



Therapy

The day arrived, their first therapy session, a milestone cloaked in dread and fragile hope. The morning sun slanted through Theresa's kitchen window, casting long shadows across the island where the pillbox sat like a silent sentinel. Down the hall, the shower hissed, a frantic rush of water against tile as Theresa's voice pierced the quiet, sharp and steady. "Lucy, are you almost ready?"

Lucy's response came muffled through the steam, her voice strained with urgency. "Almost, I'll be out in a moment." The water cut off abruptly, leaving a dripping silence, and then she emerged—hair damp and clinging to her neck, a church dress hugging her frame, its conservative cut a shield against the world. The fabric swished softly as she approached the kitchen island, her bare feet whispering against the hardwood. She reached for the pillbox, flipping it open with a trembling hand, the Chantix and SSRI staring up at her like tiny judges. She popped them into her mouth, the bitter taste scraping her raw throat, and chased them with a sip of water from a glass Theresa had left out. The coolness slid down, a fleeting relief, but it couldn't douse the craving clawing at her chest.

"Damn, I want a smoke," Lucy muttered, her voice low, almost a growl, as she set the glass down too hard, the clink echoing in the stillness. Her fingers twitched, itching for the familiar weight of a cigarette, the burn that used to steady her. She could almost taste it—the acrid curl of smoke, the way it used to fill her lungs and

fog her mind, blotting out the ache. But the pack was gone, scattered across this same floor days ago, and Theresa's rules loomed like a wall she couldn't climb.

Theresa stood by the sink, arms crossed, her gaze fixed on Lucy with that unyielding mix of care and steel. She tilted her head, her lips pressing into a thin line as she took in Lucy's restless fidgeting, the way her eyes darted to the window like she might bolt. "Are you ready?" Theresa asked, her voice firm but not unkind, cutting through the haze of Lucy's longing. "It's not gonna be easy, and I'll be stern with you—and the therapist. So, prepare yourself."

Lucy's breath hitched, her chest tightening as the words landed. She gripped the edge of the island, the cool granite grounding her as her mind spun. Not easy. Stern. The therapy loomed like a storm cloud, dark and heavy with truths she wasn't sure she could face. She saw the couch in her mind's eye—the therapist's office, a stranger's voice prying at her walls, Theresa beside her like a guard and a guide. Her stomach churned, the meds sitting heavy, and she wondered if they'd hold her together or just make her feel more exposed. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered, barely audible, her eyes dropping to the floor where the ghosts of scattered cigarettes lingered.

Theresa stepped closer, her shadow falling across Lucy, and rested a hand on her shoulder—firm, warm, a tether. "You can," she said, her tone softening just enough to let the care seep through, but the steel stayed. "You've already started—meds, no smoking, the guitar. This is just the next step. You're not alone in there, Lucy. I've got you." Her fingers squeezed lightly, a promise wrapped in a warning, and Lucy felt it—the weight of Theresa's faith in her, heavier than the craving, sharper than the fear.

Somewhere, miles away, her husband sat hunched at his desk, the glow of his monitor painting his tired face in cold blues. The car's GPS dot blinked on his screen, steady at Theresa's house, but he'd patched into the home cameras too, the audio feed crackling faintly through his speakers. He heard it all—Lucy's muttered curse, the clink of the glass, Theresa's stern encouragement—and his chest ached, a dull throb that wouldn't quit. He leaned closer, eyes tracing Lucy's grainy form on the feed, her church dress a stark contrast to the satin nightgown folded beside him. She's going, he thought, a mix of pride and pain twisting in his gut. Therapy. The divorce papers were filed, the clock ticking toward their end,

but here he was, still watching, still tethered, his fingers hovering over the keyboard as if he could reach through the screen and steady her.

Lucy straightened, pulling herself up with a shaky breath, and nodded at Theresa. "Okay," she said, her voice small but resolute, the word a lifeline she clung to. She smoothed her dress, the fabric cool against her palms, and followed Theresa to the door, her steps tentative but moving forward. The air outside hit her like a slap —crisp, clean, no trace of smoke—and she inhaled deeply, letting it sting her lungs. Theresa locked the house behind them, her keys jangling, and they climbed into the car, the engine rumbling to life as the GPS dot shifted on his screen, tracking their path to the unknown.

Inside, Lucy's mind churned—memories of his notes, the playlist, the "goodbye" smeared in red, all swirling with the dread of what she'd say in that room. She pressed her forehead to the window, the glass cold against her skin, and whispered to herself, "One step at a time," echoing Theresa's mantra. The car rolled forward, carrying her toward the reckoning she'd avoided too long, with Theresa's stern love beside her and his silent gaze following from afar, a fractured trio bound by what was and what might still be.

The husband sat there, his chair creaking faintly as he turned to his left, the glow of his desktop bathing the room in a sterile, bluish hum. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, trembling not from fatigue but from the electric surge of intent coursing through him. The CCTV feeds and GPS dots weren't enough anymore—watching her sleep, tracking her car, hearing her voice crack through hacked audio lines—it was all surface-level, a ghost's grasp at a life he'd left behind. He needed more, a deeper thread to tether him to her, to them. His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed, the faint sting of dried tears lingering on his cheeks as he opened a new terminal window, the black screen blooming with green code like a digital heartbeat.

He'd constructed it over sleepless nights—a sophisticated zero-day, zero-click exploit, more advanced than Pegasus, a predator honed to perfection. His fingers danced across the keys, each stroke deliberate, weaving a web of malicious elegance. It wasn't just an app or a backdoor; it burrowed into the baseband of their phones—Lucy's, Theresa's—slipping past defenses like a whisper through a locked door. Persistent access bloomed before him, a silent invasion granting him lateral movement, a beachhead to pivot into any network those devices touched.

Wi-Fi, cellular, Bluetooth—he'd ride their signals like a shadow, unseen, unstoppable, unless some rare zero-trust architecture stood in his way. His breath hitched, a mix of pride and guilt twisting in his chest as he pushed the payload live, the code vanishing into the ether, racing toward their unsuspecting screens.

The car hummed along the road, its engine a low growl beneath Theresa's steady grip on the wheel. Lucy sat slumped against the passenger window, her church dress creased, her damp hair leaving faint streaks on the glass as she stared out at the blurring world. The OnStar system blinked to life on the dashboard—a routine diagnostic ping, or so it seemed—and Theresa didn't notice the subtle shift, the way the onboard camera's lens twitched, its feed hijacked. He could see them now, right into the car, the grainy image flickering onto his secondary monitor. Lucy's profile, sharp and fragile, filled the frame—her lips parted slightly, her eyes hollow with the weight of what lay ahead. Theresa's hands flexed on the wheel, her jaw set, oblivious to the eyes boring into them from miles away.

His screen split again—diagnostics, telemetry, analytics streaming in real-time, the same data insurance companies mined to surveil their customers. Engine RPM, brake pressure, speed—he had it all, a pulse of the car's every move synced to his fingertips. He could hear them too, the exploit tapping the phone mics, their voices threading through his speakers with a faint static hum. "Damn, I want a smoke," Lucy's murmur echoed again in his ears, a ghost of the moment he'd caught earlier, now layered with the live feed of her restless hands twisting in her lap. Theresa's response cut through, stern and clear: "It's not gonna be easy, and I'll be stern with you—and the therapist." His chest tightened, her words a knife twisting in the wound of his absence—he wasn't there to face it with her, but he was here, closer than they'd ever know.

The exploit pulsed, a living thing now, rooting deeper into their phones. He saw Theresa glance at the dashboard, her brow furrowing briefly at the OnStar light, but she dismissed it, her focus on Lucy, on the therapy looming like a storm on the horizon. He leaned closer, his breath fogging the screen, his fingers twitching over a command that could kill the car's engine, lock the doors, blast the radio with "A Thousand Years"—anything to reach her. But he didn't. Not yet. This wasn't about control; it was about connection, a desperate lifeline to feel her breathing, moving, living, even as he'd signed the papers to let her go. The analytics scrolled—43 mph, steady, her heartbeat a rhythm he couldn't measure but imagined synced to

the car's hum—and he wondered if she'd feel him, this shadow he'd cast over her world.

Lucy shifted, her head pressing harder against the window, the cold glass biting into her temple as the craving clawed at her again. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered, her voice a fragile thread, and he heard it—live, unfiltered, a dagger in his gut. Theresa's hand darted out, resting on Lucy's thigh, grounding her. "You can," she said, and he mouthed the words with her, a silent echo from his dark room, his lips dry and cracked. He could see the tension in Theresa's knuckles, the way Lucy's shoulders slumped, and it tore at him—this was his doing, his leaving, his pain spilling into her, and now he'd burrowed into their lives like a virus, watching, listening, unable to look away.

The car rolled on, the GPS dot inching toward the therapist's office, and he adjusted the feed, zooming the camera tighter on Lucy's face—her eyes, red-rimmed, searching the horizon for something he couldn't give her anymore. The exploit held firm, a silent bridge between them, and he sat there, heart pounding, the code his confession, his obsession, his last tether to a woman he'd loved too much to keep and too deeply to release. Theresa's voice crackled again—"One step at a time"—and he nodded to the empty room, tears welling anew, knowing he'd follow her every step, a ghost in the machine, until the end came crashing down.

The husband's fingers flew across the keyboard, the exploit now fully rooted in their phones, a silent key unlocking Lucy's world. Her watch telemetry streamed in—heart rate, steps, stress levels—flooding a new screen he dragged to the side, its numbers pulsing in real-time. He leaned in, eyes darting over the vitals: her heart thumped at 98 beats per minute, erratic spikes betraying the agitation he knew too well. No smoke to calm her, no haze to blunt the edge of the therapy session looming ahead—she was unraveling, and he could see it in the data, feel it in the pit of his stomach.

The car slowed, tires crunching gravel as Theresa pulled into the lot, the engine ticking down to silence. Inside the waiting area, Lucy sank into a stiff chair, the air thick with antiseptic and the faint hum of a fish tank. Sweat beaded on her forehead, her hair clinging damply to her neck, strands sticking like dark veins against her pale skin. Her thighs pressed together under the church dress, the fabric darkening where moisture seeped through, and her fingers twisted at the

hem, tugging, smoothing, tugging again—a restless dance of nerves she couldn't still. The room pressed in, too bright, too quiet, and her breath came shallow, each exhale a faint shudder.

Back at his desk, he scanned the airwaves, his tools pinging the office's Wi-Fi network—a faint signal flickering into range. He sent a command through the exploit, nudging their phones to switch to the open guest network, bypassing their cellular data. The connection clicked, but a captive portal flared up, a digital gatekeeper demanding credentials, and he cursed under his breath. An isolated VLAN walled off the traffic—smart, but not smart enough. He probed deeper, fingers steady as he exploited a misconfigured trunk, hopping the VLAN like a thief slipping through a cracked window. Access bloomed before him, the network's veins laid bare, and he escalated his privileges with a few deft commands, his heart pounding in sync with Lucy's elevated pulse on the screen. He wasn't after patient files—too risky, too illegal—but the patient portal? That was fair game, a less intrusive peek that skirted HIPAA's edges. He found it, a sleek interface glowing on his monitor, and held his breath, poised to dig.

The therapist's office door creaked open, and Lucy flinched, her damp hands smoothing her dress one last time as Theresa nudged her forward. The room was small, walls a soft beige that swallowed the light, a couch sagging under its own weight, a desk cluttered with pens and a single potted plant drooping in neglect. The therapist—a woman with sharp eyes and a clipboard—gestured them in, her voice calm but firm. "Lucy, Theresa, please, sit." Lucy perched on the couch's edge, her thighs sticking to the leather, sweat pooling under her palms as she pressed them flat to steady herself. Theresa settled beside her, arms crossed, her presence a rock Lucy both leaned on and shrank from.

His screen flickered, the patient portal login taunting him—her name, her appointment time glowing in sterile text—but he didn't need it yet. The watch data told him more: 102 beats per minute now, a jagged line of stress spiking as the therapist's pen scratched against paper. He could almost smell the sweat on her, the faint floral of her shampoo warring with the fear seeping out, and he clenched his fists, nails biting into his palms. She was agitated, unraveling, and he was here—miles away but inside her pulse, her network, her moment—watching it all unfold, a ghost who couldn't reach out but couldn't turn away either. The therapist's voice cut through the feed, faint but clear: "Lucy, let's start with why

you're here." And his breath caught, the numbers on the screen trembling with her, waiting for her to speak.

