down her cheeks.

Theresa's head snaps up, her gaze locking onto Lucy as the song's effect ripples across her face. She sets her mug down with a soft clink, her expression shifting from calm to tender sorrow, and reaches across the table, her hand finding Lucy's trembling one. Her fingers close around it, warm and firm, grounding her as the tears fall unchecked. "I'm so sorry," Theresa says, her voice low, aching with empathy. "You're gonna have many moments like this in the beginning."

Lucy's chest heaves, a sob breaking free as she grips Theresa's hand, the coffee forgotten, the diner blurring into a haze of sound and light. The song plays on—"Come on and dance with me, my darling..."—each note a dagger, carving open the wound of his absence. She sees him in her mind's eye, young and grinning, spinning her around until they collapsed laughing, the kids giggling from the couch. It's too much, too vivid, and she presses her free hand to her mouth, trying to stifle the cries, but they spill out anyway, raw and unfiltered.

Theresa squeezes her hand tighter, her thumb brushing over Lucy's knuckles in a small, steady rhythm. "It's okay," she murmurs, leaning closer across the table, her voice a lifeline through the storm. "Let it out. These triggers—they'll come, and they'll hurt, but they won't always feel this big." Lucy nods, barely, her tears dripping onto the Formica tabletop, the song weaving its cruel magic around her. She knows Theresa's right—this is just the start, a flood of memories waiting to ambush her—but right now, it's all she can do to hold on, to let Theresa's touch tether her as the music reminds her of everything she's lost, and everything she failed to keep.

The diner's hum fades into a distant roar as Lucy's world tilts, the song—"Be my little baby..."—looping relentlessly in her ears, each note a hammer against her fragile resolve. It's all too much—the coffee's bitter steam, the lyrics' piercing nostalgia, Theresa's steady gaze, the weight of every note and memory crashing down at once. Her stomach churns, a sick wave rising, and her vision blurs at the edges, black creeping in like ink spilling over a page. She feels unwell, untethered, the emotional and mental turmoil overtaking her in a suffocating rush. Her hands slip from the mug, her body slumps, and she loses consciousness, collapsing forward onto the table with a soft thud.

Theresa's chair scrapes sharply against the floor as she bolts upright, rushing to Lucy's side in an instant. "Lucy!" she calls, her voice cutting through the diner's chatter, urgent but controlled. She kneels beside her, one hand gently touching Lucy's limp one, the other brushing her hair back from her clammy forehead. The diner falls quiet, eyes turning their way, but Theresa's focus is singular, her touch steady as she murmurs, "Come on, Lucy, wake up." Slowly, Lucy stirs, her eyelids fluttering, a faint groan escaping her lips. Her head snaps up, wide-eyed and wild, her breath ragged as she looks around, disoriented. "Where am I?" she rasps, her voice trembling, her gaze darting from the tabletop to the blurred faces of strangers.

Theresa's hand tightens around hers, grounding her. "Shh, it's okay. I'm here," she soothes, her tone soft but firm, a lifeline pulling Lucy back from the edge. Lucy's chest heaves as she clings to Theresa's arm, her fingers digging in, desperation anchoring her to the present. The waitress hurries over, her apron rustling, concern creasing her brow. "Are you okay, darling?" she asks, hovering with a glass of water in hand, her voice thick with Southern warmth. Lucy nods faintly, still catching her breath, her head spinning as the diner swims back into focus—the song fading now, mercifully, into the jukebox's next track.

"That's it, I'm here," Theresa repeats, easing Lucy upright, her arm sliding around her shoulders to steady her. Lucy presses herself against Theresa, her body trembling, the blackout a stark reminder of how fragile she's become under the weight of her grief. The waitress sets the water down, lingering a moment before stepping back, and Theresa brushes a tear from Lucy's cheek. "You're safe," she whispers, her voice a quiet promise amid the storm. Lucy's breath slows, her grip on Theresa loosening slightly, but she doesn't let go—not yet—clinging to the one

piece of solidity she has left as the diner's noise resumes, a muted backdrop to the chaos still roiling inside her.

Theresa keeps her arm around Lucy, her grip steady as the diner's hum settles back into a low murmur, the waitress retreating with a lingering glance of concern. Lucy's breathing evens out, but her eyes remain glassy, her body fragile against Theresa's side, a woman teetering on the edge of collapse. Theresa's mind races, piecing together the morning—the blackout, the tears, the cluttered house, the notes—and a quiet resolve hardens within her. She knows Lucy can't be left alone, not like this, not for long stretches. It's not safe. The weight of Lucy's emotional spiral, the mental turmoil crashing over her, feels like a ticking clock, and Theresa won't risk letting it run out.

"We're not going back to the house," Theresa says, her voice low but decisive, cutting through the fog of Lucy's daze. Lucy blinks up at her, confusion flickering across her face, but she's too drained to protest. Theresa pulls out her phone, her fingers quick as she searches for a nearby hotel, booking a room with a few deft taps. "You're staying somewhere else for now—a hotel, clean slate, just until we sort things out." She doesn't wait for Lucy's response, already shifting into action, helping her to her feet with a gentle but firm tug. Lucy sways slightly, still clinging to Theresa's arm, the coffee left untouched on the table as they move toward the door.

Theresa's plan takes shape as they step into the crisp morning air, the diner's bell jingling behind them. She'll send people—friends from the church, maybe a cleaning crew—to the house, task them with clearing the clutter, the cigarettes, the hoarded remnants of Lucy's life with him. A reset, a blank canvas, something Lucy desperately needs alongside the mental health support Theresa's determined to arrange. The house, with its echoes and debris, is a trap, a mirror to Lucy's shattered state, and Theresa won't let her drown in it. She'll take charge, orchestrate this intervention, because Lucy's life hangs in the balance—and Theresa's seen enough broken souls to know when one's at risk.

She guides Lucy to the car, settling her in the passenger seat, her movements brisk but tender. "You're a danger to yourself right now," Theresa says softly, buckling her in, her tone more observation than accusation. "Maybe to others, too, if this keeps up." Lucy stares ahead, her hands limp in her lap, the photo and notes still tucked into her robe's pocket, a woman unmoored by a life-changing event

she can't navigate. Her husband's departure—the notes, the money, the erasure—has shattered her, and Theresa sees it: the blackouts, the sobbing, the inability to cope. This isn't just grief; it's a collapse, a mental unraveling that could spiral further if left unchecked.

Theresa starts the engine, her jaw set as she pulls out of the diner's lot. She'll get Lucy to the hotel, check her in, make sure she's safe for the night. She'll call in favors, get the house cleared, line up a therapist—someone to help Lucy claw her way back from the brink. But as she glances at Lucy, slumped against the window, Theresa knows the truth: she can take charge, can save Lucy's life in this moment, but in the end, Lucy has to do the work. She has to want to move forward, to rebuild from the shards of this devastation. Theresa's giving her the tools, the space, the support—but Lucy's the one who has to pick up the pieces. For now, though, Theresa drives, her hands tight on the wheel, determined to keep this fragile, broken woman from slipping away entirely.

Theresa grips Lucy's hand as they sit in the car, her fingers wrapping around Lucy's cold, trembling ones with a firmness that anchors them both. Her voice is steady, unyielding, cutting through the haze of Lucy's despair. "If you continue to spiral, we'll have to go to the ER," she says, her tone leaving no room for negotiation, a warning wrapped in care. She locks eyes with Lucy, searching her pale, tear-streaked face for a flicker of understanding, but she can't linger—her gaze shifts reluctantly to the road as she starts the car, her hands tight on the wheel. "I have to save you from yourself," she adds, softer now, almost pleading. "Please understand."

Lucy doesn't respond, her body slumped against the passenger seat, her hand limp in Theresa's grasp. She's numb, a hollow shell staring out the window into the distance, her eyes glassy as if she could see beyond the horizon, beyond the present, into some endless void where he might still be. The world blurs past—trees, houses, the gray stretch of asphalt—but Lucy sees none of it. Then, a cry tears from her throat, raw and desperate, shattering the silence. "Oh, I need you!" she wails, her free hand reaching out, clawing at the empty air as if she could pull him back, her voice breaking under the weight of her longing.

Theresa's heart clenches, a sharp ache blooming in her chest as she glances sidelong at Lucy. She knows this isn't just hurt, not just grief—this is something deeper, darker, a mental unraveling that's spiraled beyond Lucy's control. The

blackout at the diner, the sobbing, the way she's crumbling under the notes and memories—it's serious trouble, a mind buckling under a load too heavy to bear. Lucy's beyond the edge now, teetering into a place where numbness and anguish collide, and Theresa feels the urgency like a pulse in her veins. She can't look away for long, her eyes flicking between the road and Lucy, torn between driving and holding this fragile woman together.

"Shh, I'm here," Theresa murmurs, squeezing Lucy's hand tighter, her voice a lifeline tossed into the storm. Lucy's cry echoes in the car, a haunting sound that lingers, and Theresa's throat tightens with the weight of it—her sister-in-law, her brother's wife, broken beyond recognition. She knows Lucy needs more than a hotel, more than a cleared house; she needs help, real help, and soon. The ER looms in her mind, a last resort she hopes to avoid, but she won't hesitate if Lucy slips further. For now, she drives, her foot steady on the gas, her heart aching as Lucy stares into that endless distance, reaching for a man who's gone, a love she can't reclaim, and a self she's losing with every mile.

