



Rebuilding

The Budapest flat was a narrow sliver of a place, its walls yellowed from years of cigarette smoke and neglect, the single window cracked open to let in the damp October air. John sat on a sagging couch, his burner laptop balanced on his knees, its screen casting a faint blue glow across his unshaven face. Zsuzsa perched on the armrest, her legs crossed, a chipped mug of tea steaming in her hands. The room smelled of burnt coffee and the faint tang of the Danube drifting in from outside, the city's pulse a low hum beyond the peeling paint.

"You know," Zsuzsa said, her voice lilting with that thick Hungarian accent, her eyes flicking to him over the rim of her mug, "you could do something here. Not just sit with your machines all day." She tilted her head, her dark hair spilling over one shoulder, catching the dim light from a bare bulb overhead. "The university—ELTE—they need proctors. Computer science, cybersecurity maybe. You're too smart to waste away in this hole."

John's fingers paused over the keys, the faint clack of his typing stilled. He didn't look up, his jaw tightening as her words sank in—proctor, teach, share what he knew. The idea tugged at him, a flicker of purpose brushing against the edges of his restless mind. He saw it for a moment: standing in a lecture hall, students hunched over screens, their faces lit with the same hunger he'd once had—before

the code became his cage, before Lucy's voice faded to a memory he couldn't touch. His chest ached, a dull throb, and he exhaled sharply through his nose.

"Me, a teacher?" His voice was low, rough, laced with a bitter edge as he finally met her gaze. "I'm a ghost, Zsuzsa. Ghosts don't stand in front of classrooms." He shifted, the couch creaking beneath him, and set the laptop aside, its heat seeping through his jeans. The red notice burned in his mind—Interpol's net, Maxwell's hunt—and he saw himself exposed, a name on a roster, a trail for the feds to sniff out. But her eyes held his, bright and unyielding, and for a second, he wanted to believe it could work.

She leaned closer, the tea's steam curling between them. "You're not a ghost to me," she said, her tone soft but firm, a challenge wrapped in kindness. "You're just a man who knows too much. They'd eat it up—those kids. You could show them how to break things, build things." Her lips quirked, a half-smile, and she sipped her tea, the sound sharp in the quiet. "Better than singing to yourself all day."

His throat tightened, her jab at his murmured ABBA hitting closer than she knew. He stood abruptly, pacing to the window, the cold air biting at his face as he stared out at the gray sprawl of Pest below—trams rattling, lights smearing in the drizzle. The city felt alive, indifferent to the weight he carried, and he pressed a hand to the glass, its chill grounding him. Maybe she was right. Not a proctor—too public, too risky—but something. Consulting, underground maybe, feeding his skills into the world without leaving a shadow. He turned back to her, his voice quieter now. "I'll think about it," he said, and she nodded, satisfied, her presence a steady hum he didn't deserve but couldn't push away.

Miles away, across oceans and borders, Lucy stood in the dim glow of a small stage, the viola's weight a familiar ache in her arms. The venue was a cramped bar on the edge of town, its wooden floor scuffed from years of boots and spilled beer, the air thick with the scent of fried food and anticipation. A handful of locals sat scattered at tables, their chatter fading as she adjusted the mic, her fingers brushing the stand with a faint tremble. Theresa lingered near the bar, her silhouette a quiet anchor in the haze of cigarette smoke, her eyes locked on Lucy with a mix of pride and worry.

Lucy took a breath, the air catching in her chest, and drew the bow across the strings. The first note rang out—deep, resonant, a shiver of sound that cut through

the room. She closed her eyes, letting it carry her, and began to sing, her voice threading through the viola's hum. "There goes my heart beating..." The words spilled out, raw and steady, each syllable a pulse of longing she couldn't bury. The crowd stilled, heads turning, glasses pausing mid-lift as her melody wrapped around them—John's playlist, reshaped, reborn in her hands.

Her hips swayed faintly, the viola's neck cool against her palm as she leaned into the song, the bow dancing with a precision she'd fought to master. She'd spent weeks in Theresa's living room, the instrument's weight bruising her shoulder, her fingers fumbling until the notes bent to her will. Now, here, it felt alive—a voice for the pieces of her she'd lost, the pieces she was clawing back. "I'm losing sleep..." Her voice cracked, just a little, and she pushed through, the viola swelling to fill the gap, its tone a cry she didn't have to explain.