Lucy sat frozen, her lips parting but no sound escaping, the words trapped behind a wall of nerves and craving. Her chest heaved, shallow breaths stuttering out as the itch for a cigarette clawed at her throat, relentless, a fire she couldn't douse. Sweat trickled down her spine, soaking the back of her dress, and her fingers dug into the hem, twisting the fabric until it bunched in her fists. The room felt too small, the air too thick, and all she could think of was the pack she'd hurled away —its promise of calm now a ghost taunting her from the edges of her mind.

Jody, the therapist, leaned forward slightly, her sharp eyes tracing Lucy's every twitch—the damp sheen on her forehead, the restless dance of her hands. She flipped open the file on her lap, the rustle of paper slicing through the silence, and scanned it with a practiced calm. "Mental crisis recently," she read aloud, her voice steady, clinical, "and marital dynamics. Taking meds for acute depression and anxiety, cessation of smoking with Chantix. So, we have multiple issues to unpack here, and we'll tackle them one at a time. An overview would be nice, please." Her pen hovered, poised for notes, her gaze lifting to Lucy expectantly.

Lucy's mouth opened again, a faint croak escaping, but the words wouldn't come —her mind a tangle of smoke and shame, her husband's "goodbye" flashing red behind her eyes. Before she could falter further, Theresa cut in, her voice firm, filling the void. "Her husband left her—"

Jody raised a hand, pausing Theresa mid-sentence, her eyes narrowing slightly as she shifted her focus. "And who are you in relation here?" she asked, her tone even but edged with curiosity, the pen tapping once against the clipboard. The question hung in the air, a gentle redirection, pulling the room's attention to Theresa's role in this fractured tableau.

Theresa straightened, her arms uncrossing as she met Jody's gaze head-on. "I'm her sister-in-law," she said, her voice steady but tinged with the weight of duty. "His sister. I've been looking after her since it all fell apart—since she landed in the hospital a few days back." Her jaw tightened briefly, a flicker of frustration breaking through her calm, and she glanced at Lucy, who shrank deeper into the couch, her damp thighs sticking to the leather with a faint squeak.

Miles away, the husband's breath hitched, the audio feed crackling through his speakers as Theresa's words spilled out. His eyes darted between screens—

Lucy's heart rate spiking to 108, a jagged red line on the telemetry graph, and the grainy camera feed showing her hunched form, her dress clinging to her like a second skin. He could see the sweat, the fidgeting, the way her hands trembled, and it gutted him—her agony pulsing through the data, a mirror to his own. His fingers twitched over the keyboard, the patient portal still open, tempting him to dig deeper, but Jody's voice pulled him back: "An overview would be nice." He clenched his jaw, the exploit humming in the background, his silent vigil teetering on the edge of intrusion and despair, waiting for Lucy to find her voice—or for Theresa to speak it for her.

Jody tilted her head, her sharp eyes flicking between Theresa and Lucy as she processed the revelation. "So, sibling to the husband," she said, her voice measured, a faint crease forming on her brow. "Conflict of interest here and complexities, indeed. Theresa, do you know where your brother is now?" Her pen hovered over the clipboard, the room's air thickening with the weight of the question.

Theresa's lips parted, then pressed shut, a pregnant pause swelling between them. She shifted in her seat, her fingers tightening around her own arm as she exhaled sharply. "No, I don't," she said finally, her tone clipped, eyes darting to the ceiling as if it might betray him. "But I do know we're under surveillance. He sees all and knows all. I wouldn't doubt he's here now." The words dropped like stones into still water, rippling outward, her voice carrying a mix of resignation and unease.

Jody's pen froze mid-air, her gaze snapping up, a flicker of alarm breaking through her calm facade. "This is concerning," she said, her voice tightening, "and law enforcement has to get involved. This is borderline stalking." She leaned forward, scribbling notes with quick, decisive strokes, the scratch of ink on paper slicing through the tension. Her eyes darted to Lucy, then back to Theresa, assessing, calculating—the session veering into territory she couldn't ignore.

Lucy jolted upright, her damp dress clinging tighter as she shook her head, her voice bursting out in a ragged gasp. "What, he cares!" she cried, her hands flailing, then clutching at her chest as if to hold herself together. "He can't let go, even though he must. I'm toxic and a mess." Her words tumbled over each other, raw and desperate, her eyes wide with shock and something softer—grief, maybe, or guilt. Sweat glistened on her palms as she pressed them to her thighs, the

leather creaking beneath her, her breath hitching as the reality of Theresa's confession crashed over her.

Miles away, the husband's world tilted. The audio feed blasted Theresa's betrayal through his speakers—"He sees all and knows all"—and fury erupted in his chest, a molten wave that surged up his throat. His fist slammed down on the desk, the impact rattling the monitors, the telemetry screen jittering as Lucy's heart rate spiked to 112. "Damn it, T!" he snarled, his voice a low growl swallowed by the empty room. His sister had given him away, cracked open his shadow world, and the sting of it burned hotter than the guilt he'd carried for weeks. He shoved back from the desk, chair wheels screeching against the floor, his breath ragged as he glared at the feeds—Lucy's shocked face on the cam, the patient portal taunting him with its sterile data, her vitals screaming her distress in red lines and numbers.

He raked a hand through his hair, pacing now, the satin nightgown still folded on the couch a cruel reminder of what he'd lost—what he couldn't stop chasing. Theresa's words looped in his skull, her casual exposure of his surveillance slicing deeper than Jody's threat of law enforcement. Stalking. The label stung, but Lucy's plea—"He cares"—twisted the knife, her voice cracking through the speakers, a lifeline he couldn't grab. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, itching to kill the exploit, to erase his tracks, but he couldn't—not yet. Furious or not, he was still tethered, still watching, the desk vibrating under his clenched fists as the session spiraled beyond his control.

Jody leaned back in her chair, her sharp eyes narrowing as she tapped her pen against the clipboard, the faint rhythm punctuating the heavy silence. "Theresa," she said, her voice low, deliberate, "what's your brother's intelligence level? Is this real, or a bluff?" Her gaze bore into Theresa, searching for cracks, the threat of surveillance hanging like a storm cloud over the room.

Theresa met her stare, unflinching, her arms tightening across her chest as she exhaled through her nose. "He's the best," she said, her tone flat but laced with a grudging pride. "One of the brightest in his field of cybersecurity. He writes research papers for the government and the private sector." Her words carried weight, a quiet admission of his capability, and her jaw flexed as she glanced at Lucy, who sat hunched, her damp dress wrinkling further under her fidgeting hands.

Jody's pen stilled, her lips pressing into a thin line as she processed the answer. "Perhaps," she said slowly, her voice tightening with caution, "I need to take a watch-and-wait approach. I don't want to poke the tiger and swing Lucy into further turmoil." She leaned forward, her eyes flicking to Lucy's trembling form, then back to Theresa. "But I'll be monitoring closely. Make no mistake—if there's any level of benevolence displayed, the FBI will get involved, and he will get locked up." The warning landed hard, a steel edge cutting through the room's haze, her pen resuming its scribbling with renewed urgency.

Theresa's shoulders stiffened, her breath catching for a moment before she spoke again. "Loyalties aside, Jody," she said, her voice softening but firm, "he's suffering too. The marriage has both to blame. He knows he's no angel and that his halo is held up via horns." Her gaze drifted to the floor, a flicker of sorrow breaking through her resolve, her fingers digging into her arms as if to anchor herself against the weight of her own words.

Lucy's head snapped up, her eyes wide and glistening, a ragged gasp escaping her lips. The room swam around her—Jody's threat, Theresa's confession, the idea of him locked away—all crashing against the craving still clawing at her chest. Her hands twisted harder into her dress, the fabric damp and slick under her palms, and she felt the sweat pooling at the base of her spine, a cold trickle against the heat of her panic. "He's suffering," she echoed faintly, her voice a cracked whisper, the words tasting of ash and regret. She saw him in her mind—the notes, the garter, the "goodbye"—and her heart thudded, a dull ache syncing with the watch she didn't know he was tracking.

Across the miles, the husband froze mid-pace, the audio feed crackling with Theresa's voice—"He's the best"—and then her damning follow-up—"He's suffering too." His fist unclenched, hovering over the desk as fury gave way to a raw, hollow ache. The telemetry screen blared Lucy's distress—115 beats per minute, a jagged peak of red—and he sank into his chair, the fight draining out of him. Jody's threat of the FBI stung, but Theresa's words cut deeper, laying bare the truth he'd buried under code and cameras. His halo held up by horns—he almost laughed, a bitter choke catching in his throat as he stared at the feeds, Lucy's sweaty, shocked face staring back through the cam. He was no angel, never had been, and now they all knew it—Theresa, Jody, Lucy, himself. His fingers brushed the keyboard, the exploit still humming, a lifeline he couldn't sever, even as the walls closed in.

Lucy's voice broke through the haze, trembling and sharp, cutting the air like a jagged edge. "Why couldn't he just talk to me?" she rasped, her hands flying to her chest, fingers clawing at the damp fabric of her dress as if she could rip the ache out. "I know I did some awful things and pushed him away for years." Her breath hitched, shallow and fast, her eyes darting wildly around the room—Jody's clipboard, the sagging plant, Theresa's steady gaze—everything blurring as panic surged up her throat. Her heart hammered, a frantic drumbeat she couldn't slow, sweat slicking her palms as she teetered on the edge of unraveling completely.

Theresa's hand tightened on Lucy's shoulder, warm and firm, grounding her as she leaned in close. "Calm it down," she murmured, her voice low and steady, a lifeline in the storm. "Slow, in and out." She squeezed gently, her thumb pressing into Lucy's collarbone, guiding her through the breaths—inhale, exhale, a rhythm to cling to as the room spun. Lucy's chest shuddered, her gasps slowing fractionally, though her hands still trembled, twisting the hem of her dress into knots.

Jody watched, her sharp eyes softening briefly before returning to the file, her pen scratching against the paper as she spoke. "History of codependency via both partners," she said, her tone clinical but not unkind, piecing the puzzle together aloud. "So, the husband felt like he had to break the cycle by leaving." She glanced up, her gaze lingering on Lucy's flushed, sweaty face, then shifting to Theresa's protective grip. "It's a pattern—mutual reliance that turned toxic. He couldn't talk, maybe, because he didn't know how to untangle himself without cutting the thread entirely."

Lucy's breath caught again, Jody's words sinking in like stones, heavy and cold. She saw it now—her silences, her smoking, her withdrawal mirrored by his quiet endurance, his retreat behind screens and notes. Her eyes stung, tears welling as she whispered, "I pushed him," the admission a raw scrape against her throat. Theresa's hand stayed steady, a silent anchor, but Lucy's mind raced—his leaving wasn't just abandonment, it was escape, and she'd driven him to it.

Miles away, the husband sat rigid, the audio feed crackling with Lucy's plea—"Why couldn't he just talk to me?"—and his chest caved, a hollow thud echoing in his ribs. The telemetry spiked—120 beats per minute, her panic a red scream on his screen—and he gripped the desk, knuckles whitening as her words sliced through him. Theresa's soothing murmur followed, then Jody's diagnosis—"codependency," "break the cycle"—and he felt the truth of it like a punch. He

hadn't talked because he couldn't, because every word would've pulled him back into her orbit, into the mess they'd built together. His leaving was a cut, brutal but necessary, and yet here he was, still tangled, the exploit humming as he watched her fall apart. His breath shook, a tear slipping free, and he muttered to the empty room, "I tried," knowing she'd never hear it, knowing it wasn't enough.

Lucy's sobs erupted, raw and jagged, tearing through the room as she hunched forward, her damp dress clinging to her shaking frame. "I even opened my legs for him," she choked out, her voice breaking on every word, "even that wasn't enough and will never be enough!" Her hands flew to her face, fingers digging into her cheeks as tears streamed hot and fast, smearing the sweat already glistening there. Her chest heaved, each cry a desperate gasp, the confession spilling out like blood from a wound she couldn't close.