Theresa's grip tightens on the steering wheel as Lucy's cries pierce the air, each wail a jagged shard that digs deeper into her resolve. She can't take it anymore—the raw, desperate sound of Lucy reaching for a ghost, the limp weight of her hand, the way her numbness has swallowed her whole. Her foot presses harder on the gas, the engine roaring as she speeds up, her calm unraveling into urgency. She jerks the wheel, shifting lanes abruptly, tires squealing as she weaves through traffic, her hazard lights flashing a frantic warning to the world outside. The car lurches forward, her driving turning aggressive, fueled by a primal need to act, to save.

"We're gonna get you help," Theresa says, her voice trembling but fierce, her eyes darting between the road and Lucy's slumped form. "I hope you don't hate me for this, please." The plea hangs unanswered, Lucy's silence a void beside her, her hand cold and lifeless in Theresa's grasp. Lucy doesn't respond, doesn't move, her head lolling against the window, her cries fading into a hollow stillness that's somehow worse. Theresa pushes the car further, the speedometer climbing, the hospital's lights glinting in the distance like a beacon. Her heart pounds, a mix of fear and determination driving her as she races toward the ER, knowing this is no longer a choice but a necessity.

The car screeches to a halt in the emergency bay, Theresa slamming on the brakes and throwing it into park. She flings her door open, rushing around to Lucy's side, her breath ragged as she pulls the passenger door wide. "Come on, Lucy," she urges, unbuckling her and half-lifting, half-dragging her out, Lucy's body limp but compliant, her eyes unfocused. They stumble into the ER, Theresa's arm locked around Lucy's waist, her voice sharp with urgency as they approach the receptionist's desk. The sterile smell of antiseptic hits them, the buzz of the waiting room a distant hum as Theresa leans forward, her words tumbling out in a rush.

"She's in crisis," Theresa says, her tone clipped, authoritative despite the tremor beneath it. "Mental breakdown—blacked out earlier, crying uncontrollably, not responding now. Her husband left her, she's been spiraling, and I'm worried she's a danger to herself." The receptionist's eyes widen, her hands already moving to the keyboard, nodding as she types. "Okay, we'll get her seen right away," she replies, waving over a nurse. Theresa keeps her hold on Lucy, her hand brushing Lucy's hair back as she whispers, "You're gonna be okay," though she's not sure if Lucy hears her—or if she believes it herself. The nurse approaches with a wheelchair, and Theresa eases Lucy into it, her heart aching as she steps back, praying this is the lifeline Lucy needs, even if it's one she can't grab on her own.

The nurse wheels Lucy into the exam room, the squeak of the chair's wheels a stark rhythm against the sterile hum of the ER. Theresa follows close behind, her steps quick and unsteady, her eyes fixed on Lucy's slumped form. Lucy remains unresponsive, her body present but her mind adrift, lost somewhere beyond the fluorescent lights and beige walls. Her gaze is vacant, staring into a distance only she can see, her lips moving faintly, a murmur escaping in a soft, broken loop: *"Love you a thousand years, love you a thousand more."* She repeats it, over and over, a mantra that fills the small room, fragile and haunting.

Theresa freezes, her breath catching as the words register. She knows that song—"A Thousand Years"—knows it too well. It was his song, her brother's, one he'd sing with a quiet reverence, his voice cracking on the high notes every time. She'd seen him play it on the old guitar in their living room, his eyes glistening, lost in some deep, unspoken emotion. It was a piece of him, a melody he'd shared with Lucy in their early days, a vow woven into its lyrics. And now, here's Lucy, murmuring it like a prayer—or a wound—her voice barely audible but relentless, each repetition a stab into the silence.

A chill runs through Theresa as she pieces it together. Was Lucy doing this on purpose? Inflicting her own wounds by echoing those lyrics, knowing how they'd pierced him every time he sang them? She remembers Lucy once telling her—half-laughing, half-sad—how he'd get emotional whenever that song came on, how he'd turn away to hide the tears, how it was *their* song from a time when love felt eternal. Lucy knew its power over him, knew it tugged at the rawest parts of his heart. And now, in her shattered state, she's wielding it—maybe unconsciously, maybe not—repeating it like a self-inflicted cut, a way to feel him, to punish herself, to keep the pain alive.

"Lucy," Theresa whispers, stepping closer, her voice trembling as she kneels beside the wheelchair. She touches Lucy's hand, cold and limp, but Lucy doesn't flinch, doesn't stop. *"Love you a thousand years, love you a thousand more..."* The nurse glances at Theresa, her brow furrowing as she adjusts a clipboard, then steps out to fetch a doctor, leaving them alone in the room's stark quiet. Theresa's heart aches, torn between the sister-in-law she's trying to save and the brother she knows is breaking too, somewhere out there. "You're hurting yourself with this," she says softly, though she's not sure Lucy hears. "He loved that song... and you know it."

Lucy's murmurs continue, a loop of grief and memory, her eyes unseeing, her mind locked in a place Theresa can't reach. The lyrics are a bridge to him, a tether to the love she's lost, but they're also a blade, carving deeper into her already fragile state. Theresa squeezes her hand, her own tears threatening to spill, knowing this isn't just a breakdown—it's a collapse, a woman drowning in the echoes of a song that once held them together, now tearing her apart. The doctor's footsteps approach, but Theresa stays there, holding on, praying Lucy can let go of the lyrics long enough to let help in.

The exam room hums with tension, Lucy's soft, relentless murmur—"Love you a thousand years, love you a thousand more..."—filling the space like a heartbeat as the nurse adjusts a monitor nearby. Theresa kneels beside her, her hand still clasped around Lucy's, when her phone buzzes sharply in her pocket, jolting her from the moment. She pulls it out, her breath catching as her brother's name lights up the screen. He knows—he must. They'd kept shared positioning enabled on Lucy's phone, a lingering thread of connection he hadn't severed, and now it's led him straight to the ER. The text glows: *"Why are you at the hospital, has something happened?"*

Theresa's heart sinks, a crush of emotion pressing down on her. She glances at Lucy, still lost in her trance, then steps out into the hallway, the door clicking shut behind her. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, casting harsh shadows as she leans against the wall, her thumb hovering over the screen. Should she tell him? He's already fragile, already carrying his own wounds—she can hear it in his words, feel it in the notes he left. But he deserves to know, doesn't he? She types, her fingers trembling: "*She's in crisis.*"

The response comes almost instantly, his words spilling across the screen in a rush of guilt: "*OMG, it's all my fault. I didn't want it to end like this, Theresa.*" Her chest tightens, his pain mirroring hers, a shared ache for the woman unraveling inside that room. She knew he'd feel this—knew the guilt would hit him hard, the same way it's been eating at Lucy. He'd left to save himself, to break the cycle, but not like this, not to see her collapse under the weight of it. "*I can't go to her,*" he texts next, his confession raw. "*I'm just as torn as she is.*"

Theresa presses the phone to her forehead, her eyes squeezing shut as she fights back tears. He's right—he's torn, shattered by the same storm that's broken Lucy, the codependency, the years of hurt, the love that couldn't hold them together. She imagines him out there, wherever he is, staring at that shared location pin, knowing she's in the ER and blaming himself. He hasn't turned it off—maybe he can't, maybe it's his last lifeline to her, a way to care from afar even as he keeps his distance. But he won't come. He can't. He's too raw, too fragile, and seeing her like this might drag him back into the abyss he's trying to climb out of.

She takes a shaky breath, lowering the phone, and types back: "*It's not all your fault. She's hurting, but she's getting help now. Stay where you are—I've got her.*" Her thumb hovers over the send button, then presses it, the message flying off into the ether. She doesn't know if it'll ease his guilt, but it's the truth—she's here, taking charge, holding the line for both of them. The hallway feels endless, the muffled sound of Lucy's murmurs seeping through the door, and Theresa slides the phone back into her pocket, her resolve hardening. They're both broken, her brother and Lucy, but she can't save them both at once. For now, she'll focus on Lucy, praying he finds his own way to heal, wherever he's watching from.

Lucy's husband sits alone, miles away, his phone glowing in the dim light of wherever he's taken refuge—a motel room, maybe, or a friend's spare couch. The shared location pin had pulled him to the ER, a digital thread he couldn't cut, and

now his fingers fly across the screen, driven by a desperate need to see her. He's no stranger to tech—years of tinkering, a knack for systems—and it doesn't take long to exploit a vulnerability in the hospital's CCTV network. A few bypassed firewalls, a roster check, and he's in, the grainy feed flickering to life. He finds her room, Exam 3, and zeros in on the camera, his breath hitching as her image fills the screen.

There she is—Lucy, slumped in the wheelchair, her face pale and drawn, her lips moving in that familiar, heartbreakin loop: *"Love you a thousand years, love you a thousand more..."* He reads her lips, the words syncing with the memory of every time he'd sung them to her, and his throat tightens, a sob clawing its way up. He murmurs the lyrics back, his voice breaking—"A thousand years..."—tears spilling down his cheeks, hot and unchecked. The song had always undone him, a vow he'd meant with every fiber, and now it's her lifeline, her torment, echoing back to him through the cold lens of a security camera.