A man at a corner table leaned forward, his weathered face softening, a beer bottle forgotten in his hand. A woman near the front nodded along, her eyes glistening, caught in the pull of Lucy's ache. Theresa's lips curved, a small, fierce smile breaking through her worry—she saw it, the spark, the way Lucy stood taller with every note. The song ended, the last chord hanging in the air, and a smatter of applause broke out, tentative at first, then louder, warm. Lucy opened her eyes, her breath shaky, and managed a nod, the viola still trembling in her grip.

She stepped off the stage, her boots thudding softly on the wood, and Theresa met her halfway, a glass of water in hand. "You were incredible," Theresa said, her voice low, thick with something unspoken. She pressed the glass into Lucy's palm, her fingers brushing hers, steadying her. "They felt it—you made them feel it."

Lucy took a sip, the coolness sliding down her throat, easing the burn of nerves and memory. "I didn't know if I could," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes darting to the crowd still buzzing faintly behind her. "But it's... it's mine now. This." She clutched the viola closer, its curves a shield and a promise, and Theresa nodded, her hand lingering on Lucy's arm, a tether in the chaos of starting over.

Back in Budapest, John sat at a rickety table in the flat, a single lamp throwing jagged shadows across the walls. Zsuzsa had left hours ago, her laughter fading down the stairwell, leaving him alone with the hum of the city and the weight of her suggestion. He pulled the laptop closer, its screen flickering to life, and

opened a dark pool forum—anonymous, encrypted, a digital underbelly where he could breathe. His fingers moved fast, typing out a query: *Consulting gigs, cybersecurity, off-grid. Budapest base. No traces.* He hit send, the message vanishing into the ether, and leaned back, the chair groaning under him.

The idea burned now, a quiet fire he couldn't douse—working again, not for the feds or the suits, but for himself, for the rush of it. He saw Lucy in his mind, unbidden—her voice, her hands on that guitar, the playlist he'd left her—and wondered if she'd found something too, something to fill the void he'd carved out. His throat tightened, and he hummed softly, "The Winner Takes It All," the notes slipping out before he could stop them. The flat swallowed the sound, its emptiness a mirror to the life he'd chosen, but the forum pinged back—a bite, a lead—and he straightened, his pulse quickening, a flicker of purpose cutting through the ache.

Lucy sat cross-legged on Theresa's couch, the viola resting beside her, its case open like a confession. Sheet music lay scattered across the cushions—John's songs, her songs, a tangle of ink and memory she was weaving into something new. She picked up a pencil, her hand steady as she scratched out a line, then wrote another, her lips moving silently with the words. The bar gig replayed in her head—the applause, the faces, the way her chest had loosened with every note—and she felt it, a hunger she hadn't known she still had.

Theresa poked her head in from the kitchen, a dish towel slung over her shoulder, the scent of garlic and onions drifting behind her. "You're at it again," she said, her tone teasing but warm, her eyes catching the sprawl of papers. "Got another gig lined up?"

Lucy looked up, a small smile breaking through the focus. "Maybe," she said, her voice lifting. "The bar owner asked me back—next week. Said I could do a longer set." She tapped the pencil against her knee, the rhythm restless, alive. "I'm working on something original too. Not just his stuff—mine."

Theresa stepped closer, leaning against the doorway, her arms crossing as she took it in—Lucy, the viola, the music spilling out of her like breath. "Yours," she echoed, her voice soft, proud. "That's what I've been waiting for." She didn't say more, didn't need to—Lucy felt it, the shift, the way Theresa saw her not as a shadow of John but as a woman stepping into her own light. The pencil moved

again, the notes taking shape, and Lucy hummed under her breath, the sound her own this time, unborrowed, unbroken.

The flat's door creaked open, the sound slicing through the stale air as Zsuzsa breezed in, her boots thudding against the warped floorboards. Behind her trailed Anes, a tall streak of energy, her laughter spilling out before she even crossed the threshold. Her hair was a wild tangle of auburn, catching the lamplight as she tossed her coat onto the couch, missing the armrest entirely. John looked up from his laptop, the screen's glow flickering across his face, his brow creasing at the sudden invasion of noise and motion.