Theresa's heart twisted, a sharp ache blooming behind her ribs as she watched Lucy crumble. She slid closer on the couch, her hand sliding from Lucy's shoulder to her back, rubbing slow circles as her own breath caught. "He didn't rape you, did he, Lucy?" she asked, her voice soft but urgent, a tremor of fear threading through it. She knew her brother—his flaws, his obsessions—but not that, never that. Still, the question had to be raised, a dark shadow that demanded light, and her eyes searched Lucy's face, pleading for the answer she needed to hear.

Lucy shook her head violently, her sobs hitching as she swiped at her tears. "No, no," she stammered, "he didn't—it was me, I offered, I tried—" Her words dissolved into a wail, her body curling inward, shame and grief knotting her tighter.

Jody's pen scratched faster, her eyes narrowing as she leaned forward, her voice cutting through the chaos with cool precision. "Sex addiction, it seems," she said, her tone clinical, a hypothesis forming as she jotted it down, her gaze flickering between Lucy's breakdown and Theresa's protective stance.

Theresa's head snapped up, her hand freezing mid-rub as indignation flared in her chest. "Oh, please, don't go there!" she snapped, her voice rising, sharp and defensive. "My brother has his ways and was trying to get therapy for himself, but the lady he was seeing turned traitor and betrayed his trust." Her jaw clenched, her eyes flashing with a mix of loyalty and frustration, the memory of his late-night rants about that betrayal still fresh. She pulled Lucy closer, almost instinctively, her

arm wrapping around her trembling shoulders as if to shield her from Jody's probing.

Lucy's sobs quieted to a shuddering whimper, her face buried in her hands, the weight of Theresa's arm a lifeline she clung to. "I wasn't enough," she whispered again, the words muffled against her palms, her thighs sticking to the leather as she shifted, the dampness a constant reminder of her unraveling. Jody's label—sex addiction—echoed in her skull, twisting with her own guilt, and she wondered if it was true, if he'd sought something she couldn't give, even when she'd tried.

Across the miles, the husband's breath stopped, Lucy's anguished cry—"I opened my legs for him"—blasting through his speakers like a gunshot. His fist slammed the desk again, the monitors rattling, her telemetry spiking to 125 as her sobs filled his ears. Theresa's question—"He didn't rape you, did he?"—sent a jolt of rage and relief through him, his sister's doubt a fleeting sting washed away by Lucy's denial. But Jody's cold "sex addiction" diagnosis ignited a fresh fury, and Theresa's defense—his failed therapy, the betrayal—hit too close, a mirror to his own shame. He hadn't wanted more, he'd wanted her, but the words never came, and now she thought this. His hands shook, hovering over the keyboard, the exploit still live, his eyes locked on her tear-streaked face in the grainy feed, a man trapped by his own silence, watching her break under the weight of it all.

The husband's voice cracked in the empty room, a raw whisper swallowed by the hum of his machines. "All I wanted was to be loved," he muttered, his fists unclenching, fingers splaying across the desk as if searching for something solid. "The act alone was hollow and distant—I could've gotten an escort if I only wanted sex. Where was the emotional intimacy?" His eyes burned, locked on the telemetry screen—Lucy's heart rate a jagged 123, a silent scream matching the one he felt clawing at his chest. The feeds flickered, her sobbing form a blur on the OnStar cam, and he pressed a hand to his forehead, the weight of her absence crashing over him. He'd craved her warmth, her presence, not just her body—but that craving had drowned in their silence, and now it was ash.

In the therapist's office, Lucy's voice rose, sharp and brittle, cutting through her own tears. "I couldn't be his whore," she spat, her hands slamming down on her thighs, the damp fabric slapping against her skin. "I don't dance poles. I'm not playing in a porno flick. Damn him! Why did it have to come to this?" Her chest heaved, sobs tangling with anger, her eyes wild as she glared at the floor, the

plant, anything but Theresa and Jody. Her fingers dug into her legs, nails biting through the dress, leaving faint red crescents as the craving for a cigarette surged again, a desperate itch she couldn't scratch.

Jody's pen raced across the clipboard, her face a mask of calm focus, though her eyes flicked up briefly, catching the raw edge of Lucy's outburst. She wrote steadily, the scratch of ink a quiet counterpoint to the storm unfolding before her, each word a brick in the wall of understanding she was building—intimacy, dysfunction, collapse.

Theresa's hand stayed firm on Lucy's back, her voice softening but carrying a blunt truth. "Honey," she said, her tone gentle yet unyielding, "all he wanted was normal intimacy. You guys' intimacy was far from normal." Her fingers pressed lightly, a steady force, but her eyes held a flicker of sorrow—for her brother, for Lucy, for the mess they'd made. She remembered his late-night calls, his quiet longing for something simple—a touch, a laugh, a moment that wasn't shadowed by distance or addiction—and her heart ached for them both.

Lucy's head shook, tears spilling faster as she curled inward, her voice dropping to a broken whisper. "I couldn't be what he wanted me to be." The confession slipped out, fragile and heavy, her shoulders slumping as if the weight of it crushed her. She saw it now—his need, her failure, the gulf between them she'd widened with every cold night, every cigarette, every retreat. Her thighs stuck to the leather, sweat and shame binding her to the couch, and she felt small, hollow, a shell of the woman he'd once loved.

The husband's breath hitched, Lucy's words—"I couldn't be his whore"—piercing through the audio feed like a blade. He shoved back from the desk, the chair skidding across the floor, his hands raking through his hair as her fury and despair flooded his ears. Theresa's reply—"normal intimacy"—echoed his own plea, and Lucy's final whisper—"I couldn't be what he wanted"—landed like a blow, stealing the air from his lungs. He paced, the satin nightgown a crumpled ghost on the couch, his screens alive with her pain—122 beats per minute, a steady tremble in the data. "I didn't want a whore," he growled to the void, his voice shaking, "I wanted you." But the words stayed trapped, unheard, as the exploit hummed on, binding him to her collapse, a witness to the wreckage he couldn't mend.

The husband slumped back into his chair, the fight draining from his limbs as Lucy's words looped through the audio feed, a bitter refrain he couldn't unhear.

Disappointment settled in his gut, heavy and cold, a stone he'd carried too long. He stared at the screens—her heart rate steadyng at 118, the OnStar cam showing her hunched, defeated form—and shook his head. Why was it so hard? Foreplay, intercourse, afterglow, a shower afterward—simple acts that could've woven them closer, but to her, they were mountains, insurmountable, too much to ask. He'd wanted love, a quiet surrender to each other, not a debate, not the constant combativeness that turned every touch into a battlefield. That's why he was moving on—or trying to, though the exploit still tethered him, a lifeline he couldn't cut. His jaw tightened, the satin nightgown a silent witness to his fading hope, and he muttered to the dark, "I just wanted us," knowing it was over, even if his heart hadn't caught up.

In the office, Lucy's voice dropped to a whisper, barely audible over the hum of the fish tank, her hands limp in her lap. "I was always too selfish about my comfort levels," she murmured, her eyes fixed on a spot on the floor, tears drying into salty streaks on her cheeks. "Placed too many boundaries. Maybe, perhaps, it's best he moves on and finds someone younger that he can control." The words slipped out, laced with self-loathing, her shoulders curling inward as if she could disappear into the couch. She saw it now—her walls, her refusals, the way she'd shrunk from him—and the thought of him with someone else, someone pliable, stung less than the truth of her own failures.

Theresa's hand paused on Lucy's back, her breath catching as she turned sharply. "Lucy, that's not fair," she said, her voice firm but edged with a quiet ache. "To him or to you." She leaned closer, her fingers resuming their slow rub, trying to pull Lucy back from the abyss. "He didn't want to control you—he wanted to connect. And you're not some broken thing to be tossed aside." Her eyes flickered with frustration, loyalty to her brother warring with her care for Lucy, the mess of it all knotting her chest.

Lucy didn't respond, her whisper hanging in the air, a confession she couldn't take back. The leather squeaked under her shifting weight, her thighs still damp, the room's beige walls closing in as Jody's pen scratched on, capturing every fracture. The husband's screen flickered, her words—"find someone younger"—cutting deeper than he'd expected, a fresh wound atop the old. He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, his face inches from the feed, her defeated slump a mirror to his own. "Not control," he breathed, the words lost to the void, "just you." But her boundaries, her combativeness—they'd built a cage he couldn't break, and now,

even as he watched, he knew she was right: moving on was all that was left, though the exploit kept him rooted, a ghost refusing to fade.

Theresa's voice sharpened, her hand still resting on Lucy's back but her gaze locking onto Jody with a fierce edge. "My brother kept his trap shut as to not disturb the peace and suffered for years in silence," she said, her tone clipped, protective. "His love and their codependency trapped him." She exhaled hard, her fingers tightening briefly on Lucy's shoulder, a flicker of pain crossing her face as she spoke for him—for the man who'd buried his needs under layers of quiet endurance, only to watch it all collapse anyway.

Jody's pen paused, her eyes lifting from the clipboard to meet Lucy's bowed head. "Explain, Lucy," she said, her voice calm but insistent, cutting through the tension. "You attempted therapy before—why did it fail?" Her gaze was steady, probing, the question a key turning in a lock long rusted shut.

Lucy slowly raised her head, her eyes red-rimmed and glistening, meeting Jody's stare with a sluggish, reluctant lift. "Well," she began, her voice low, cracking on the edges, "the last time, I did it—not for me or our relationship, but for him." She swallowed hard, her hands twisting together in her lap, the damp dress clinging tighter as she shifted. "As it turned out, you labeled him just like the last lady did—a 'sex addict.' That caused him considerable trauma." Her confession spilled out, heavy and halting, her breath shuddering as she forced the words free. "Yes, I lied. I faked it. Therapy was a joke, and it wasn't a joke on him." Her head dropped again, shame curling her inward, the memory of that betrayal—hers and the therapist's—burning fresh in her chest.

Miles away, the husband's world tilted, Lucy's words crashing through the audio feed like a tidal wave. "What the fuck is wrong with all these therapists thinking I'm a freak of nature?" he roared, his voice bouncing off the walls of his dark room, raw and ragged. He shoved up from the chair, pacing wildly, the telemetry screen blaring Lucy's steady 116 beats per minute—a calm he couldn't feel. "All I want is to feel like a man and make love to a human being with a connection. Fucking outrageous, these damned therapists!" His hands balled into fists, slamming against the desk, the monitors shuddering as he glared at the feeds—her slumped form, Theresa's tense silhouette, Jody's scribbling pen. "I swear, I'll never trust any of them again. Fuck them all!" The words tore from his throat, a howl of frustration and betrayal, the label—sex addict—searing into him like a brand, twisting his

longing into something sordid when all he'd wanted was her, whole and real. The exploit hummed on, his rage fueling its silent pulse, binding him to the wreckage unfolding in that beige room.

Lucy's head snapped up, her eyes wild and glistening, a sudden fire breaking through the fog of her despair. "I know you're out there, my love," she shouted, her voice cracking but fierce, echoing off the beige walls. "I'm sorry, I broke us!" The words burst from her, a raw, unfiltered plea, her chest heaving as she straightened on the couch, pulling herself up from the slump. Her hands unclenched, trembling as they smoothed her damp dress, and then her lips parted again, a murmur spilling out that twisted into song. "One kiss is all it takes to falling in love... possibilities..." Her voice wavered, soft at first, then grew, a fragile melody weaving through the room. She swayed back and forth, her body rocking gently, the music a lifeline she grasped to soothe the storm raging inside her—sweat still beading on her brow, her thighs slick against the leather.

Theresa's hand slid to Lucy's arm, gripping lightly, her voice steady but tender. "Soothe it, slow it down..." she murmured, her thumb brushing Lucy's skin, guiding her back from the edge. She watched the swaying, the singing, a mix of worry and relief flickering in her eyes as Lucy reached for calm through the notes, her breaths slowing, though the dampness clung to her like a second skin.