He sees Theresa there, kneeling beside her, holding her hand with that steady strength he knows so well—his sister, the rock he'd sent to save Lucy when he couldn't. The doctor stands near the door, clipboard in hand, speaking to a nurse who adjusts a monitor, their movements clinical, detached. But Lucy—she's the center of it all, lost in her trance, her murmurs a quiet plea he feels in his bones. He presses a hand to his mouth, stifling a cry, the tears blurring the screen as he watches her, helpless and torn. She's hurting, unraveling, and he's the one who pushed her to this edge—"It's all my fault," he'd texted, and now, seeing her like this, the guilt is a vise around his heart.

He can't look away, can't stop reading her lips, can't stop the lyrics tumbling from his own. *"I have died every day waiting for you..."* His voice cracks, the song a mirror to their shared pain, and he wonders if she knows he's there, watching, crying with her. Theresa glances up, her face etched with worry, and for a moment, he imagines she senses him—her brother, the shadow behind the camera—but she doesn't. The doctor steps closer to Lucy, the nurse hovering, and he knows they're about to intervene, to pull her from this spiral. He wants to reach through the screen, to hold her, to take it all back, but he can't. He's too broken, too far gone, and all he can do is watch, tears streaming, as the woman he still loves murmurs their song into the void he left behind.

Lucy's husband leans closer to his phone, his tear-streaked face illuminated by the screen's harsh glow, his fingers trembling as he zooms in on the CCTV feed. He captures details—the room number, the nurse's badge, the faint logo on the doctor's coat—scraps of data he can use to anchor himself to her. His mind, sharp despite the grief, shifts gears; he navigates to the hospital's public portal, a safer entry point than the internal systems he'd hacked. He logs in, caching credentials for the future, a lifeline he's not ready to sever. The feed blips as they wheel Lucy out of Exam 3, and he follows, switching cameras with a practiced flick, tracking her transfer to another room down the hall.

He shifts his operation to his desktop, the larger screen a window into her world. His setup is meticulous—a VPN cloaking his IP, routing through a server in some distant country, masking his presence from prying eyes. He's not just watching now; he's entrenched, glued to the monitor as the new room comes into focus. Lucy's there, still in the wheelchair, her t-shirt and leggings a stark contrast to the sterile white of the hospital gown they're coaxing her into. Her face—God, her face—twisted with turmoil, eyes hollow, lips still moving faintly with those lyrics: *"Love you a thousand years..."* It guts him, the sight of her so broken, so lost, and he presses a hand to the screen, as if he could touch her, steady her.

Theresa's there too, hovering close, her hand on Lucy's shoulder as the nurse adjusts an IV line, the doctor scribbling notes. He sees the strain in his sister's posture, the way she's holding it together for Lucy when he can't. The sadness crashes over him again, a tidal wave of regret and longing. She's dressed now, no longer in the robe she'd clung to at home, but the change doesn't hide the devastation etched into her—every line, every shadow a testament to the pain he's caused, the pain they've shared. He'd left to break the cycle, to save himself, but seeing her like this, he wonders if he's only shattered her more.

His tears fall silently, dripping onto the desk as he watches, unable to look away. The monitor is his tether, his punishment, his only way to stay near her without crossing the line he's drawn. He murmurs the lyrics back—*"A thousand more..."*—his voice a broken echo, syncing with her faint whispers on the screen. The hospital staff move around her, clinical and efficient, but he's fixated on her face, on the turmoil he can't unsee. He's cloaked, hidden, a ghost in the system, but the distance doesn't dull the ache. She's in there, fighting—or fading—and he's out here, watching, powerless, drowning in the sadness of what they've become.

The hospital room is a sterile cocoon, the beep of monitors and the rustle of the nurse's movements a faint backdrop to Lucy's dazed state. They slide the IV into her arm, the needle piercing her skin, but she doesn't flinch—doesn't even clench her fist. She's too far gone, her body numb to the prick, her mind adrift in a fog thicker than the grief that's swallowed her. The nurse steps back, adjusting the drip, and Lucy blinks slowly, her gaze sharpening as fragments of awareness seep in. She turns her head, her eyes finding Theresa beside her, and her voice rasps out, fragile and confused. "Theresa, why am I here? Why am I dressed like this? Where are my underclothes, why am I not dressed?"

Theresa leans closer, her hand resting gently on Lucy's arm, just above the IV line, her expression soft but steady. "Lucy, you had an episode," she explains, her voice calm, measured, though it carries the weight of the morning's chaos. "That's why you're dressed like this, why we're here." She gestures faintly to the hospital gown now draped over Lucy's frame, the t-shirt and leggings replaced during the shuffle of care. Lucy looks down at herself, her hands brushing the thin fabric, her brow furrowing as she takes in the unfamiliar sight. "I don't like how I look," she murmurs, her tone small, almost childlike, a flicker of vanity piercing through her haze.

Before Theresa can respond, her phone buzzes again, sharp and insistent in her pocket. She pulls it out, her breath catching as a photo loads—a grainy still of the room they're in, Lucy in the wheelchair, herself beside her, captured from the CCTV camera mounted above. A text follows, his words stark on the screen: "*Wave hello, you're on camera.*" Theresa freezes, her blood running cold as the realization hits. He's watching—her brother, Lucy's husband, peering through the lens, his eyes on them even now. Her head snaps up, instinctively scanning the ceiling until she spots the camera, its unblinking eye staring down, and her heart stumbles. He's hacked in, tracked them, refused to let go completely, and the weight of his presence crashes over her.

She clutches the phone, her thumb hovering over the screen, torn between anger and sorrow. Lucy's still murmuring, her hands fidgeting with the gown, oblivious to the shift, but Theresa feels it—the ghost of him in the room, watching, grieving, clinging. She doesn't wave, doesn't acknowledge the camera, but her eyes narrow, a silent question burning: *Why are you doing this?* He's torn, he'd said, too broken to come to her, yet here he is, a shadow on the feed, unable to fully release her. Theresa's chest tightens, her resolve wavering as she glances back at Lucy,

then at the phone, knowing he's seeing this too—Lucy's confusion, her fragility, and the sister caught between them, trying to hold the pieces together.

The doctor steps into the room, his clipboard tucked under his arm, his expression grave but composed as he reviews the notes from the nurse. He glances at Lucy, still slumped in the wheelchair, her murmurs now silent, her eyes flickering with a fragile awareness. "Given her condition—unresponsive episodes, emotional instability, potential self-harm risk—I'm recommending inpatient care," he says, his voice clinical yet firm. "She needs medication and monitoring to stabilize her." The words hang in the air, a heavy decree, and Theresa nods faintly, her hand still resting on Lucy's arm, though her mind reels with the weight of it.

Lucy's head tilts, her gaze sharpening as the doctor's words sink in. "Huh, am I detained against my will?" she asks, her voice cutting through the room with a clarity that startles Theresa. It's the most intelligent response she's heard from Lucy all day—a spark of lucidity amid the fog—and Theresa's floored, her breath catching as she meets Lucy's eyes, seeing a flicker of the woman she used to know.

Theresa recovers quickly, leaning closer, her tone soothing but urgent. "It's only temporary," she assures her. "To get you well." She squeezes Lucy's hand, willing her to trust, to hold onto that clarity, but Lucy's focus shifts downward, her hands tugging at the hospital gown again. "I'm naked," she says, her voice rising slightly, a mix of confusion and indignation. "Get me clothes." Theresa nods, her heart aching at the small, human demand. "I promise I'll get you something when I go by the house," she says, already picturing the t-shirt and leggings left behind.

The nurse steps forward, her tone gentle but firm, holding up a thick, teal garment—a suicide smock, designed for safety, not comfort. "Honey, you need to get into this instead," she says, unfolding it for Lucy to see. Lucy's eyes widen, her head snapping up. "What? Is that necessary?" she snaps, her voice sharpening, a confrontational edge creeping in where numbness had reigned. Her demeanor shifts, her body tensing in the chair, her hands balling into fists as she glares at the smock, then at the nurse, then at Theresa.

Theresa feels the change like a storm brewing, her stomach knotting as Lucy's lucidity twists into defiance. "Lucy, please," she says, her voice low, pleading, her hand tightening on Lucy's arm. "Don't escalate." She glances at the nurse, then the doctor, silently begging them to tread carefully, knowing how fragile this moment

is. Lucy's not just broken—she's fighting now, clawing back some control, and Theresa's torn between relief at her spark and fear of where it might lead. The camera above hums faintly, and she wonders if he's still watching, seeing this shift, feeling the same mix of hope and dread as Lucy teeters on the edge of herself.

Lucy's husband sits hunched over his desktop, the glow of the monitor casting shadows across his tear-streaked face as he watches the hospital feed. The camera in the new room captures every detail—Lucy, still in the wheelchair, reluctantly slipping into the suicide smock as the nurse guides her arms through the stiff, teal fabric. Her movements are slow, resistant, and then she rolls her eyes, a flash of that old, stubborn streak cutting through her haze. He catches it, a faint chuckle escaping his lips despite the ache in his chest. "Oh, boy, that stubborn streak," he murmurs to himself, a bittersweet flicker of recognition warming him for a moment. It's her—his Lucy, the one who'd argue over the smallest things, the one who'd never back down without a fight.