"John, meet Anes," Zsuzsa said, her voice bright, almost singsong, as she gestured to the woman now spinning a quick circle in the cramped space, her arms flung wide. "I decided to bring you a friend—besides me, of course. She's lots of fun, as you can see. You need cheer and happiness in your life, not just..." She waved a hand at the laptop, the tangle of cables, the half-empty coffee mug on the table. "This."

Anes stopped mid-twirl, her eyes locking onto John with a grin that was all teeth and mischief. "So, you're the mysterious one Zsuzsa won't shut up about," she said, her voice loud, unfiltered, cutting through the flat's heavy silence. She plopped onto the couch beside him, too close, her knee bumping his as she leaned in. "What's your deal? Hiding from the world or just allergic to fun?" Her tone was teasing, but her gaze was sharp, probing, like she could peel back his layers if she stared long enough.

John shifted, the couch groaning under him, his hands hovering over the keyboard before he snapped the laptop shut. "Not hiding," he muttered, his voice low, rough, the lie sticking in his throat. "Just... keeping busy." He glanced at Zsuzsa, who stood by the window now, her arms crossed, watching them with a satisfied smirk. The air felt thicker, charged with Anes's restless energy, and he exhaled hard, the weight of their cheer pressing against the walls he'd built.

Anes laughed, a sharp bark of sound, and slapped his shoulder, the contact jarring. "Busy brooding, you mean. Zsuzsa said you're some kind of genius—computers, right? You should come out with us. There's a bar down by the river—cheap beer, loud music. Beats sitting here humming sad songs to yourself." She winked, oblivious to how close her words cut, and John's jaw tightened, his fingers curling into his palms.

"I'll pass," he said, his tone flat, but Zsuzsa stepped forward, her eyes softening as she caught the flicker of something in his face—grief, maybe, or exhaustion.

"Come on, John," she said, quieter now, almost pleading. "Just one night. Let her drag you out of this cave." Anes nodded, already bouncing to her feet, her zest a whirlwind he couldn't outrun. He wanted to say no, to retreat into the dark pool forums, the safety of his code, but their laughter lingered, tugging at him, and he felt the ache of Lucy's absence sharpen—an echo he couldn't drown out, even here.

The bar was packed, the air thick with sweat and the tang of spilled whiskey, the stage lights casting jagged shadows across the crowd. Lucy stood under their glare, her viola pressed to her shoulder, the bow slicing through the air as she tore into Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger." Her voice roared out, fierce and unyielding, the notes punching through the haze of chatter and clinking glasses. The crowd swayed, fists pumping, a sea of faces caught in the song's raw pulse—her pulse, spilling out through the strings and into the room.

She'd strung together a set of Survivor tracks—"Burning Heart," "The Search Is Over"—each one a battle cry she'd honed in Theresa's living room, the viola bending to her will with a ferocity that still surprised her. Her hair clung to her neck, damp with effort, her boots planted firm on the scarred wood. She felt alive up there, the music a fire she could wield, burning away the ghosts that clung to her edges. The crowd roared as she finished, applause crashing over her, and she let it wash through her, her chest heaving, a grin tugging at her lips.

Then she slowed, the energy shifting as she drew the bow gently, the viola's tone dropping low, mournful. "This one's for someone I lost," she said into the mic, her voice steady but soft, the words carrying a weight the crowd couldn't fully grasp. "A Thousand Years." The first notes trembled out, her fingers steady on the strings, her eyes closing as she sang—John's song, their song, a dedication she couldn't let go. Her voice wove through the melody, tender and aching, and the room quieted, the rowdy energy giving way to something heavier, sadder. She swayed, lost in it, the viola a lifeline to a man she'd never stop loving, even as she stood here, building something new.

Theresa watched from the sidelines, her arms crossed tight, her beer untouched on the table beside her. The crowd blurred in her vision, but certain figures stood out—men in plain jackets, their eyes too sharp, their movements too deliberate.