Miles away, the husband froze mid-pace, Lucy's shout—"I know you're out there"—piercing through the speakers, a dagger straight to his core. Her apology followed, then the song, her voice trembling through the feed, and his knees buckled. He sank into the chair, the telemetry screen glowing—114 beats per minute, a slight dip—and his own voice broke free, a whisper blending with hers. "I want to feel your skin on mine," he sang softly, his words syncing with her melody, "feel your eyes through the exploring passion in the message when you smile, take my time." His chest ached, deeply moved, her cries and love song unraveling him. Tears welled, spilling hot down his cheeks as he leaned closer to the screen, her swaying form a blurry vision on the cam, her confession echoing in his skull—I broke us. He wanted to reach through the exploit, through the miles, to hold her, to tell her he broke them too, but all he had was this shadow connection, this song they unknowingly shared.

Theresa's voice cut through again, practical but warm. "You're extremely sweating, my dear," she said, her hand still on Lucy's arm, feeling the heat

radiating off her. "Perhaps a shower is in order when we get home—if and when that may be." She glanced at Jody, then back at Lucy, her brow creasing with concern as Lucy swayed, the singing fading to a hum, her eyes half-closed as the music wrapped around her like a balm. The room held its breath, the air thick with sweat and song, a fragile moment teetering between collapse and hope.

Lucy's phone buzzed, a strange, stuttering pattern that jolted her from her swaying trance. Her hands fumbled into her small compact backpack, fingers brushing past crumpled tissues and a half-empty water bottle before closing around the device. She pulled it out, the screen glowing with an unknown number—withheld, anonymous—and a text flickered into view: "*I'm so sorry too, my love. But you aren't alone, I broke us too.*" The words hit her like a punch, and a fresh wave of tears sprang free, hot and fast, spilling down her cheeks. "It was him," she gasped, her voice a broken sob as the phone slipped from her trembling hands, clattering onto the couch beside her.

Theresa's head snapped toward the sound, her eyes darting to the screen as she scooped up the phone. The text stared back at her—his words, direct and raw, reaching out across the miles to soothe, to heal, to own his share of the wreckage. Her chest tightened, a mix of relief and frustration swirling as she recognized his attempt, his voice breaking through the silence he'd kept for so long. She handed the phone back to Lucy, her touch gentle but firm, steadying her as the tears flowed unchecked.

Lucy clutched the phone to her chest, her sobs hitching as she rocked forward, the damp dress sticking to her skin, her hair a tangled mess against her neck. "Can we go home?" she demanded, her voice thick with exhaustion and need. "So I can linger in the shower. I'm filthy and reek." The words tumbled out, a plea wrapped in desperation, her body screaming for the cleanse of water, for a moment to wash away the sweat, the shame, the day.

Theresa nodded, her hand sliding to Lucy's elbow, helping her up. "Sure, my dear," she said softly, her tone warm but weary, her eyes meeting Jody's for a brief, unspoken agreement. She steadied Lucy as she rose, the leather creaking beneath her, leaving a faint sheen of sweat behind.

Jody set her clipboard aside, her sharp eyes softening as she stood. "Enough for today," she said, her voice calm but final. "Thanks for coming." She offered a small nod, her pen still in hand, the session's weight lingering in the air as she watched

them shuffle toward the door—Lucy leaning into Theresa, the phone still pressed to her chest, its message a fragile thread tying her to him.

Across the miles, the husband watched it all—the buzz he'd triggered, the text he'd sent through a burner proxy, her tears blooming on the OnStar feed. Her gasp—"It was him"—echoed in his ears, and his own breath caught, a tear slipping free as he saw her clutch the phone, his words finally reaching her. The telemetry dipped—112 beats per minute, a slight easing—and he exhaled, shaky and raw, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. He'd broken through, just a crack, and as Theresa guided her out, he whispered to the empty room, "I'm here," knowing she couldn't hear, knowing the shower she craved would wash away more than just the day's grime. The exploit hummed on, a silent witness as the car roared to life, carrying her home, carrying them both toward something uncertain but shared.

The car rolled to a stop outside Theresa's house, the engine ticking down as Lucy flung the door open, her movements frantic, urgent. As soon as her feet hit the gravel, she started stripping—kicking off her shoes by the steps, peeling the damp church dress over her head and letting it fall in a crumpled heap on the porch. She stumbled through the front door, bra and underwear shed in a haphazard trail across the hardwood, her bare skin prickling in the cool air as she made a beeline for the bathroom. "OMG, I need this," she muttered, her voice thick with relief as she twisted the shower knob full blast. Hot water roared out, steam billowing up in thick clouds, just the way she loved it. "I'm so yucky. I can't believe I sweated so much. Must've lost 10 pounds." She stepped in, the scalding spray pounding her skin, a sharp, cleansing sting that made her gasp.

Theresa followed behind, her steps slower, methodical, as she bent to gather the scattered clothes—shoes by the door, dress on the porch, bra dangling from the back of a chair. She carried them to Lucy's room, dropping them into the hamper with a faint sigh. Her brother's voice echoed in her mind, his old complaints surfacing—*She's so messy, T. I'm tidy, and she just takes over, leaves everything in disarray*. The memory tugged at her, a pang of understanding for his frustration, his need for order clashing with Lucy's chaos. She smoothed the dress in the hamper, the damp fabric cool against her fingers, and shook her head, a bittersweet ache settling in her chest.

In the shower, Lucy tilted her head back, letting the water cascade down her face and chest, a hot river washing away the day's grime and grief. Her skin flushed

pink under the heat, steam curling around her as she closed her eyes, the pounding spray drowning out the world. Then, her voice rose, soft at first, a murmur threading through the water's roar—"Misled, and too hot, from Kool and the Gang..." The melody grew, her hips swaying faintly as she sang, the lyrics a strange, soothing balm against the rawness of her nerves. "Misled... too hot to handle..." Her hands slid up her arms, water streaming through her fingers, the song a tether pulling her back to herself, note by shaky note.

Miles away, the husband sat hunched over his screens, the audio feed crackling as Lucy's voice filtered through—first her relieved mutter, then the song, faint but clear. The cam had cut off, but the exploit still tapped her phone, left on the couch where she'd dropped it, picking up the distant hum of the shower and her singing. His breath caught, her words—"I'm so yucky"—and the melody tugging at him, a memory of her humming in their old bathroom flickering to life. He saw the trail of clothes in his mind, a mess he'd once resented, now a pang he couldn't shake. "Too hot..." she sang, and he leaned closer, the telemetry screen dark now, but her voice alive, soothing him too, across the distance—a shared ache carried on steam and sound.

Today had been a crucible, a day where confessions spilled out raw and jagged from both sides—husband and wife, separated by miles but bound by the weight of their words. In a therapy office, of all places, unconventional and messy, the truth had clawed its way free. Distance didn't dull it; the emotions rippled through the air, through screens and speakers, felt by all—Lucy's sobs, his silent rage, Theresa's steady presence holding it together. The steam still lingered in Lucy's shower, her song fading, but the echoes of their shared unraveling hung heavy.

Theresa stood in her kitchen, the phone pressed to her ear as she dialed her brother, the line clicking through after a single ring. "Bro," she said, her voice low, worn from the day, "that was intense today."

His reply came sharp, edged with a restless energy, the clack of keys faint in the background. "Well, yeah, I was there, remember." He snorted, a bitter laugh cutting through the static. "Implementing advanced OPSEC now. If and when that bitch calls the FBI on me, they won't find anything. I'm too smart for that. First thing they'll do is tap your phones, wait for my stupid ass to call in—that's when they'll take me. No fucking way. I'll use SIP from a jumpbox across seas." His voice

was a growl, defiance masking the hurt, his mind already racing ahead, building walls of code to shield himself.

Theresa's grip tightened on the phone, her free hand rubbing her temple as exhaustion battled frustration. "I hope it doesn't come to that," she said, her tone firm but pleading. "You need to stop. I know you're hurting too, but this creepy shit needs to stop." She paced a step, the hardwood cool under her feet, her eyes flicking to the bathroom where Lucy's shower still hummed. "She saw your text, felt it—you got through. But this surveillance, this hiding? It's not helping either of you."

He went silent for a beat, the clacking pausing, his breath audible through the line—a shaky exhale, raw and unguarded. "I just wanted her to know," he muttered, quieter now, the fight leaching out. "I broke us too." The words hung there, a confession stripped bare, and then the keys resumed, softer this time. "I'll lock it down, T. No traces. But I'm not calling again—not like this." The line crackled, his voice hardening again. "They won't catch me. I'm done being the fool."

Theresa sighed, leaning against the counter, the weight of the day pressing down. "Just... think about what you're doing, okay? For her. For you." She didn't wait for his reply, ending the call with a soft click, her hand lingering on the phone as the house settled into quiet, Lucy's distant singing the only sound threading through the stillness.

Theresa lingered in the kitchen, the phone still warm in her hand, its silence a heavy thing. She stared at the counter, the faint ring of a coffee mug etched into the wood, and let her mind churn. If the FBI came—and they might, with Jody's threat hanging like a guillotine—they'd grill her, press her for every scrap of where he was. But she didn't know. He'd kept it from her, a deliberate void, shielding her as much as himself. She could spill what she knew—his OPSEC, his talk of jumpboxes and SIP overseas—but it'd be breadcrumbs, not a map. They'd get clues, sure, but he was too sharp, too layered in his defenses. They'd wait for him to slip, to make a mistake, and she knew it wasn't *if* but *when*. Even the best faltered eventually.

Her thoughts drifted to a story he'd told her years back—Kevin Mitnick, the hacker legend, chased by the feds, caught after a slip, only to rise again with his own security gig. Her brother idolized that arc, the cat-and-mouse thrill of it, and she could see him now, pulling a Jason Bourne—dropping off the radar, vanishing into

some digital shadow. He'd go quiet, maybe for months, cloaked in aliases and encrypted tunnels. It might save him, keep the feds at bay, but Lucy? Theresa's chest tightened. It could heal her, give her space to breathe, or it could cut deeper, leave her dangling in his absence, wondering if he'd ever surface again.

She loved him—her stubborn, brilliant brother—but she knew better than to wade into his games. He'd built this web, his surveillance and his retreat, and she wouldn't be the one to untangle it. The shower's hum filtered through the house, Lucy's voice a faint thread beneath the water, and Theresa set the phone down, her fingers brushing the counter. He'd hide, and she'd wait, caught between loyalty and the hope that somehow, somewhere, they'd both find a way out of this mess.

A cold chill slithered down Theresa's spine, sharp and sudden, cutting through the kitchen's quiet. She froze, her hand still resting on the phone, as a new fear took root. What if they came for Lucy? Not just her, but Lucy—grilling her about her husband, his whereabouts, his tricks. Lucy, with her red-rimmed eyes and trembling hands, wasn't ready for that. She was barely holding it together, her mind fragile, childlike in its chaos—singing in the shower, swaying through her pain, clinging to scraps of control. The FBI wouldn't care about her state; they'd push, probe, demand answers she didn't have, couldn't give. And if they pressed too hard, they'd break her, shatter what little ground she'd gained today.

Theresa's jaw tightened, her fingers curling into a fist. Lucy was too brittle for their tactics—her confessions, her tears, her raw unraveling today proved it. One wrong question, one harsh tone, and she'd crumble, lost in a panic they wouldn't understand. Theresa couldn't let that happen. She'd have to step in, legally if it came to it—invoke whatever rights she could, maybe call a lawyer, anything to temper the FBI's advance. Not to shield her brother's wrongs—he'd dug his own hole—but to protect Lucy's well-being, to keep her from fracturing under a weight she didn't deserve.

The shower's hum softened, Lucy's singing trailing off, and Theresa exhaled, slow and shaky. She'd stand between them if it came to that, a wall against the storm, because Lucy wasn't just her brother's wreckage—she was family now, fragile and flawed, and Theresa wouldn't let her break alone.

Theresa grabbed her phone again, her thumb scrolling fast through her contacts until she landed on John—her friend, the attorney she could trust. She hit call,

pacing the kitchen as the line rang, her pulse quickening until his familiar voice crackled through. "John," she said, skipping the pleasantries, "I need your help. I don't know if Jody will contact the FBI or not, but I want Lucy protected. I need you to shield her. By no means am I condoning my brother's behavior—I don't want her or me trapped in a government battle."