But the warmth fades fast as he sees the tension building. Theresa's there, her hand on Lucy's shoulder, her voice low and pleading, trying to keep her calm as Lucy's confrontational edge sharpens. He knows this pattern—knows how Lucy's defiance can spiral, how it's a spark that could ignite into something worse. The nurse hovers, the doctor's posture stiffens, and he can sense it: if she doesn't settle, if she pushes too far, they'll restrain her, sedate her. He's seen enough hospital dramas, heard enough stories, to know what comes next—straps on the bed, a needle in her arm, her eyes glazing over as they force her into stillness. It'd be more trauma piled on a woman already breaking, and his stomach twists at the thought. He didn't want this—not for her, not after everything.

His hands hover over the keyboard, helpless, his mind racing. What can he do? He's cloaked behind a VPN, a ghost in the system, watching from a distance he can't bridge. He can't call out to her, can't step into that room and soothe her the way he once could—his voice, his touch, the only things that ever tamed her fire when it flared like this. He sees Theresa trying, her patience stretched thin, and he knows she's fighting to keep Lucy from that edge, but it's not enough. Lucy's rolling her eyes again, her jaw tight, her words muffled but sharp through the feed: "*Is that necessary?*" The nurse's response is firm, and he can feel the storm brewing, the moment tipping toward restraint.

He leans closer, his breath fogging the screen, whispering to himself, "Come on, Lucy, just breathe." It's futile—she can't hear him—but it's all he has. He could text Theresa again, tell her to play that song, "*A Thousand Years*," to ground her, but would it help or hurt more? He hesitates, his fingers twitching, torn between action and silence. He didn't want her sedated, didn't want her strapped down, but he's powerless, a spectator to her unraveling, praying her stubborn streak bends before it breaks her further. The tension on the screen thickens, and he holds his breath, watching, willing her to calm, knowing he's the reason she's there—and the one thing he can't give her now.

Lucy's husband's fingers fly across the keyboard, his heart pounding as he makes a split-second decision. He can't let her spiral into restraints, can't watch her sedated and lost—he has to reach her, somehow. He uploads a file from his desktop, an old recording he'd kept: his voice singing "*A Thousand Years*," soft and raw, backed by the gentle chords of a piano he'd played years ago for her. With a few deft commands, he pipes it into the hospital's PA system, bypassing security with the same skill that got him into the CCTV. The song spills out, echoing through the halls, its melody weaving through the sterile air of the ER.

In the room, Lucy freezes mid-protest, the suicide smock half-on, her head snapping up as the first notes hit. "*A thousand years...*"—his voice, unmistakable, fills the space, tender and haunting, the piano a familiar embrace. She stands abruptly, swaying slightly, a smile breaking across her face, fragile but real. "Oh, he's here," she breathes, her voice trembling with a mix of wonder and relief, her eyes darting around as if he might step out from the shadows. The nurse pauses, startled, and the doctor glances at the ceiling, confusion creasing his brow, but Lucy's lost in it, the song pulling her back from the edge.

Theresa's jaw drops, her eyes widening as she recognizes her brother's voice echoing through the speakers. She can't believe it—he's hacked the PA system, risked everything to play this for Lucy. Her heart lurches; he could get caught, could face real trouble, but she knows him too well—he's too smart, too careful, his tracks cloaked behind layers of digital smoke. Still, she shoots a glance at the camera, half-expecting him to wave, her mind racing between awe and worry. But then she looks at Lucy, sees the shift—the way her shoulders relax, the way her defiance melts into something softer—and she knows it's working.

Lucy lifts her head higher, her voice joining his, shaky at first but growing stronger. “*My heart belongs to you, now and always...*” She sings along, the lyrics spilling out as if they’re her lifeline, her hands clutching the smock like it’s his shirt. The nurse steps back, uncertain, and the doctor scribbles something, but Theresa just watches, her throat tightening. Lucy’s smiling now, tears glistening in her eyes, the song a bridge between her and him, wherever he is. It’s reckless, it’s mad, but it’s him—reaching her when no one else could, calming her storm with the one thing she’d clung to all day.

Theresa’s phone stays silent in her pocket—no buzz, no text—but she knows he’s there, watching, hearing Lucy sing back to him. The tension in the room eases, the threat of restraints fading as Lucy sways to the music, her voice mingling with his over the PA. Theresa’s torn between scolding him later and thanking him now, but for this moment, she lets it be—lets the song weave its magic, knowing it’s the only thing holding Lucy together, and maybe him too.

The hospital staff guide Lucy to a small, quiet room down the hall, the song—his voice singing “*A Thousand Years*”—fading from the PA system as the last notes linger in the air. She’s calmer now, the edge of her defiance softened by the melody, her smile faint but holding as they settle her into a bed. The suicide smock hangs awkwardly on her frame, but she doesn’t fight it anymore, her hands resting in her lap as the nurse adjusts a monitor beside her. The doctor orders a low dose of a sedative—something to keep her steady, to dull the storm without zoning her out completely—and the IV drips it into her arm, her eyes fluttering briefly before settling into a hazy awareness. She’ll stay here for 24 hours, monitored, watched, a fragile figure under the hospital’s care.

Theresa follows, her steps heavy but resolute, and takes up a post just outside the room, leaning against the wall where she can see Lucy through the small window. The adrenaline of the day ebbs, leaving her drained, her phone warm in her hand from clutching it too long. She watches Lucy for a moment—her breathing even now, her face slack but peaceful—then pulls out her phone and dials her brother. It rings once, twice, before he picks up, his voice rough with exhaustion but sharp with intent.

“Bro, that was impulsive and reckless, what you did,” Theresa says, her tone a mix of reproach and relief, her eyes flicking to the ceiling where she knows a camera

hides. She can still hear the echo of his song, still feel the jolt of hearing it blast through the hospital.

"I had to do something," he replies, his voice low, strained but unapologetic. "I saw it was gonna spiral out of control real quick, and that would've been bad for her—restraints, heavy sedatives, more trauma. I couldn't let that happen." There's a pause, a rustle on his end—maybe him shifting at his desk, the glow of his monitor painting his tear-streaked face.

Theresa sighs, rubbing her temple. "What now?" she asks, her voice softer, the question hanging between them like a thread they're both afraid to pull.

"I'll continue to monitor," he says, his tone steady, a hint of that old determination creeping in. "I have eyes everywhere—including the door locks." His words carry a quiet confidence, the tech-savvy edge he's always had, and Theresa can picture him—cloaked behind his VPN, patched into the hospital's systems, watching over Lucy like a ghost with too much power and too little reach.

She glances back at Lucy through the window, the sedative keeping her still, her lips no longer moving with lyrics but her chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm. "You can't keep doing this," Theresa warns, though her heart isn't fully in it. "Hacking in, playing songs—it's risky, and it's not fixing anything."

"I know," he admits, his voice cracking slightly. "But I can't stop caring, T. Not yet. I just need to know she's okay." There's a beat of silence, then he adds, "Keep me posted, yeah? From your end."

Theresa nods, though he can't see it, her throat tight. "Yeah," she says finally. "I will." She hangs up, slipping the phone back into her pocket, and leans her head against the wall, her eyes on Lucy. He's out there, watching, a shadow tethered to her by guilt and love, and she's here, holding the line in person. The 24 hours stretch ahead, a fragile limbo, and Theresa settles in, knowing they're both clinging to Lucy in their own ways—one through a screen, one through the glass.

The small hospital room grows quieter as the sedative weaves its gentle threads through Lucy's system, pairing with the bone-deep exhaustion that's been dragging at her all day. Her body, once tense with defiance and turmoil, softens under the weight of it all. She curls up on the bed, the suicide smock crinkling faintly as she tucks her knees to her chest, her head nestling into the thin pillow. Her breathing slows, a steady rise and fall, and her face—still pale, still marked by

the day's tears—relaxes into something resembling peace. The murmurs stop, the lyrics fade, and sleep claims her, a temporary refuge from the storm that's ravaged her mind.

Theresa watches through the window, her arms crossed, her own fatigue etching lines into her face. She sees Lucy settle, sees the way her hands unclench and her brow smooths, and a small, relieved breath escapes her. She's resting comfortably—at least for now—and that's enough to ease the knot in Theresa's chest, if only slightly. She leans against the wall, her eyes lingering on her sister-in-law, grateful for this moment of calm after the chaos, knowing it's a fragile reprieve but a necessary one.

Miles away, Lucy's husband sits at his desk, the glow of his desktop bathing him in cold light. The CCTV feed from the observation room fills his screen, and he watches her too, his breath catching as she curls up and drifts off. A faint smile tugs at his lips, bittersweet and tender, his tears drying on his cheeks. She's sleeping peacefully, her face untroubled for the first time in hours, and it soothes him, a quiet balm on his own raw edges. At least for a moment, she can rest, recover slightly, and that's all he can ask for now—contentment flickering through his guilt and grief as he sees her safe, still, cared for.

He leans back in his chair, his hand resting near the keyboard, the feed his only tether to her. Theresa's silhouette is visible through the window on the screen, a steady sentinel, and he knows she's there, holding the line he can't. They're both watching, both waiting, and for this brief stretch of time, Lucy's sleep binds them in a shared, silent hope—that she'll wake stronger, that this pause might be the start of something better. The hospital hums around her, but for now, she's at peace, and they both cling to that, each in their own way, across the miles and the glass.