Glowies, she thought, the term bitter in her mind—feds, undercover, monitoring. They lingered near the bar, the exits, their gazes flicking to Lucy, then away, subtle but unmistakable. Her stomach twisted, a cold knot of unease. She'd seen them before, at the last gig, their presence a shadow she couldn't shake. Were they here for Lucy? For John? The divorce papers said he was gone, but the feds didn't let go easy—Maxwell's hunt stretched far, and Theresa felt its reach in the way they watched, silent, waiting.

She glanced at Lucy, radiant under the lights, her voice soaring through the final chorus—"I have died every day waiting for you..."—and wondered if she saw them too. Did she know what a Glowie was, what they meant? Lucy's focus stayed on the music, her world narrowing to the strings, the notes, the dedication that anchored her set. Theresa's jaw tightened, her fingers curling around the bottle's neck. She wouldn't tell her—not yet. Let her have this, the stage, the crowd's love. The Glowies could hover, could watch, but they wouldn't touch her tonight. Theresa stood straighter, her eyes narrowing as she tracked them, a silent vow to guard this fragile light Lucy was kindling, even if the shadows loomed closer than she knew.

John sat at the bar Zsuzsa and Anes had dragged him to, the Danube's black shimmer visible through the grimy window, the air thick with cigarette smoke and the thump of techno pulsing from a jukebox. Anes leaned against the counter, her laughter cutting through the noise as she waved a shot glass at him, amber liquid sloshing over the rim. "Drink, mister genius!" she shouted, her voice a challenge, her eyes glinting with that relentless zest. Zsuzsa stood beside her, quieter, her smile softer as she sipped her beer, watching him with a patience he didn't understand.

He took the shot, the burn of pálinka searing down his throat, and set the glass down hard, the clink swallowed by the din. The bar was alive—bodies pressed close, voices overlapping, a chaos that grated against his need for control. Anes grabbed his arm, tugging him toward the tiny dance floor, her energy a force he couldn't dodge. "Move, John!" she yelled, already spinning, her auburn hair a blur. He stumbled after her, the floor sticky under his boots, his body stiff, unyielding.

Zsuzsa followed, her laugh warm as she joined them, the three of them a clumsy knot in the crowd. Anes twirled again, bumping into him, and he caught her elbow, steadying her without thinking. She grinned up at him, wild and free, and for a

moment, the noise faded—the hunt, the red notice, Lucy’s ghost—and he felt it, a flicker of something lighter, something alive. Zsuzsa’s hand brushed his shoulder, her voice close. “See? Not so bad.” He didn’t reply, his throat too tight, but he moved with them, awkward and slow, the pálinka loosening the edges of his guard, the night pulling him under despite himself.

Lucy stepped off the stage, the viola case swinging in her hand, the crowd’s cheers still ringing in her ears. Theresa met her with a towel, her smile tight but real as she handed it over. “You killed it,” she said, her voice cutting through the bar’s hum, her eyes flicking briefly to the Glowies—one near the door now, his phone pressed to his ear. Lucy wiped her face, the cotton rough against her skin, and nodded, her breath steadying.

“Thanks, T,” she said, her tone warm, tired. She didn’t see them—the men in the shadows, their quiet scrutiny—but she felt something, a prickle at the back of her neck she couldn’t name. She slung the case over her shoulder, her fingers brushing the strap, and followed Theresa toward the bar’s exit, the weight of “A Thousand Years” still heavy in her chest. The night air hit her as they stepped outside, sharp and cold, and she inhaled deep, the music—hers now, not just John’s—carrying her forward, even as unseen eyes tracked her every step.

The flat’s door thudded shut behind them, the sound swallowed by the late-night hush of Budapest, the city’s distant hum seeping through the cracked window. John stumbled in, the pálinka still buzzing in his veins, his boots scuffing the floor as he aimed for the couch. The cushions sagged under him, the worn fabric cool against his back, and he let his head tip back, eyes half-closed, the bar’s chaos still ringing in his ears. Zsuzsa lingered near the door, kicking off her shoes with a quiet clatter, her gaze flicking between him and Anes, who followed like a storm breaking loose.