John's voice came back steady, calm, the kind of tone that cut through panic. "I'll see what I can do," he said, pausing as he weighed it out. "We could have a mental health professional present at any questioning—keep it controlled, make sure she's not pushed too far. Or she could just use the Fifth. You and her don't really know too much anyway—his location, his tech, that's all on him. It'd be up to the local field office and their special agents to do their own homework if they ever hope to catch him." His words were clipped, practical, already mapping the edges of a plan.

Theresa nodded to herself, leaning against the counter, the cool edge pressing into her hip. "Yeah, that's it," she said, her voice firming up. "She's a mess, John—she's fragile, can barely handle today, let alone a fed with a badge. I just need her safe, not caught in his fallout." The shower shut off down the hall, the sudden silence ringing in her ears, and she pictured Lucy—wet hair, shaky hands—too breakable for what might come.

"Got it," John replied. "I'll pull some strings, get a psych referral lined up if it escalates. They can't force her to talk if she's not fit, and you're not in the crosshairs either. Sit tight—I'll handle it." The line clicked off, and Theresa set the phone down, her breath easing just a fraction. She'd built a shield, thin but real, and now it was wait-and-see—hoping Jody held off, hoping her brother stayed smart, hoping Lucy could hold on.

The next morning, Jody sat at her desk, the faint hum of the fish tank buzzing in the background as she dialed the MSP that managed their small office account. Her fingers tapped the edge of her clipboard, the weight of yesterday still pressing on her—Theresa's warning, Lucy's collapse, the specter of surveillance. "Did we have any strange activity yesterday," she asked, her voice crisp, "especially at my office?"

The tech on the other end, a man with a clipped, bored tone, responded after a brief pause, the faint clack of keys audible through the line. "Let me check the dashboard," he said, then, after a moment, "No anomalies here. All clear." His

voice carried the confidence of routine, the dashboard's green lights a reassuring pulse—nothing out of place, no red flags blinking.

Jody frowned, leaning back in her chair, the pen in her hand twirling slowly. All clear. It didn't sit right. If Theresa was to be believed—and Lucy's husband was one of the best in cybersecurity, a mind sharp enough to write papers for governments and dodge traps like this—wouldn't he be too slick to trip a basic MSP's sensors? Her gut twisted, a quiet doubt creeping in. He'd be layers deep, cloaked in tricks they couldn't even sniff out, not leaving crumbs for some small-time managed service provider to catch. Or maybe—her pen stilled—Theresa had overhyped him, built him into a phantom genius when he was just a man with a grudge and a laptop. Either way, the "all clear" felt hollow, a thin reassurance against the unease prickling her spine. She thanked the tech, hung up, and stared at the phone, wondering if he was still out there, watching, waiting, too smart to be seen—or if the silence was his retreat.

Jody set the phone down from the MSP call, her unease festering, a nagging itch she couldn't shake. The "all clear" rang false, too clean for the mess she'd waded through yesterday. She picked up the receiver again, her fingers punching in a number she'd used before, a direct line to the local FBI field office where she'd collaborated on past cases. The line clicked, and she straightened in her chair. "May I speak with Special Agent Mark Maxwell, please," she said, her voice steady, professional. "It's Jody Foster. Thank you." She waited, the hold music a faint buzz, her pen tapping a restless beat against her desk until the line crackled back to life.

"This is Special Agent Maxwell," Mark's voice came through, deep and familiar, a hint of curiosity threading through. "How can I help you, Jody?"

Jody exhaled, leaning forward as she launched in. "Mark, I had a session yesterday that's got me worried," she said, her tone clipped but urgent. "There's a potential hacker involved—Lucy's husband. Theresa, his sister, hinted he's watching them, maybe us too. We're talking invasion of privacy, ethical violations, possible stalking. He's supposedly some cybersecurity expert—government-level smart. I checked with my MSP, and they saw nothing, but I don't buy it. He might be too good to get caught that easy."

Mark let out a low hum, processing. "Ah, I see," he said, his voice sharpening with interest. "I'll come by tomorrow, and we'll chat about it further. Get the lay of the

land." He paused, then added, "You got a name for this guy? I can start digging."

Jody nodded to herself, flipping open her notes. "Yeah, it's [insert husband's name here]," she said, reading it off cleanly. "That's him. Lucy's husband. Theresa's brother. Start there." She set the pen down, her fingers lingering on the page, the weight of handing him over settling in—necessary, but heavy.

"Got it," Mark replied, the faint scratch of him jotting it down audible. "I'll run the background, see what pops. Sit tight, Jody—we'll figure this out." The call ended with a click, and she leaned back, staring at the fish tank's slow bubbles, her gut churning. She'd pulled the trigger, set the wheels turning, and now it was Mark's move—hoping he'd find something, anything, to prove she wasn't chasing shadows.

Husband X sat hunched over his screens, the dim glow casting sharp shadows across his face when an alert flared—red and insistent, cutting through the quiet hum of his setup. His fingers froze mid-keystroke, eyes narrowing as he scanned the message. The FBI had been pinged, and he knew the name tied to it: Mark Maxwell, a field agent he'd clocked from past research, a dogged bastard who didn't let go easy. Another alert pulsed—his personnel files at OPM had been accessed, tripped by the silent traps he'd buried deep in the system, a digital tripwire he'd set to scream the moment anyone brushed his data. He smirked, a bitter twist of his lips. They were moving fast, but he'd seen it coming.

He leaned back, cracking his knuckles, his mind already racing ahead. Before the MSP call had even cleared Jody's desk, he'd slipped into their systems—child's play for him—planting a RAT, a remote access trojan, sleek and undetectable. It let him slither out of the therapist's office network, erasing his tracks, leaving nothing for their dashboards to catch. The RAT sat quiet now, a ghost in their machine, ready to whisper back to him if they got too close. He wasn't about to let Maxwell or some small-time MSP pin him down—not yet, not ever.

His chair scraped as he stood, the decision locking in. Time to move. He grabbed his go-bag—pre-packed, essentials only: laptop, drives, passport under an alias he'd burned into memory. The satin nightgown stayed on the couch, a relic he couldn't take, its folds catching the screen's glow as he powered down his rig, wiping it clean with a script that shredded every trace. Overseas was the play—somewhere far, somewhere tangled in jurisdictions Maxwell couldn't touch. He'd bounce through proxies, SIP calls from a jumpbox in Eastern Europe or Southeast

Asia, a shadow slipping through the cracks. His jaw tightened as he slung the bag over his shoulder, the alerts still blinking in his mind. Lucy's voice—"I broke us"—echoed faintly, but he shoved it down. This wasn't running; it was surviving. He locked the door behind him, the click final, his sights set on the horizon.

Husband X stood at the edge of his now-empty hideout, the weight of his go-bag digging into his shoulder, his heart a torn, bleeding thing. Leaving Lucy behind—vanishing like Jason Bourne, a ghost in the wind—ripped him apart. Her voice, her song, her text still clung to him, a thread he couldn't sever, but he had no choice. The FBI was closing in, Maxwell's name a ticking clock, and he couldn't let them trace him back to her, to Theresa, to the life he'd already fractured. His jaw clenched as he fired up his laptop one last time, fingers flying across the keys. He erased every digital footprint he'd left in Theresa's house—cameras, mics, the ghosts of his surveillance—then scrubbed the exploits from their phones, the RATs dissolving into nothing. No breadcrumbs, no echoes. He was gone.

But it gutted him. He'd have to find another way to reach them—Lucy's tears, Theresa's pleas—or wait out the FBI's hunt, which could stretch into forever. Maxwell wouldn't quit, and a Red Notice from Interpol loomed if he didn't move fast. His mind churned, already spinning a new play: a zero-day exploit, something pristine, untainted by Pegasus or Cellebrite, beyond Zerodium's grasp. Unique, undetectable—a key to slip back into their lives when the heat died down. But that was later. Now, he had to run, get ahead of the net closing in. Europe was his target—somewhere gray and labyrinthine, a place to vanish before the world painted him red. He zipped the laptop into his bag, his breath sharp, and stepped into the night, the ache of leaving her a quiet fire he'd carry across the sea.

Weeks slipped by, quiet and heavy, the days blurring into a haze neither Theresa nor Lucy could fully grasp. They didn't know—couldn't know—the storm Husband X had fled, the digital purge he'd wrought, the shadow he'd become. Lucy shuffled through the house, her steps slow, her showers long, her singing softer now, while Theresa kept watch, her phone silent, her brother's absence a void she felt but couldn't name. Life settled into an uneasy rhythm, until a turn of events cracked it open.

Husband X had known this was coming, had orchestrated it from afar. The divorce papers—his final cut, a mercy he forced himself to grant. He'd signed them in a dim room halfway across the world, his pen shaking, his heart a raw wound. Lucy

needed closure, a clean break to move on without his ghost dragging her back. He'd wired the last of his provisions through a proxy, erased his traces, and let the papers fly—his love a burden he wouldn't let her carry anymore.

A sharp knock rattled the front door, slicing through the afternoon stillness. Theresa straightened, her breath catching as she crossed the room, her hand steady on the knob. She opened it to a man in a plain suit, his face blank, official. "Ms. Lombardi?" he asked, his voice flat.

"No," Theresa replied, her tone firm, masking the tremor in her chest. "I'll get her." She knew what this was—the weight of those papers, the end she'd braced for. She steeled herself, squaring her shoulders, and turned back into the house. "Lucy," she called, her voice soft but unyielding, "come with me, please." She found her in the kitchen, staring at a mug of tea gone cold, and took her hand—warm, fragile, trembling. Lucy looked up, confusion flickering in her eyes, but she followed, her bare feet whispering against the floor as Theresa led her to the living room, to the open door.

The man leaned forward, extending a crisp envelope, his fingers brushing hers as he handed it over. "Lucille Lombardi?" he confirmed, and Lucy nodded faintly, her grip tightening on Theresa's hand. The papers landed in her grasp, heavy despite their thinness, and the man stepped back, tipping his head before retreating down the steps. The door clicked shut behind him, leaving silence in his wake, the envelope a bomb ticking in Lucy's hands.

Lucy's fingers trembled as she tore open the envelope, her eyes darting across the pages, skimming fast, her breath hitching with every line. "He's left me everything," she whispered, shock and awe tangling in her voice, raw and unsteady. The house, the accounts, the provisions—it was all hers, a flood of generosity she couldn't process. She flipped further, the words blurring as instructions emerged, penned by his attorney, not him. Simple, stark: drop the marriage name, return to her maiden one—Lombardi no more—because of his tangle with the authorities, his flight into the shadows. Her chest tightened, the weight of it crashing in—freedom, loss, a final cut all at once.

Her vision swam, the papers slipping from her hands as the room tilted. Her knees buckled, and she blacked out, her body crumpling like a marionette with its strings snapped. She hit the floor hard, a dull thud echoing through the living room, the papers scattering around her like fallen leaves.

Theresa lunged forward, her heart lurching as she dropped to her knees beside her. "Lucy! Oh, Lucy!" she cried, her voice sharp with panic. She cradled Lucy's head, her hands shaking as she brushed damp hair from her pale face, feeling for a pulse—there, faint but steady. "Come on, wake up," she murmured, her breath ragged, her eyes darting to the spilled papers, the stark end of her brother's tether now a weight on the floor. She held Lucy close, the hardwood cold beneath them, fear and resolve warring in her chest as she waited for her to stir.

Theresa fumbled for her phone, her hands slick with sweat as she dialed, her voice tight but steady. "911, my sister-in-law fainted and hit the floor hard. She's non-responsive," she said, her eyes locked on Lucy's still form, the scattered papers a silent witness around them.

The operator's voice cut through, calm and clipped. "We'll send someone right away." The line clicked off, and Theresa dropped the phone, kneeling back beside Lucy, her fingers brushing her cheek, willing her to move, to breathe, anything.

The wail of sirens sliced through the quiet soon after, the ambulance screeching to a stop outside. Paramedics burst in, boots heavy on the hardwood, a rush of motion as they dropped beside Lucy. One pressed two fingers to her neck, nodding faintly—pulse still there—while another cracked open a kit, pulling out an oxygen mask. They worked fast, rousing her with gentle shakes and sharp commands, and Lucy stirred, her eyes fluttering open, dazed and glassy. The mask settled over her face, the hiss of oxygen steadyng her shallow breaths. "Dehydrated," one paramedic muttered, checking her vitals, his gloved hand lifting her wrist. "She's not eating."