Theresa's eyelids droop as she stands vigil outside Lucy's room, the weight of the day pressing down on her like a physical force. The hospital's fluorescent hum and the steady beep of monitors fade into a dull drone, and she knows she can't keep going without a break. She pulls out her phone, her fingers sluggish as she texts her brother: *“She's sleeping now. I'm taking a nap. You should too.”* She hits send, then sinks into a chair in the hallway, just close enough to peek through the window at Lucy's resting form. Her head tips back against the wall, and within moments, exhaustion pulls her under, her breathing evening out as she drifts into a shallow sleep.

Miles away, her brother reads the text, his eyes heavy as he watches Lucy on the CCTV feed, curled up and peaceful in the hospital bed. Theresa's right—he needs rest, needs to step back from the screen that's been his lifeline and his torment. He shuts off the monitor, the room plunging into a dim quiet, and retreats to a small couch nearby, the worn cushions creaking under his weight. He reaches for a pillow to prop under his head, but as he lifts it, something slips out—his wife's underwear, a pair of satin panties he'd always loved, and a matching nightgown, soft and shimmering in the low light.

His breath catches, his fingers brushing the fabric as he picks them up, the familiar texture a jolt to his senses. They're his favorites—cherished pieces he'd taken with him, tucked away like relics of a life he can't fully let go. The satin is cool against his skin, carrying the faint scent of her—jasmine, maybe, or just the memory of her—and his chest tightens, a fresh ache blooming beneath the exhaustion. These are his forever keepsakes, tangible fragments of her he couldn't leave behind, even as he'd stripped the house of photos and walked away. He clutches them close, curling onto the couch, the underwear and nightgown pressed against his heart as he closes his eyes.

Sleep comes slowly, fitful and thin, but it comes. The hospital holds Lucy in its quiet embrace, Theresa naps in the hallway, and he rests with her satin in his hands, each of them tethered to her in their own way—through glass, through screens, through the soft relics of a love that's broken but not erased. For now, they rest, a fragile truce with the pain, waiting for what the next hours will bring.

Morning breaks over the hospital, a pale light filtering through the blinds as the night slips away, leaving a quiet calm in its wake. Lucy sleeps on in the small room, the IV dripping steadily, her face still softened by the sedative's gentle hold.

Theresa stirs in the hallway chair, her neck stiff from the awkward angle, her body aching as she blinks awake. Across the miles, her brother rouses on his couch, the satin underwear and nightgown still clutched close, his sleep restless but deep enough to carry him through the dark hours.

The doctor approaches Theresa, his white coat crisp despite the early hour, a clipboard in hand as he reviews Lucy's chart. He stops beside her chair, his voice low but clear, pulling her fully awake. "She's stable for now," he says, glancing through the window at Lucy's sleeping form. "But she was severely dehydrated and fatigued when she came in—low electrolytes, too. The IV's helping, and she should stabilize physically with rest and fluids." Theresa nods, rubbing her eyes,

relief mingling with the fatigue still clinging to her.

"I'm prescribing a low dose of SSRIs," he continues, flipping a page on the chart.

"Temporary, to level her out emotionally—combined with aggressive therapy.

She's in a fragile state, and we need to address the mental health crisis head-on."

He pauses, meeting Theresa's gaze with a stern look. "It's critical that this is strictly adhered to—medication schedule, therapy sessions. No deviations. She's at risk without it." His caution hangs heavy, a reminder of the stakes, and Theresa feels the weight settle on her shoulders, a responsibility she can't shirk.

"Got it," she says, her voice hoarse but firm, already mentally mapping out the next steps—calls to make, appointments to set. "I'll make sure it happens." The doctor nods, satisfied, and steps away to update the nurse, leaving Theresa to process the plan. She pulls out her phone, her thumb hovering over her brother's number, knowing he'll want to hear this—Lucy's stable, medicated, on a path, however tenuous. She glances back at Lucy, still curled in the bed, and feels a flicker of hope; the night's rest has bought them time, and the doctor's orders offer a lifeline.

Somewhere else, her brother wakes fully, the morning light creeping into his space. He sits up, the satin still in his hands, and powers on his desktop, the CCTV feed flickering back to life. He sees Lucy sleeping, sees the IV, the quiet room, and waits—knowing Theresa will call soon, knowing he'll keep watching, clinging to the fragile peace of this new day. The SSRIs, the therapy—it's a start, and though he's miles away, he's tethered to her recovery, ready to monitor every step, just as he's done all night.

The hospital hums with a subdued morning rhythm, the staff moving quietly as the light strengthens outside. Theresa slumps in her chair, her body heavy with exhaustion, her nap barely scratching the surface of the fatigue that's settled into her bones. Her brother, miles away, rubs his eyes at his desk, the satin nightgown and underwear now folded beside him, his night of fitful rest leaving him raw but alert, his gaze fixed on the CCTV feed. Everyone is drained—everyone except Lucy, who sleeps on in the small room, her chest rising and falling steadily under the thin blanket, the IV still dripping fluids into her arm. She's the eye of the storm, the only one granted the mercy of oblivion after the chaos of yesterday.

The doctor returns, his steps measured as he checks Lucy's chart at the foot of her bed, then peers through the window to assess her. He nods to himself, satisfied, and steps out to update Theresa, his voice low to avoid waking her.

"She's still sleeping, and that's good," he says, glancing back at Lucy's peaceful form. "Yesterday was brutal—mentally, emotionally, physically. She was severely dehydrated when she came in, and her electrolytes were a mess. The IV's replenishing her, but rest is the priority now. We'll let her wake when she's ready—no rush. Once she's up, we'll discharge her under your care."

Theresa straightens slightly, her tired eyes meeting his. "She'll be okay to go then?" she asks, her voice rough from disuse. The doctor nods. "Physically, yes, with the fluids and rest. The SSRIs will start today, and I'll give you the prescription and therapy referral. She's fragile, though—keep a close eye on her." He pauses, his expression softening. "I know there's family dynamics at play, conflicting interests. But right now, you're the only one here, the only one who cares enough to take her on. She's got no one else yet."

The words settle heavily on Theresa, a mix of duty and sorrow. She knows he's right—Lucy's husband is out there, watching, torn but distant; the kids are grown, scattered, not stepping in. It's just her, the sister-in-law thrust into the role of caretaker, the only one willing to wade through the mess of Lucy's collapse. She nods, accepting it, her exhaustion tempered by resolve. "I'll handle it," she says, her voice steadier now, already bracing for the day ahead.

Back at his desk, her brother watches the feed, sees Lucy sleeping, sees the doctor's quiet exchange with Theresa through the window. He can't hear the words, but he reads the scene—the rest, the care, the plan forming. He's exhausted, his body screaming for more sleep, but he won't turn away, not yet. Lucy's still there, still his, in some fractured way, and he clings to the sight of her resting, knowing she'll wake soon, knowing Theresa will take her home. The doctor's caution about family dynamics echoes in his own mind, unvoiced—he's part of the conflict, part of the pain, but for now, he's just a shadow, watching, waiting, hoping her sleep heals what he couldn't.

Hours slip by in the hospital's quiet limbo, the morning stretching into a soft, muted calm. Lucy stirs at last, her body shifting beneath the blanket as consciousness creeps back. Her eyes flutter open, bleary and unfocused, and she fumbles with the call button beside her bed, her voice a faint rasp as she presses it. "Theresa, please..." The sound carries through the room, weak but deliberate, a lifeline tossed out from her haze. The nurse, passing by, catches the murmur and taps on the window, signaling Theresa with a quick, gentle rap. Theresa jolts awake in her

chair, her fatigue momentarily forgotten as she picks up the cue and steps inside, the door clicking shut behind her.

Lucy turns her head, her gaze locking onto Theresa, and with a slow, shaky effort, she pushes herself up. She reaches out, her arms trembling but certain, and pulls Theresa into an embrace, her cheek pressing against Theresa's shoulder. "Thank you," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion, "for taking such good care of me and taking me where I needed to be." The words are raw, heartfelt, a crack of gratitude breaking through her exhaustion, and Theresa feels the warmth of it, the weight of Lucy's trust settling into her.

Theresa wraps her arms around Lucy, holding her steady, and leans in close, her lips near Lucy's ear. "You'll be okay," she whispers back, her voice soft but firm, a promise laced with truth. "But hard times are yet to come. Please stay with me while you heal and recover—you can't be alone, per doctor's orders." She pulls back slightly, meeting Lucy's eyes, her own glistening with unshed tears but resolute. Lucy nods, a small, weary motion, and sinks back into the bed, still clinging to Theresa's hand. She's grateful—deeply, achingly so—for Theresa's devotion, a kindness she knows isn't owed. Theresa didn't have to do this, didn't have to shoulder her collapse, but she's the giving kind, the kind who'd see Lucy through to full recovery, even past the divorce she knows looms on the horizon.

Theresa sits beside her, keeping her hand in Lucy's as she explains what's next, her tone gentle but clear. "The doctor's got you on a low dose of SSRIs—starts today—to help with the emotional swings. And there's therapy, aggressive sessions, starting soon. You'll need to stick to it, Lucy—meds on time, appointments kept. It's the only way through this." She squeezes Lucy's hand, reinforcing the point. "I'll be with you for it all—taking you, checking in. You're not doing this alone."