Theresa hovered close, her chest tight, watching as they stabilized her. The mix of meds hit her then—the SSRI, Zoloft, recently upped, and the Chantix, almost done but still clawing at Lucy's system. The toll was clear: her frail frame, the dark circles under her eyes, the way she'd collapsed under the weight of the papers. A paramedic glanced at Theresa, his voice low. "She's nearly through the Chantix, but the Zoloft increase—it's hitting her hard. Needs fluids, food, rest." They lifted Lucy onto a stretcher, her body limp but awake, the oxygen mask fogging with each breath as they wheeled her out, Theresa trailing behind, her hands clenched, the divorce papers left crumpled on the floor.

The ambulance rocked as it sped through the streets, sirens blaring, the sterile hum of machinery filling the tight space. Theresa sat crammed in the back, her

hand locked around Lucy's, her grip firm despite the tremor in her fingers. "Lucy, we'll be there soon," she said, her voice soft but steady, cutting through the chaos as she watched Lucy's chest rise and fall beneath the oxygen mask, her eyes half-open, unfocused.

Minutes later, the ambulance screeched to a halt outside the trauma ER, doors flying open as paramedics wheeled Lucy out, the stretcher rattling against the pavement. Theresa followed close, her boots pounding the tiles as they burst into the hospital, the medical team swarming like bees to a hive. Nurses and doctors converged, voices sharp and overlapping—"Dehydration, SSRI adjustment, possible shock"—as they assessed her, hands moving with practiced speed. An IV needle glinted under the harsh lights, piercing Lucy's arm, and she jolted, a raw cry tearing from her throat. Disoriented, her free hand flailed, swinging wild, catching a nurse's shoulder with a weak, desperate punch. "Oh, baby, don't leave me," she wailed, her voice cracking, thick with confusion and pain, her head lolling as the IV dripped fluids into her vein.

Theresa stood just beyond the fray, her hand still warm from Lucy's grasp, her heart shredding at the sound of her cries. "Oh, what has my brother done," she whispered, the words slipping out, a quiet ache as she watched Lucy thrash, lost in a haze of grief and meds. The nurses restrained her gently, their voices soothing but firm, and Theresa's eyes stung, torn between the sister-in-law crumbling before her and the brother who'd fled, leaving this wreckage in his wake.

Somewhere in Europe, the red notice flashed across Interpol's network, a digital net snapping shut. Husband X's passport—his legal one—canceled, stranding him like Snowden in Moscow years back, a fugitive pinned by bureaucracy. But he wasn't cornered, not yet. He sat in a dim rented room, the glow of his laptop painting his face, his fingers steady as he shuffled through aliases—passports, IDs, lives he'd crafted with a spy's precision. He was a master at this, his craft honed over years, and he could vanish into the Black Forest, a prepper's haven, living off-grid indefinitely. Supplies cached, routes mapped—he could do it. But his jaw tightened, his eyes flickering to the screen. That wasn't the life he wanted: a shadow hiding in the trees, cut off from her, from everything. He wanted more, even now.

Back at the hospital, Lucy lay still in a crisp bed, the IV dripping steadily, her breathing slow and even under the faint hum of monitors. The chaos had ebbed—she'd settled, resting peacefully at last, her face slack, the oxygen mask replaced by a nasal cannula. Theresa stood by the bedside, her arms crossed, watching the rise and fall of Lucy's chest. She'd gone through so much—too much—crushed by grief, meds, and the divorce papers that had floored her, literally. But now, Theresa thought, now she could heal. Move on. With her help. Lucy was family, more than ever, not just her brother's ex but a tether Theresa wouldn't let snap. Lucy had no one else—her kids long gone, chasing their own lives, grandkids a distant memory. It was just them now, and Theresa's resolve hardened, a quiet vow to see her through as the hospital lights buzzed softly overhead.

Lucy stirred, her eyes fluttering open, the hospital room's sterile glow seeping into her haze. "T, are you here?" she croaked, her voice frail, searching, her head shifting on the pillow.

Theresa leaned closer, her hand resting lightly on the bedrail, her voice warm and steady. "Yes, dear, I'm here. Always." She offered a small, reassuring smile, her eyes soft but tired, anchoring Lucy in the moment.

Lucy's gaze settled on her, tracing Theresa's familiar form, and a flicker of confusion crossed her face. "Why does this keep happening to me?" she asked, her tone trembling, a mix of exhaustion and quiet despair as her free hand tugged at the IV line taped to her skin.

Theresa sighed, pulling a chair closer and sitting, her hand sliding over Lucy's. "It's because of the trauma, the meds, and..." She paused, her voice gentling. "You not eating. You need your fats and proteins. You used to do it before—and very well too. You're a fabulous cook." Her lips quirked up, a spark of encouragement breaking through the weight.

Lucy's face softened, a faint smile tugging at her lips, the first in days. "Yes," she murmured, her eyes drifting as memory flickered—pots simmering, spices in the air. "I need to cook again." Then her smile faltered, guilt creeping in. "I'm sorry, I've been a leech and a burden lately."

Theresa squeezed her hand, firm and quick. "No," she said, her voice resolute, cutting through the apology. "You're family." Her eyes held Lucy's, unyielding, a promise etched there.

Lucy's breath hitched, her smile fading as she glanced at the papers on the bedside table, the divorce stark in black ink. "I'm not a Lombardi anymore," she said, her voice small, the words a quiet wound as she tested their shape, her maiden name a ghost she hadn't yet claimed.

Theresa's grip tightened, her thumb brushing Lucy's knuckles. "You're still you," she said, low and fierce. "And you're still mine." The room hummed around them, monitors beeping softly, but in that space, it was just them—family redefined, unbroken by names or distance.

Lucy fumbled with the papers on the bedside table, her fingers shaky as she pulled them closer, squinting at the dense text through the hospital's dim light. "T, what is this?" she asked, her voice hoarse, tinged with confusion. "Instructions. This seems like something else other than the divorce itself." Her brow furrowed, the IV line tugging at her arm as she shifted, trying to make sense of the words swimming before her.

Theresa leaned in, peering over her shoulder, her own eyes scanning the lines she'd glimpsed earlier. "From what I gather," she said, her tone measured, piecing it together, "it's a transfer of assets. But it doesn't state what kind of assets. And so, that's why there's further instructions—his attorney's the only one who can give them, and it's for our eyes only." She sat back, her hand resting on Lucy's arm, steadyng her as the weight of it settled between them.

With Husband X on the run, those assets—whatever they were—sat shielded behind his attorney's lockbox, untouchable by the feds or anyone else once Lucy claimed them. A fortress of legal maneuvering, his last act of provision woven into his escape. Theresa's mind ticked over it—money, property, something hidden deeper maybe—but Lucy's recovery came first. She couldn't chase this riddle, not yet, not with her body still frail, her mind teetering. "Rest now," Theresa murmured, easing the papers from Lucy's grip. "We'll figure it out when you're stronger." Lucy nodded faintly, her eyes drifting shut, the mystery of his final gift a quiet shadow waiting beyond the hospital walls.

The FBI didn't waste time. Mark Maxwell sat at his desk in the field office, the hum of fluorescent lights overhead as he fired off encrypted emails to Interpol, kicking off an inter-agency collaboration to hunt Husband X. This wasn't a local chase anymore—it was global, a net cast wide across borders. He picked up the phone, dialing a liaison at GCHQ, then another at the NSA, his voice clipped and urgent as

he laid it out: Husband X, ex-cybersecurity genius, security clearances up to his ears, a spymaster who'd slipped into the wind. "He's a ghost," Maxwell said, tapping a pen against his notepad. "If we're gonna catch him, we need your eyes—sigint, backdoors, anything he might've touched." The liaisons agreed, their responses terse, already pulling strings to tap into their networks.

Husband X wouldn't be easy—Maxwell knew that. The guy was a step ahead, a shadow who'd built his life on evasion, his aliases a maze, his tech a fortress. The NSA had his old clearance profiles, GCHQ could sniff his digital echoes across Europe, but pinning him? That was a race against a mind that didn't slip. Interpol's red notice was live, his passport dead, but Maxwell's gut told him X was already buried under a new name, a new life. The inter-agency machine roared to life—data pings, satellite sweeps, chatter scans—a global hunt for the elusive Husband X, with Maxwell at the helm, chasing a phantom who might never be caught.

Husband X sat in a cramped attic room somewhere in Europe, the slanted ceiling pressing low, the faint drip of a leak tapping in the corner. Sadness gnawed at him, a quiet ache he couldn't shake. He didn't want to be remembered like John McAfee—wild, unhinged, a cautionary tale ending with a noose in a Mexican cell. That wasn't him, wasn't the legacy he'd choose. If anything, he wanted Lucy to see him not broken, not a fugitive smeared across headlines, but risen—successful, whole, more than the mess he'd left behind. But how? The question gnawed deeper, his aliases a shield but his heart exposed. He missed her—God, he missed her—her voice, her chaos, the way she'd hum in the shower. Regret coiled tight in his chest, a bitter thread for how it all unraveled, his flight a necessity that felt like betrayal.

Back at Theresa's, the TV murmured in the living room, a low drone as Theresa flipped channels, half-listening. Then a report cut through, sharp and sudden. "In other news," the anchor's voice rang out, "the DoJ today filed an indictment against the elusive John Lombardi, believed to have last been in Europe..." The words hung, stark and heavy, the screen flashing a grainy photo—his face, younger, from some old file.

In the kitchen, Lucy stood with a glass of water trembling in her hand, the anchor's voice hitting her like a jolt. "John Lombardi..." Her breath caught, the glass slipping from her fingers, crashing to the floor in a spray of shards and water. She froze, eyes wide, shock locking her in place as the name—*his* name—echoed, a ghost

from the papers now blaring into her world. Theresa spun at the sound, rushing in, her heart sinking as she saw Lucy's pale face, the broken glass glinting at her feet. "Lucy—" she started, but the words stalled, the news still droning, tying them all to the man who'd vanished, now hunted, his shadow stretching back to them across the airwaves.

Lucy stumbled forward, her breath ragged, distress clawing at her as she lunged for her guitar propped against the couch. "Theresa, please..." she rasped, her voice a plea as she fumbled with the remote, silencing the TV's droning report. The room fell quiet, save for the faint clink of glass shards still settling on the kitchen floor. She sank onto the couch, pulling the guitar into her lap, her fingers trembling as she positioned them on the strings. She strummed, a soft, mournful chord, and began to sing—"Goodbye love..."—her voice cracking, tears spilling down her cheeks, streaking her face as she choked out the words. Each note quivered, a raw, broken lament, her body swaying slightly as she poured her pain into the music.

Theresa stood rooted in the doorway, her hands clenched at her sides, shock and sorrow twisting her chest as she watched. Lucy's tears fell faster, dripping onto the guitar's wood, her voice fraying but relentless, a desperate release. Theresa's heart sank—she'd thought they could move on, that the divorce, the assets, the quiet days might stitch Lucy back together. But now this—his name on the news, the DoJ's indictment, a red notice snapping shut across the ocean. If they caught him, dragged him back to the States, it'd be courtrooms, depositions, law enforcement swarming their lives like flies. She didn't want it—not for herself, not for Lucy, who sat there breaking all over again, her song a fragile thread holding her together and tearing her apart. All Theresa could do was watch, helpless, the weight of her brother's shadow crashing back into their fragile peace.

Lucy's fingers shifted on the fretboard, the mournful strum of "Goodbye Love" fading into a new melody, softer, more piercing. Her voice, still thick with tears, found the notes of a Carpenters song she'd always loved. "Tell me why then," she sang, her tone fragile but steady, "why should it be that... we go on, hurting each other... we go on..." The words trembled, each one a quiet stab, her tears slowing but still tracing paths down her cheeks. She rocked gently, the guitar a shield and a lifeline, pouring her heart into the lyrics—loss, confusion, the endless cycle of pain she couldn't escape.

Theresa recognized it instantly, the Carpenters' melancholy a thread woven deep into Lucy's soul. This wasn't just a song; it was her—a raw, unfiltered echo of how she felt, her love for Husband X tangled with the hurt they'd dealt each other, now spilling out in chords and whispered lines. Theresa's throat tightened, her eyes fixed on Lucy's hunched form, the way her fingers gripped the strings like they were all she had left.