Lucy listens, her eyes tracing Theresa's face, the words sinking in through the fog of her waking mind. Therapy, meds, a road ahead—it's daunting, but Theresa's presence makes it bearable, a lifeline she can cling to. She nods again, stronger this time, a flicker of resolve sparking beneath her gratitude. "Okay," she murmurs, her voice steadier now. "I'll try." Theresa smiles faintly, a tired but genuine curve of her lips, and stays there, holding Lucy's hand as the nurse steps in to check the IV, the morning light framing them both in a quiet, fragile hope. Somewhere, unseen,

her brother watches too, and the path forward begins to take shape, one step at a time.

The hospital room buzzes faintly with the final steps of discharge, the nurse handing Theresa a stack of papers to sign—release forms, medication instructions, a referral for therapy. Theresa scrawls her name across each line, her hand steady despite the exhaustion tugging at her, while Lucy sits on the edge of the bed, the IV now removed, her arm bandaged. The nurse steps out, leaving a small bag with Lucy's t-shirt, leggings, and underwear, and Theresa helps her dress, guiding her arms into the sleeves, her touch gentle but efficient. Lucy's movements are slow, still heavy with fatigue, but a faint smile tugs at her lips as she sheds the suicide smock for her own clothes. "Happy to get out of here," she murmurs, her voice soft but brighter, a flicker of relief breaking through the haze.

Theresa nods, folding the smock aside, her mind already shifting to the next steps. She knows her brother's watching—tracking their every move through the car's GPS, her home security, Lucy's phone, wherever they go. He's obsessed, tethered to Lucy even now, unable to let go fully. She can picture him at his desk, the CCTV feed swapped for location pins, his eyes glued to the screen as they leave the hospital. He misses her dearly—it's eating at him, the toll of his own codependency gnawing at his resolve. The satin underwear and nightgown under his pillow, the hacked PA system, the constant monitoring—it's all proof of how deeply he's still tangled in her, even as he fights to break free.

In the car, Theresa helps Lucy into the passenger seat, buckling her in before sliding behind the wheel. The engine hums to life, and she pulls out of the lot, the hospital shrinking in the rearview mirror. She knows he's following—digitally, silently—a shadow clinging to their path. He'd had to break the cycle, had to be the one to walk away, because staying meant sinking deeper into the dependency that helped no one. It was killing him—her coldness, her smoking, her withdrawal dragging him toward that garage, toward suicide—and it was killing her too, her mental collapse a mirror to his own unraveling. Someone had to snap the thread, and he'd done it, ripping himself away despite the pieces it left behind.

Lucy leans her head against the window, watching the world blur past, her hands resting in her lap. "He's still out there, isn't he?" she asks quietly, her voice barely above the hum of the tires. Theresa glances at her, her grip tightening on the wheel. "Yeah," she admits, soft but honest. "He's watching, making sure you're

okay. But he can't come back—not now. It'd start it all over again." Lucy nods, a small, sad understanding settling into her, and they drive on in silence, the weight of his absence—and his invisible presence—filling the space between them.

He sits at his desk, the desktop screen split between the car's GPS dot and a live feed from Theresa's home cameras, waiting for them to arrive. His issues—his codependency, his need to protect her—claw at him, but he knows breaking away was the only way to stop the spiral. He misses her, aches for her, but he holds firm, tracking her recovery from afar, a silent guardian who's let go in every way but one. Theresa's right to take her in, and he's right to stay out—for now, it's the only path forward, however jagged it feels.

The car rolls to a stop in Theresa's driveway, the engine ticking as it cools. Theresa helps Lucy out, steadyng her as they step into the house, the air inside warm and faintly scented with lavender—a stark contrast to the hospital's antiseptic chill. Lucy's steps are tentative, her body still weak but bolstered by Theresa's arm around her waist. They move through the living room, past a couch piled with blankets and a coffee table cluttered with books, until Theresa guides her down a short hallway to a small guest room. The bed is neatly made, a quilt folded at the foot, and a window lets in soft afternoon light. "This is where you'll stay for a while," Theresa says, setting Lucy's bag on a chair. "It's yours as long as you need it."

She turns to Lucy, her expression shifting from gentle to stern, her voice firm but not unkind. "You know divorce is coming," she says, locking eyes with her. "You have to prepare for it—mentally, emotionally, all of it. You're not alone while you're here; I've got you. But I'm staying out of it—I won't intervene between you and him unless he agrees to therapy with you." The words are a boundary, a line drawn with care, and Theresa holds Lucy's gaze, making sure they sink in. She knows her brother's watching, knows he's tangled in his own mess, and she won't play mediator unless they both commit to facing it together.

Lucy sinks onto the bed, the mattress dipping under her slight weight, and nods slowly, her hands twisting in her lap. She knows the divorce is inevitable—the notes, his absence, the money he left—it's all leading there, a final cut to the thread they've frayed. But Theresa's words about therapy stir something uneasy in her. She's tried it before, years ago, when he'd pushed her to go—sessions she'd sat through with a tight smile, nodding at the right times, faking it. She'd gone

because he wanted her to, not because she'd truly wanted it, not because she'd believed it could fix the coldness growing between them. The memory stings now, a reminder of her half-hearted efforts, and she wonders if this time will be different—if she can want it for herself, not just for him.

"I know," she murmurs, her voice small but steady, meeting Theresa's eyes. "I'll try... really try this time." There's a flicker of resolve there, fragile but real, and Theresa softens, nodding back. "Good," she says simply, stepping toward the door. "Rest now. We'll figure out the therapy tomorrow—meds too. You're safe here." She lingers a moment, then leaves, closing the door gently behind her.

Out there, her brother watches through Theresa's home cameras, the feed flickering as Lucy settles in. He hears the exchange through a hacked audio line—Theresa's stern warning, Lucy's quiet admission—and his chest tightens. Divorce is coming, and he knows it's his doing, his break from the cycle, but hearing Lucy say she'll try therapy twists the knife. She'd faked it before, for him, and he'd let it slide, too caught in their codependency to push harder. Now, he wonders if she'll follow through, if he should join her—if therapy together could salvage something, or just reopen wounds. He leans back, the satin nightgown still beside him, and keeps watching, obsessed, torn, knowing he's the ghost in her recovery, waiting to see what she'll choose.

Theresa's voice carries through the house, firm but laced with care, as she shouts down the hall, "There's towels and toiletries for you in the guest bath if you wanna shower. Please do." She knows the patterns of mental illness too well—how personal hygiene often slips first, a quiet casualty of despair. It's not a judgment, just a nudge, a small push toward normalcy to help Lucy find her footing. A shower, a routine—it's a simple thing, but it could anchor her, give her a taste of control amid the chaos.

Lucy shuffles toward the guest bathroom, her steps slow but purposeful, the promise of hot water pulling her forward. She pushes the door open and pauses, her eyes landing on the counter—a fresh pack of underwear, her exact size, sitting neatly beside a stack of towels and a basket of toiletries. She blinks, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. *"Like, how? Did siblings share way too much?"* she mutters to herself, half-amused, half-baffled. Theresa must've told him, or he'd guessed—either way, it's a detail that feels oddly intimate, a reminder of how tangled their lives still are, even now.

She turns the taps, cranking the water to hot, and steam begins to curl into the air, fogging the mirror. Stepping in, she lets the heat envelop her, the scalding spray hitting her skin like a balm. She lingers, the water pounding against her shoulders, and grabs the soap, scrubbing herself raw—every inch, every crevice, determined to wash away the hospital's antiseptic stench, the sweat of her breakdown, the weight of yesterday. She wants to smell like a woman again, not a patient—something floral, something alive. The shampoo foams in her hands, and she works it through her hair, rinsing away the grime until the drain swirls clean.

When she steps out, the air is thick with steam, and she wraps herself in a towel, her skin pink and tingling from the heat. She feels refreshed, lighter, the hospital's residue sloughed off, replaced by the faint scent of lavender from the soap. She slips into the new underwear—soft, fitting just right—and pulls on the t-shirt and leggings, the fabric cool against her scrubbed skin. A nap calls to her now, an insistent pull, her body relaxed in a way it hasn't been in days. She pads back to the guest room, the bed beckoning, and sinks into it, the quilt soft under her as she curls up, her damp hair fanning across the pillow. Sleep tugs at her, gentle and welcome, a quiet reprieve she doesn't fight.

Outside, Theresa hears the water shut off and nods to herself, satisfied—Lucy's on track, if only for this moment. And across the miles, her brother watches the bathroom camera's feed go dark as Lucy leaves, then switches to the guest room, seeing her settle in, clean and calm. He smiles faintly, a flicker of relief cutting through his obsession, knowing she's finding some peace, even if he's still tethered to her every move.

Theresa stands in her kitchen, the afternoon light slanting through the window as she pours herself a glass of water, her nerves still frayed but steadier now that Lucy's settled. She glances toward the guest room, the door ajar, Lucy's soft breathing a faint reassurance, then pulls out her phone and dials her brother. It rings once before he picks up, his voice crackling through, rough with fatigue but alert. "Bro, you're a creeper," she says, her tone half-teasing, half-exasperated, cutting straight to it. "I can't even walk around here without a bra 'cause you're watching. Lucy's gonna be fine—she's sleeping now. But you, you've got issues. You need therapy too."