Lucy had been clawing her way back—slowly, shakily. She'd quit smoking, the Chantix finally behind her, and her mental state had edged toward something like stability, a fragile normalcy Theresa had nurtured day by day. Cooking again, small smiles, fewer breakdowns—she'd made progress, real progress. But now, with his name blaring from the news, the indictment a fresh wound, Theresa's hope teetered. She prayed this wouldn't unravel it all, wouldn't shatter the delicate work Lucy had done to stitch herself together. The song hung in the air, a plea and a lament, and Theresa stood silent, her heart heavy, willing Lucy to hold on through this new storm.

Lucy pulled herself upright, her spine stiffening as she rose from the couch, the guitar still cradled in her arms. Her fingers found the strings again, a new song spilling out, her voice raw but resolute. "There goes my heart beating," she sang, stepping forward, her bare feet brushing the hardwood, "'cause you are the reason... I'm losing sleep... please come back now." The words trembled, a desperate pulse threading through the melody, her eyes distant, fixed on some unseen point as she swayed, the music a tether to the man she'd lost.

Theresa's chest tightened, her voice breaking through, soft but strained. "Oh, Lucy, you can't keep going this way." She stepped closer, her hands hovering, wanting to reach out but held back by the ache tearing at her heart. Would Lucy ever be the same? The question gnawed at her, watching this woman—her family—pour her soul into a plea for a man who'd vanished, who'd signed her away. Theresa's eyes stung, the weight of Lucy's longing a mirror to her own grief for the brother she couldn't save.

"My heart keeps bleeding, I need you now," Lucy's voice rang out, stronger now, the notes piercing the room, her tears dry but her face etched with yearning. She stood tall, the guitar a shield, her song a cry that echoed beyond the wall.

Theresa knew it—despite the divorce, despite his flight, Lucy's heart hadn't let go. And it never would, not fully. The legal end was just ink; the emotional tether

stretched taut across oceans, unbreakable even as it bled her dry. Theresa sank onto the couch, her hands clasped, watching Lucy sing, her hope for normalcy fraying against the truth: he was gone, and Lucy was still here, breaking for him, maybe always would.

Lucy's fingers shifted again, the guitar's strings humming as she transitioned into a new song, her voice cracking with the weight of what hurt most. "I'd love love again," she sang, her tone soft but piercing, "if I knew it was the last time, I would've broken my heart in two..." She paused, her breath hitching, then pressed on, "I'll never give my heart away to a stranger..." The words hung heavy, a vow wrapped in regret, her eyes glistening as she stood there, swaying faintly, the music a raw confession of her shattered trust, her longing for what was lost. Each note trembled, her voice fraying at the edges, but she kept going, pouring the ache into every chord.

Theresa watched, rooted to the couch, tears welling in her own eyes, spilling over as she blinked them back. Lucy's pain was a living thing—visible in the slump of her shoulders, audible in the quiver of her voice—and it cut Theresa deep. She could see it, hear it, feel it: the hurt that wouldn't let go, the love that lingered like a bruise. Her chest ached, her hands twisting together as she fought the urge to pull Lucy into her arms, to shield her from a wound she couldn't heal.

Her mind drifted, unbidden, to her brother—Husband X—somewhere out there, hidden in Europe's shadows. She remembered him singing once, years back, his voice low and rough: "Tell me that your sweet love hasn't died..." The memory hit her like a wave, and she knew, wherever he was, he was hurting too. For Lucy. For them. The divorce papers hadn't severed that; his flight hadn't erased it. They were mirrors, these two, bleeding across the distance—her with her guitar, him with his ghosts—and Theresa sat caught between them, tears slipping down her cheeks, helpless to mend what they'd both broken.

Lucy's last note faded, the guitar's hum dissolving into silence as she set it down, her hands trembling slightly. She turned to Theresa, her eyes red and raw, and stepped forward, collapsing into her arms. Theresa met her halfway, wrapping her tightly, their embrace a tangle of shared grief. They held each other close, tears streaming freely, their sobs mingling in the quiet room. Lucy's sadness poured out—a lost love, a wound that wouldn't close—while Theresa's came from a different ache: her brother's safety, the void of missing him, the fear of what he'd become.

They clung to each other, two women bound by a man who'd left them both, crying for reasons that overlapped yet diverged, their sorrow a bridge between them.

As their tears slowed, Theresa's mind shifted, her grip on Lucy softening. Tomorrow loomed—a new chapter, a trip to Husband X's attorney to unravel whatever he'd left behind, the assets and instructions shrouded in mystery. She wanted Lucy ready, steady for it, but a quiet battle tugged at her. The caretaker role ran deep—too deep—etched into every meal she'd coaxed Lucy to eat, every night she'd sat by her side. She had to fight it, had to stop treating Lucy like a fragile child and see her as the adult woman she was, capable despite her cracks. Theresa loosened her hold, brushing a hand through Lucy's hair, wary of letting attachment twist into something unhealthy. They'd face tomorrow together, but she'd do it as family, not a crutch—both of them needing to stand, even if their legs shook.

The sun barely crested the horizon as Theresa and Lucy stepped into the attorney's office, the air crisp with morning chill and the faint scent of polished wood greeting them. The attorney—a wiry man with a brisk smile—stood as they entered, gesturing to two chairs across his desk. "It's a pleasure to meet you both," he said, his voice smooth, professional. "Here's the paperwork John wanted you to have. Just sign off, and I'll make the transfer happen." He slid a thick stack of documents across the desk, neatly clipped, the weight of Husband X's intentions bound in ink.

Lucy took the pages, her fingers brushing the edges as she scanned them, her breath catching. "T," she said, her voice a mix of shock and wonder, "there's an estate—assets I knew nothing about, with accompanying accounts." Her eyes darted over the lines—property deeds, account numbers, sums that made her head spin—hidden pieces of a life he'd kept veiled, now laid bare for her.

Theresa leaned over, her gaze sweeping the text, a quiet realization settling in. "My brother was prepared," she said, her tone steady but tinged with awe. "This was all planned. Despite his flaws, the broken marriage, and the divorce, he still loves you—wanted to make sure if he was out of your life, you were well taken care of." She shook her head faintly, a bittersweet ache blooming as she saw his care woven into every detail, a final act of devotion from a man on the run.

Lucy's eyes widened as she flipped further, her voice lifting. "T, you're in here too—he left you assets as well." She pointed to a section, her finger tracing lines that spelled out accounts, a share of the estate, a piece of his shadow empire carved out for his sister. The room stilled, the attorney watching quietly as the two women absorbed the scope of it—Husband X's love, his guilt, his foresight reaching across the distance to hold them both, even as he vanished from their grasp.

Theresa clutched the stack of papers, her knuckles whitening as she turned to the attorney, her voice edged with worry. "This all does no good if it's not shielded from the feds," she said, her eyes narrowing, the weight of her brother's fugitive status pressing down. The idea of losing it all to a government seizure loomed like a storm cloud—she'd seen enough news to know how they could claw back anything tied to a wanted man.

The attorney leaned back, his hands folding calmly on the desk, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "John anticipated that," he said, his tone smooth, confident. "They're 100% protected. Both John and I stepped through this—several layers of protection, all in place right now." He tapped a finger on the desk, as if pointing to the invisible fortress they'd built—trusts, offshore accounts, legal shells woven tight to keep the feds' hands off. "It's airtight."

Theresa exhaled, a flicker of relief softening her grip, but her brow creased again. "I have no idea how to even handle all this," she admitted, glancing at Lucy, who sat quiet, still processing, "let alone Lucy would." The numbers, the properties—it was a maze, overwhelming, far beyond the scope of their everyday lives.

The attorney nodded, unfazed. "I could recommend a great financial planner," he offered, pulling a card from his drawer and sliding it across. "She's solid—won't steal your funds. And if you wish, you could keep me on retainer. I'd be happy to help." His voice was steady, a lifeline extended, his eyes meeting theirs with a quiet promise of guidance.

Theresa took the card, her fingers brushing the embossed name as she looked up. "Thank you," she said, her voice firming, gratitude threading through the uncertainty. The papers felt lighter now, less a burden and more a tool—Husband X's last gift, secured and waiting, a path forward she and Lucy could navigate, together, with help.

Theresa tucked the financial planner's card into her pocket, the attorney's assurances still ringing in her ears as she and Lucy stepped out of the office into

the sharp morning light. The stack of papers sat heavy in her bag, a tangible link to her brother's shadow life, now theirs to wield. Lucy walked beside her, quiet, her hands fidgeting with the strap of her own small purse, her eyes distant but clearer than they'd been in weeks. The weight of the estate, the accounts—it hung between them, unspoken but felt, a lifeline and a question mark all at once.

They climbed into the car, the engine humming to life as Theresa pulled out of the lot. "You okay?" she asked, glancing at Lucy, her voice gentle but probing, searching for cracks.

Lucy nodded slowly, her gaze fixed out the window, the passing streets a blur. "Yeah," she said, her voice soft, steadier than Theresa expected. "It's just... a lot. He left us all this, T. Even after everything." Her fingers tightened on the strap, a faint tremble there, but she didn't cry—not this time.

Theresa's grip tightened on the wheel, her chest aching with a mix of pride and sorrow. "He did," she said, her tone low. "Flawed as he is, running as he is—he still wanted us safe. You most of all." She kept her eyes on the road, but her mind churned—Husband X's love, warped by his choices, now crystallized in deeds and dollars, protected from the feds' reach. It was a chance, a fresh start, if they could handle it.

Lucy turned to her, a small, weary smile tugging at her lips. "And you too, T. You're in this with me." Her voice held a thread of warmth, a quiet strength peeking through the fragility.

Theresa returned the smile, faint but real. "Always," she said, and they drove on, the papers in her bag a map to a future they'd have to chart—together, step by shaky step.

Lucy's fingers tapped the onboard nav system, punching in an address with a quiet focus that caught Theresa's eye. She glanced over, a flicker of curiosity breaking through her steady grip on the wheel. "Someone's got their eye on something," she said, a teasing lilt in her voice, her lips quirking up as she caught Lucy's faint nod.

Theresa flicked the blinker, smoothly changing lanes. "Let's go," she said, her tone warm, decisive. "You deserve it, my dear." The car hummed along, the morning sun glinting off the hood as they veered toward Lucy's unspoken destination, a small detour from the weight of attorneys and assets.

They pulled up to an instrument store, its weathered sign swinging faintly above the door. Inside, the air smelled of wood and polish, shelves lined with guitars, violins, a quiet hum of potential. Lucy wandered ahead, her steps tentative but purposeful, her eyes scanning the offerings. Then she stopped, her gaze landing on a viola—dark, sleek, its curves catching the light. She lifted it gently, her fingers brushing the strings as she strummed once, twice, the sound rough but alive. She adjusted the pegs, tuning it with a practiced ear, her focus narrowing as the notes sharpened into clarity.

Theresa lingered nearby, arms crossed, watching as Lucy warmed up, her hands finding their rhythm. The first few bars spilled out—slow, mournful—and Theresa shot her a look, one eyebrow raised, a silent nudge. Lucy caught it, a flicker of understanding passing between them, and her lips twitched into a small smile. Time for something else, something lighter. Her fingers shifted, and she launched into “Bohemian Rhapsody,” the viola’s deep tones bending into the iconic opening, playful and bold. The store seemed to brighten, the music filling the space, and Theresa’s grin widened, her foot tapping faintly as Lucy played, a spark of life cutting through the shadows they’d carried.

Theresa stood there, her jaw softening in quiet shock as Lucy coaxed “Bohemian Rhapsody” from the viola, the rich, resonant tones a world away from the guitar’s familiar twang. It wasn’t perfect—her fingers stumbled slightly, adjusting to the bow’s weight—but for a first go, it was far from bad. The viola’s voice sang through the store, bold and unexpected, and Theresa’s eyes widened, a mix of surprise and pride flickering across her face.

Lucy paused, lowering the bow, and waved to the shopkeeper—a lanky man behind the counter who’d been watching with a faint grin. “I want this one,” she said, her voice firm, decisive. She turned to Theresa, her eyes alight with a spark Theresa hadn’t seen in weeks. “I’m gonna master this one,” she declared, clutching the viola closer. “Handling a bow is much different than frets. Even the sheet music is different—but this will give me something to do, agreed?” Her tone lifted, a challenge and a plea woven together, her fingers brushing the strings as if already mapping out the hours ahead.

Theresa nodded, her shock melting into a warm smile. “Agreed,” she said, her voice steady, encouraging. “It’s yours, Lucy. Something new—something good.” She stepped closer, resting a hand on Lucy’s shoulder, the viola a tangible shift, a

piece of purpose Lucy could hold onto amid the chaos they'd weathered. The shopkeeper shuffled over, ready to ring it up, and Theresa felt a quiet relief settle in—Lucy wasn't just surviving now; she was reaching, and that was enough for today.

Lucy slid her wallet from her purse, flipping it open with a quiet resolve, and handed the shopkeeper her card. "Thank you," she said, her voice soft but steady, a faint tremor of excitement beneath it as she watched him swipe it through the reader.

The gentleman—a wiry figure with a kind, weathered face—beamed back, handing her the receipt and the viola, now hers. "No, thank you, fine lady," he replied, his tone warm, genuine. Lucy paused, meeting his eyes for a brief moment, and a smile broke across her face—small, unguarded, real. "Have a nice day," she said, tucking the card back and cradling the instrument close.

Theresa caught the exchange, the flicker of connection, and her own lips curved into a quiet smile. It was a crack of happiness, a sliver of light piercing Lucy's gloom, and it warmed her chest. She hoped—prayed—this viola would swallow Lucy up, pull her into its strings and notes, drown out the ache of Husband X, the worry that still shadowed her. A new focus, a distraction that could heal.

Their eyes locked as they turned to leave, Theresa's gaze steady, encouraging. "Are you ready to learn something new?" she asked, her voice lifting, a spark of challenge in it as she nodded toward the viola.

Lucy's smile lingered, her grip tightening on the case. "Yeah," she said, a quiet fire in her tone. "I am." They stepped out into the day, the instrument a promise between them, a fresh page Lucy could write on her own terms.

Theresa eased the car into the driveway, the engine ticking down as they stepped out, Lucy cradling the viola case like a fragile treasure. Inside, they shed their coats, settling into the familiar hum of home—Theresa tossing her keys onto the counter, Lucy setting the viola by the couch. As they unwound, Theresa turned to her, her voice casual but curious. "As I saw, you know the state of the financials he left," she said, leaning against the kitchen island. "We've got the option now—work if we choose to, or not. What do you have in mind with all this extra time you'll have?"

Lucy paused, her fingers brushing the viola case, a faint smile tugging at her lips as she looked up. "You know what I'll do," she said, her tone quiet but firm, a spark igniting behind her eyes. "I have a life to rebuild, and perhaps music can be it. I want to express myself through it—share it with others." Her voice grew steadier, the idea taking shape, a lifeline she could weave from strings and sound.

Theresa's face softened, her smile widening as she nodded. "I'll support you all the way," she said, her words warm, unwavering. "Maybe you can get a few gigs here in town. You'll do great." She stepped closer, resting a hand on Lucy's shoulder, a silent promise in her touch—believing in her, rooting for this new thread Lucy was spinning, a way forward that didn't need to echo with his absence. The viola sat waiting, its case a quiet invitation, and for the first time in a while, the air between them felt lighter, edged with possibility.

One morning, the kitchen glowed with soft sunlight, coffee brewing as Lucy sat at the table, her fingers tapping restlessly against her mug. She turned to Theresa, her brow furrowed, a thought that had been gnawing at her spilling out. "T," she said, her voice tentative but edged with hope, "I have an idea that's been eating at me—could we ever prove John's innocence? The feds would have to prove him guilty, right? They got nothing from us—I didn't talk to them, didn't know anything anyway. Could he ever come home again?"

Theresa paused mid-sip, the steam from her own mug curling upward as she set it down, concern creasing her face. She leaned forward, her hands folding on the table, her voice gentle but heavy with reality. "Lucy," she said, her eyes meeting hers, "let's use Snowden as a reference. Today, he lives in Russia with his family—his girlfriend went to him, they had a child. His home is Russia now; he's got permanent citizenship there, safe from the U.S. reach." She sighed, a flicker of sorrow crossing her features. "I feel that might happen for my beloved brother too. At least he'd be safe." Her gaze drifted, imagining him—Husband X—carving out some shadowed life far away, beyond extradition, beyond their grasp.

Lucy's fingers stilled, her mug forgotten, the weight of Theresa's words sinking in. Home wasn't here for him anymore—not the States, not this house—but safety might be, somewhere else, under a different sky. Her chest tightened, hope and resignation tangling, and she nodded faintly, the viola waiting in the corner a quiet reminder of the life she could still build, even if he couldn't come back to it.

Somewhere in Europe, John—Husband X—sat in a small, dimly lit café, the clink of porcelain and murmur of voices a soft backdrop. Across from him was Zsuzsa, a young Hungarian woman with sharp eyes and a quick laugh, her accent thick as she sipped her coffee. She was a companion, nothing more—someone to share time with, to fill the quiet hours. No intimacy, no tether of emotion or flesh tied them; she was just there, a presence to keep the solitude at bay. Younger than him by decades, she'd never replace Lucy—couldn't, wouldn't. Lucy's shadow loomed too large, an ache he carried in his chest, untouched by Zsuzsa's easy company.

He itched to get back to work—not for money, the assets he'd secured for Lucy and Theresa left him flush—but for purpose, to keep his mind sharp, his skills honed. The game of evasion had dulled into routine, and he missed the thrill of code, the dance of outsmarting systems. But he knew the powers that be—the FBI, Interpol, Maxwell—were still hunting, their eyes unblinking. He needed to stay ahead, many steps ahead, and that meant keeping tabs on them. From a burner laptop in a hidden corner, he'd dip into dark pools, skim chatter, track their moves—subtle pings to see how close they were, how hot the DoJ's file on him burned. They wouldn't rest until they had him, he knew that, and he wouldn't rest either, not until he was sure Lucy and Theresa were safe from his fallout, Zsuzsa's laughter a faint echo against the war he still waged in silence.

John sat across from Zsuzsa, the café's warm light catching the steam rising from his untouched coffee. She gazed at him, her eyes bright with a quiet admiration, her head tilted as if trying to read the lines etched into his face. He barely noticed, his thoughts drifting, and a familiar tune slipped from his lips, low and murmured—"The Winner Takes It All..." The melody hummed through him, an old wound reopening, its lyrics a mirror to the defeat he carried. Zsuzsa wouldn't know it—too young, born after ABBA's reign—but it didn't matter. It was his truth, a quiet anthem of loss, the game he'd played and lost with Lucy.

His voice faltered, the song shifting in his mind, and another took its place, unspoken but heavy—"I'll Never Love Again." He thought of Lucy—her voice, her tears, the viola she might be playing now—and the weight of it anchored him. Zsuzsa's presence faded, her admiration a distant flicker he couldn't return. Singing it silently, he kept her at arm's length, where she belonged—no closer, no deeper. She was company, not connection, and Lucy's ghost ensured it stayed that way, a wall he built with every note he didn't share.

What hurt the most gnawed at John like a dull blade, a constant ache he couldn't shake. He couldn't carry a single physical tether to his former life—no photos, no keepsakes, not even the satin nightgown he'd once clung to. They were anchors that could drag him back if something beyond his control—a slip, a betrayal—tied him to the past. All he had left of Lucy was in his mind, a vivid ghost he guarded fiercely. He never spoke of her, never uttered her name or hinted at his old life to anyone—not Zsuzsa, not a soul. That was OPSEC, the iron rule of his existence now: trust no one, not even a fleeting night with a hooker, nothing that could crack the shell he'd built.

His broken heart was a liability, a soft spot that could make him sloppy, vulnerable—could sink him if he let it. One wrong move, one moment of weakness, and the feds would have him, Maxwell's net snapping shut. So he locked it down, kept Lucy's memory silent, untouchable, a fire he fed only in the dark of his own head. It hurt—God, it hurt—but it kept him sharp, kept him free, a man untethered except for the weight he carried inside, where no one could reach.

Weeks later, the truth unraveled like a frayed thread. Theresa had let it slip—casually, unintentionally—over coffee one morning, her voice halting as she mentioned Jody's name tied to the FBI call that sparked it all. Lucy's mug froze mid-air, her eyes narrowing as the betrayal sank in. Jody—the one who'd sat across from them, scribbling notes, promising help—had turned them in, lit the fuse that sent John running and the feds chasing. Bitterness coiled in Lucy's chest, sharp and cold, and she set the mug down hard, the clink echoing. "She sold us out," she muttered, her voice tight, venomous. She was done—done with Jody, done with that office.

Theresa's face crumpled, her hands rising in a helpless gesture. "I'm sorry, Lucy," she said, her voice thick with regret. "It slipped out—I didn't mean..." But the words trailed off, useless. The harm was done, the trust shattered, and Lucy's silence was answer enough. All Theresa could do was watch, her apology hanging in the air, as Lucy made up her mind.

She moved on, found another therapist—this time alone, no tether to Theresa's steady presence. Her steps into the new office were measured, her words tempered, every interaction guarded. She sat straighter, spoke softer, her viola lessons and the assets a quiet armor she wore now. The bitterness lingered, a

scar from Jody's betrayal, but Lucy accepted it, channeled it, let it fuel her resolve to rebuild on her own terms—alone, but not broken.

Lucy let the music flow, the viola's deep, resonant voice spilling into the room as she played. "All I need..." she sang, her voice weaving through the notes, soft but clear, a thread of longing stitched into every word. "Tell you love me, tell you need me... I just want someone to care, maybe that's all I need." The bow moved steady across the strings, her stance firm, the melody a quiet confession—her heart laid bare, yearning for connection, for the care she'd lost but still craved. The kitchen faded, the notes wrapping around her like a shield and a plea.

Theresa watched from the counter, her breath catching as the words sank in. She whispered to herself, barely audible, "She'll always miss him. She'll always love him. Still to this day, she mourns him." Her eyes traced Lucy's form—tall, radiant, confident despite the ache—and Theresa's chest tightened, a mix of pride and sorrow swelling. Lucy stood there, the viola an extension of her, her music a bridge to a man who'd left but never truly gone from her soul.

Then Lucy shifted, the tune changing, her voice softening as she transitioned. "Sometimes when we touch..." The lyrics hung, tender and raw, the viola's tone deepening, echoing memories of closeness she couldn't reclaim. Theresa stayed silent, letting the song fill the space, seeing the strength in Lucy's hands, the grace in her sway—mourning, yes, but standing, shining through it.

Lucy lowered the viola, the last note fading as she turned to Theresa, a quiet determination in her eyes. "Let me show you something, T," she said, setting the instrument down and reaching into her small backpack. She pulled out a laminated sheet, its edges worn but preserved, and handed it over—a playlist, John's playlist, the one he'd left her before he vanished. "I've memorized every song," she said, her voice steady, tracing the titles with her finger. "Every lyric, every note. I want to master them all—on different instruments. It's a goal I'm striving for."

Theresa took the paper, her fingers brushing the plastic as she scanned the familiar titles—"A Thousand Years," "The Winner Takes It All," songs that had echoed through their lives. Her throat tightened, and she looked up, her voice soft. "Oh, Lucy, you feel like you're carrying a piece of him."

Lucy nodded, her gaze dropping to the playlist, her fingers curling around the viola's neck. "T, he poured his heart out," she said, her tone heavy with both love

and regret. "The words, the playlist, the lyrics—they're a mirror of his mind and heart. I'll have to live the rest of my life knowing I pushed away the man I loved." Her voice cracked, just a little, but she stood firm, the laminated sheet a tether to him, a challenge she'd set herself—to play his soul back to life, note by note, even if he'd never hear it.

Theresa stepped closer, resting a hand on Lucy's arm, the playlist trembling slightly between them. "You're not just carrying him," she said, her eyes glistening. "You're honoring him—your way." The kitchen held them, quiet but alive with the weight of Lucy's resolve, the viola waiting to sing his songs again.