There's a pause on his end, a rustle—maybe him shifting at his desk, the glow of his monitor still painting his face. "Sis, all I can say is thank you," he replies, his

voice low, tinged with gratitude and something heavier. "Please understand. Be mindful of 'our' feelings and their underpinnings. It's complicated, and you know it." His words carry the weight of their shared history, the tangled mess of love and codependency he's still unraveling, and Theresa hears it—the plea beneath his defense, the ache he can't shake.

She sighs, leaning against the counter, her free hand rubbing her temple. "I wish things could've worked out between you two," she says, softer now, a trace of regret seeping in. "It didn't have to come to this—hospitals, hacking, all of it. She knows, though—no smoking in my house, and I told her not to bring that stench back in if she steps outside." She'd laid down that rule earlier, stern but practical, knowing Lucy's addiction was part of the wreckage they're all navigating.

He chuckles faintly, a dry sound that doesn't reach his eyes—she can picture it, even miles away. "Good luck with that one," he says, knowing Lucy's stubborn streak too well. "I'm trying, T. I'm watching 'cause I can't not care, but I know I've got my own mess to sort out. Therapy... maybe. I'll think about it." His voice trails off, the weight of his obsession—cameras, satin keepsakes, the need to monitor—hanging unspoken between them. He misses her, needs her, but he's the one who broke the cycle, and now he's stuck in this limbo, watching from afar.

Theresa nods to herself, sipping her water. "Think hard, Bro," she says, firm again. "She's safe here, and I've got her. But you—don't let this eat you alive." She hangs up, setting the phone down, and glances toward the guest room again. Lucy's asleep, clean and calm, a small victory. Theresa knows he's still watching, knows he's wrestling with his own demons, but for now, she's the one in the trenches, keeping Lucy on track—no smoking, no spiraling—while he figures out how to face his own. The house settles into quiet, and she braces for the days ahead, caught between them both.

The morning sun climbs higher as Theresa and Lucy step out of the house, the air crisp and carrying a bite of early spring. Theresa's resolved—no more delays, no more excuses—and she drives them straight to a primary care physician's office, the appointment booked to tackle Lucy's smoking head-on. She's not tolerating it under her roof, not after the notes, the hospital, the way it's woven into the wreckage of Lucy's marriage. Theresa knows Lucy can't go back to her own house yet—not in its current state, cluttered and chaotic, a mirror to her mental mess. While they're out, she's arranged a crew—friends from church, a cleaning

service—to descend on Lucy's place, scrubbing it clean, decluttering the hoarded piles, returning it to a pristine state Lucy can eventually face.

In the exam room, the nurse practitioner—a brisk woman with a no-nonsense air—checks Lucy over, her stethoscope cold against Lucy's chest as she listens to her lungs, her brow furrowing slightly at the telltale rasp. "You've got to quit," she says flatly, jotting notes. "Cold turkey's tough, so I'm prescribing Chantix—helps with the cravings, cuts the nicotine pull. Start it today, follow it exactly." She hands Theresa the script, knowing she's the enforcer here, and Theresa takes it with a nod, her jaw set.

They step out of the office, the prescription bag crinkling in Theresa's hand, and she turns to Lucy with a stern look, her eyes unyielding. "No fucking around here," she says, her voice sharp, cutting through any room for debate. "We'll be starting this immediately." Lucy meets her gaze, then looks away, her hands fidgeting as the weight of it sinks in. "My habit, my addiction pushed him away," she says quietly, almost to herself, her voice tinged with regret. "We no longer smooched. He missed that." The memory stabs at her—his note from the heels, "*We no longer smooched, no long embraced...*"—and she sees it now, how the smoke had built a wall, how it stole the small intimacies he'd craved.

Theresa softens slightly, but her resolve holds. "Yeah, it did," she says, not sugarcoating it. "And it's not just him—it's you too. This is your shot to take it back, Lucy. No more letting it run your life." She opens the car door, ushering Lucy in, and they drive back in silence, the Chantix a promise—and a challenge—between them. Somewhere, her brother watches, the car's GPS dot moving on his screen, and he knows what's happening. He misses her, misses the closeness the smoking stole, but he's the one who walked away, and now Lucy's facing it, with Theresa's fierce nudge, one cigarette-free day at a time. The crew at Lucy's house keeps working, and the path forward sharpens, jagged but clear.

The car hums along the road, the tires a steady thrum beneath them as Lucy sits in the passenger seat, the prescription bag crinkling in her lap. Her gaze drifts out the window, unfocused, and a murmur escapes her lips, soft and mournful: "*Love was just for fun, now those days are gone. All by myself...*" The words spill out, a fragment of some old song or a lament of her own making, her voice trembling with the weight of loss and solitude. Theresa glances over, her brow furrowing, concern flashing across her face. "Lucy, keep it together," she says, her tone firm

but not harsh, and she reaches out, placing a hand on Lucy's thigh, a grounding touch to pull her back from the edge.

"Tomorrow's your first therapy appointment," Theresa adds, her voice steady, shifting the focus forward. She squeezes Lucy's leg lightly, a reminder that she's not alone in this, even if it feels that way. Lucy turns her head, her eyes meeting Theresa's for a moment, wide and uncertain. "This is happening so fast," she says, her voice cracking slightly. "I'm giving up a lot."

Theresa's patience snaps, her hand lifting from Lucy's thigh to grip the wheel tighter, her tone sharpening like a blade. "Are you really?" she fires back, her words cutting through the car's quiet. "You're gonna give up baggage which should've been given up a long time ago. You and I wouldn't be having this conversation now, would we? Huh, you tell me?" Her voice rises, frustration spilling out—not at Lucy, not entirely, but at the years of inertia, the habits and hurts that piled up until they broke everything. She glances at Lucy again, her eyes fierce, daring her to argue, to cling to the weight she's finally shedding.

Lucy flinches, the sting of Theresa's words sinking in, and she looks down at her hands, the Chantix bag a small, tangible symbol of the shift. "No," she admits, her voice small, almost lost in the hum of the engine. "We wouldn't." She knows it—knows the smoking, the withdrawal, the mess of her life pushed him away, pushed her here. It's not just about cigarettes; it's the baggage Theresa's naming, the stuff she's carried too long, the stuff therapy's meant to unpack. She leans her head back against the seat, the murmured song fading, replaced by a quiet resolve—or at least the start of one.

Theresa softens her grip on the wheel, her outburst spent, and the car settles back into a tense silence. She knows she's hard on Lucy, knows it's fast, but it has to be—Lucy's got no time to wallow if she's going to climb out of this. Tomorrow's therapy, today's Chantix, a cleaned-out house—it's a lot, but it's not loss, it's release, and Theresa's determined to see her through it, even if she has to drag her kicking and murmuring the whole way. Somewhere, her brother watches, the GPS dot steady on his screen, and he hears the echoes of their fight in his own guilt, knowing he's part of that baggage too.

The morning sun hangs low as Lucy's husband drives to the attorney's office, his hands tight on the wheel, the weight of his decision pressing down like a stone in his chest. He's exhausted—sleepless nights hunched over his desktop, watching

Lucy through cameras, clutching her satin keepsakes—but resolute. This is the next step, the one he's been building toward since he left the notes, the money, the pieces of their life behind. He pulls into the lot, grabs a folder from the passenger seat, and steps inside, the air cool and smelling faintly of paper and coffee.

The lawyer, a brisk woman in a sharp blazer, greets him with a nod and ushers him into a small office, the desk cluttered with files but orderly. He sits, sliding the folder across to her, his voice steady but low as he says, "Here's how I want it to go." She opens it, revealing a detailed outline—pages he'd typed up late at night, precise and methodical. Non-contested, simple: Lucy keeps the house, the car, all the property, no kids to complicate it with custody battles. "Please follow my instructions," he adds, his tone firm, a man who's thought this through too many times to falter now.

The lawyer skims it, her eyes flicking over the lines, and a faint smile tugs at her lips—not amusement, but approval. "You did your homework," she says, setting the papers down, tapping them with a pen. "This is clean, straightforward. We can start the process today—file the petition, serve her the papers. In this state, with no contest and a year's separation, it'll be final in twelve months." She leans back, studying him. "You're sure about this? No alimony, no splitting assets—she gets it all?"

He nods, his jaw tight. "Yeah. I've already moved money into her account, paid off what I could. I don't want a fight—just want it done." His voice cracks slightly, betraying the ache beneath his resolve, but he holds her gaze. He's breaking the cycle, letting go of the codependency that nearly drowned them both, but it's not without cost. The house, the life they built—it's hers now, a clean cut he's forcing himself to make, even if it leaves him adrift.

The lawyer shrugs, satisfied, and pulls out a form to start drafting. "Alright, we'll get it rolling. She'll be served soon—probably within the week. You've made it easy." She starts typing, the clack of keys filling the silence, and he sits there, staring at the folder, the reality settling in. A year from now, it'll be over—legally, at least. He thinks of Lucy at Theresa's, sleeping off the hospital, starting Chantix, facing therapy, and wonders if she'll fight it or let it go too. Somewhere, his desktop waits, the cameras still watching, but this—this is him stepping back, letting the law finish what he started when he walked away.

Lucy steps back into the guest room at Theresa's house, the afternoon light filtering through the curtains as she shuts the door behind her, leaving it slightly ajar. Her body's still adjusting—the Chantix starting to hum in her system, the therapy looming tomorrow—but she's restless, needing something to ground her after the morning's push with the PCP. Her eyes catch on the closet, half-open, and there, leaning against the wall, is an old acoustic guitar, its wood scratched but warm in the dimness. She hesitates, then pulls it out, dust clinging to her fingers as she cradles it, a flicker of focus sparking in her chest.

She sits on the bed, the guitar across her lap, and starts tuning it, her fingers fumbling at first—rusty from years of neglect—but she persists. The strings twang, sharp then soft, as she twists the pegs, her brow furrowing in concentration. It takes a while, longer than it used to, but she's locked in, the task pulling her mind from the murk of the past days. It's a good thing, this focus, a lifeline she didn't expect, and when the chords finally ring true, she strums lightly, testing it, a small smile tugging at her lips.

Her fingers find a melody, hesitant at first, then stronger, and she starts to play: *"As the day bleeds and the night, you'd get me through it all..."* Her voice joins in, soft and raw, the lyrics spilling out—*"Someone you loved..."*—a song she remembers from late nights with him, maybe one he'd hummed while she smoked on the porch, the smoke curling between them. The notes deepen, her strumming growing more forceful, and emotion pours into it, her voice rising, cracking with every line. It's not just music—it's a release, a flood of everything she's held in, the love, the loss, the guilt, all vibrating through the strings.

Theresa, in the kitchen, hears it—the open door letting the sound drift down the hall. She pauses, a dish in her hand, and listens, the rawness of Lucy's voice cutting through the quiet house. It's beautiful, wrenching, and Theresa's torn—part of her wants to check in, to make sure Lucy's not spiraling, but she holds back. As long as it's just music, just feeling, not a breakdown, she'll let her be. Lucy needs this, needs to pour it out, and Theresa trusts the guitar to catch her for now.

Lucy sings louder, her voice filling the room—*"Someone you loved..."*—tears welling as she leans into it, the chords a lifeline, the lyrics a mirror to the man she's losing, the man who's filing papers today. Somewhere, he's watching, the home camera catching her in grainy detail, and he hears it too, his heart twisting as her voice echoes through his speakers, a piece of her he can't touch but can't turn

away from. The guitar trembles in her hands, and she keeps playing, letting it carry her, a fragile bridge between then and now.

Theresa's voice floats down the hall, warm but insistent, cutting through the echo of Lucy's guitar. "Lucy, why not come out here and play? You can play anything you want. I want to continue to hear." She's still in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, the dish forgotten as the music pulls at her. Her home's open design—vaulted ceilings in the living room, the kitchen spilling into the space—makes it perfect, the sound carrying clear and unbroken. She wants Lucy out here, not holed up alone, wants to keep an eye on her while giving her room to breathe through the strings.

Lucy pauses, her fingers stilling on the guitar, and considers it. The guest room feels small now, the walls too close, and Theresa's call tugs her forward. She rises, cradling the guitar, and shuffles out, her bare feet soft on the hardwood. She settles onto the couch in the living room, the high ceilings stretching above her, and positions herself—legs crossed, the guitar resting comfortably across her lap. She strums once, testing the space, the sound ringing out fuller, richer, in the open air.

Her fingers move again, finding a new rhythm, and she launches into "*In the End*" by Linkin Park, the chords sharp and deliberate. They flow with ease, muscle memory kicking in despite the years, her hands steady as they dance across the strings. Her voice follows, low at first, then building—"In the end, it doesn't even matter..."—the lyrics spilling out, raw and fitting, a perfect mirror to her unraveling life. The divorce papers being drafted, the addiction she's shedding, the love she's lost—it all pours into the song, her singing gaining strength, the words a cathartic release for what's happened and what's yet to come.

Theresa watches from the kitchen, leaning on the island, her arms crossed but her face softening as Lucy plays. The music fills the house, heavy with emotion, and she lets it wash over her, recognizing the fit—Lucy's singing her truth, letting it bleed out through the notes. It's not a spiral, not yet, just a woman finding her voice in the wreckage. Somewhere, her brother's screen flickers, the living room camera catching Lucy's every move, her voice crackling through his speakers. He leans closer, the Linkin Park chords hitting him square—"I tried so hard, and got so far..."—and it's their story too, the end they're both facing, mattering and not

mattering all at once. Lucy keeps playing, her fingers sure, her singing loud, and the house holds it, a fragile harmony in the chaos.

Lucy's fingers slow as she finishes "*In the End*," the final chord fading into the vaulted ceiling, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. Theresa seizes the break, her voice cutting through from the kitchen with a gentle but firm reminder. "Don't forget your meds, dear," she says, nodding toward the island where a large pillbox sits, its compartments neatly labeled. Lucy glances over, her hands still resting on the guitar, and nods faintly. She sets the instrument aside, rising from the couch with a small groan, and shuffles to the kitchen, the weight of the morning still clinging to her.

Theresa slides the pillbox toward her, flipping it open to reveal the day's doses—Chantix for the smoking, the low-dose SSRI from the hospital. Lucy picks them up, her fingers trembling slightly, and pops them into her mouth, swallowing hard. Her throat's raw, scratched from days of crying, and the pills scrape going down, but she forces them through, chasing them with a sip of water Theresa hands her. She grimaces, the taste bitter, but it's done.

"That's it," Theresa says, her tone softening, a hint of encouragement breaking through her sternness. "Consistency is key here. One day at a time." She rests a hand on the counter, watching Lucy with a quiet pride—small steps, but steps all the same. Lucy nods again, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and shuffles back to the couch, the guitar calling her like a lifeline.

She settles in, picking it up, and strums a few idle chords before looking at Theresa. "What about 'A Whiter Shade of Pale'?" she asks, her voice tentative but curious, a spark of something lighter flickering in her eyes. Theresa tilts her head, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "Go for it," she says, leaning back against the island, ready to listen.

Lucy's fingers find the opening notes, the haunting melody of Procol Harum spilling out, slow and deliberate—"We skipped the light fandango..." Her voice joins in, rough but steady, the lyrics weaving through the room, a melancholic beauty wrapping around them. It's softer than Linkin Park, introspective, and she pours herself into it, the rawness of her throat adding a gritty edge to the song. Theresa watches, the music filling the open space, and feels the shift—Lucy's not spiraling, she's processing, one note at a time.

Somewhere, her brother's screen glows, the camera catching Lucy's hunched form, her voice threading through his speakers—"And so it was that later..." He leans forward, the pills, the guitar, the song all playing out before him, a mix of relief and ache settling in. She's sticking to it, the meds, the music, and he's still there, watching, tethered to her recovery even as he signs the papers to let her go. The house hums with her playing, and for now, it's enough—one day, one song, one step forward.

Lucy's voice weaves through the room, the chords of "A Whiter Shade of Pale" giving way to a new melody, her fingers shifting effortlessly as she sings, "*I was a fool playing by all of the rules. The gods may throw a dice, their minds as cold as ice...*" The lyrics spill out, heavy with resignation and a bitter edge, her raw throat lending them a jagged intensity. She's lost in it, the music pulling her deeper into the swirl of her emotions, each note a brushstroke on the canvas of her pain.

Theresa listens from the kitchen, her head tilting as the words register, and a flicker of recognition sparks—followed by concern. She knows this trajectory, knows where these kinds of lyrics can lead Lucy right now, too soon after the hospital, too raw. She sets her water down and moves quietly across the open space, her steps deliberate, until she reaches the couch. She sits beside Lucy, close but not crowding, her presence a gentle interruption. "Perhaps," she says softly, her voice cutting through the song's mournful hum, "this isn't the time for this type of processing. All things in life must be tempered, and this is one of them."

Lucy's fingers falter on the strings, the melody breaking as she looks over at Theresa, her brow furrowing. "It's how I feel," she says, her voice defensive but tinged with vulnerability. "It paints a vivid picture, and it was one of the songs he left me." She sets the guitar down across her lap, her hands resting on its curves, and turns to face Theresa fully. "There's a playlist," she explains, her words halting at first, then rushing out. "Lyrics he left—on notes, in the dress, the heels, tucked into things. Songs we shared, ones he loved. This was one of them."

Theresa's eyes soften, but her jaw stays firm as she processes it—the playlist, the hidden messages, his way of lingering even as he pulls away. She'd seen the notes, heard "A Thousand Years" blast through the hospital, but this is new, a thread Lucy's unraveling now. "I get it," she says, resting a hand on Lucy's arm. "It's him, it's you, it's all mixed up in there. But you're still fragile, Lucy. Diving into

that—those feelings, those songs—it's a lot, too fast. You've got therapy tomorrow to start unpacking it. Let's not drown in it today."

Lucy nods slowly, her gaze dropping to the guitar, her fingers tracing its edge. "He loved this one," she murmurs, almost to herself. "Said it felt like fate, cold and random." Her voice cracks, and Theresa squeezes her arm, a silent anchor. "He left you more than songs," Theresa says quietly. "He left you a chance to heal. Let's take it slow, okay?"