Anes didn’t hesitate—she dropped beside him, her body crashing into the couch with a force that jolted him upright. Her laughter spilled out, sharp and wild, as she swung a leg over his lap, straddling him without a shred of hesitation. Her hands gripped his shoulders, fingers digging in, her auburn hair falling into his face as she leaned close, her breath hot with liquor and intent. “Come on, genius,” she purred, her voice low, teasing, her lips brushing his ear. “Let’s have some fun.” She pressed herself against him, aggressive, unyielding, her energy a flood he couldn’t stem.

John's hands shot up, catching her wrists, his grip firm but not cruel. His pulse kicked, a flicker of something old stirring—youth, late nights, the thrill of someone bold and unafraid, a shadow of what he'd craved from Lucy once, her hesitance a wall he'd never breached. Anes grinned, mistaking his tension for play, and rocked her hips, her boldness a spark he hadn't felt in years. He liked it—God help him, he did—but it wasn't right, wasn't her. "Anes," he rasped, his voice rough, strained, "stop."

She froze, her grin faltering, and he pushed her hands down, sliding her off his lap with a gentleness that belied the storm in his chest. She landed beside him, her breath hitching, confusion flashing in her eyes. "What's wrong with you?" she snapped, her tone sharp now, the rejection stinging. Zsuzsa stepped closer, her arms crossed, her face tightening as she watched it unfold—her plan, her push to jolt him awake, crumbling before her.

"I'm not..." John started, his words thick, tangled, as he raked a hand through his hair. "I can't. Not like this." He stood, the couch creaking in protest, and paced to the window, the cold glass a shock against his palm. Anes's aggression had lit something in him, a memory of wanting Lucy to fight for him, to meet him halfway with that same fire—but it wasn't Lucy here, and he couldn't pretend. Zsuzsa's good intentions hung heavy, her attempt to drag him into happiness a weight he couldn't carry. He turned, his voice low. "I'm not what you think, Anes. Go home."

Anes huffed, grabbing her coat from the floor, her movements jerky, wounded. "Fine, be miserable then," she muttered, storming past Zsuzsa, the door slamming behind her. Zsuzsa stayed, her eyes on John, soft but searching, the flat silent now except for the faint drip of the sink. "I just wanted you to feel something," she said, her voice quiet, almost an apology. He nodded, his throat tight, but didn't answer—Lucy's ghost was too loud, and Anes's fire couldn't burn it away.

The car rolled into Theresa's driveway, the engine ticking down as Lucy climbed out, the viola case swinging in her hand, her steps light with a glow she couldn't shake. The night air nipped at her cheeks, crisp and sharp, but inside she was warm, buzzing, the crowd's cheers still echoing in her bones. She'd owned that stage—Survivor's anthems, her viola roaring, and "A Thousand Years" cutting deep, a tribute that felt less like a wound tonight and more like a thread she could hold. Theresa followed, her keys jangling as she unlocked the door, the house's quiet wrapping around them like a blanket.

Lucy dropped onto the couch, the viola case thudding beside her, and kicked off her boots with a contented sigh. "That was... God, T, it was everything," she said, her voice bright, alive, her hands gesturing wide as if she could scoop the feeling back into her chest. She leaned back, her hair spilling over the cushions, her grin unguarded, pure. Theresa watched from the kitchen doorway, a mug of tea steaming in her hands, her own smile softer, cautious, the Glowies' shadows flickering in her mind—but she held them back, letting Lucy's high fill the room.

She set the mug down, crossing her arms as she leaned against the frame, her tone casual but deliberate, testing the waters. "Perhaps, one day you might meet someone at one of your gigs?" The words hung light, a nudge, her eyes steady on Lucy, watching for the ripple—hoping for healing, bracing for retreat.

Lucy's grin faltered, just for a breath, her fingers pausing where they'd been tapping the couch. She tilted her head, her gaze drifting to the viola, then back to Theresa, a flicker of something—curiosity, maybe, or fear—crossing her face. "Someone?" she echoed, her voice quieter now, thoughtful. She sat up, pulling her knees in, her hands wrapping around them. "I don't know, T. Maybe. But..." She trailed off, her eyes distant, John's playlist flashing in her mind, the dedication she'd sung like a vow. "It'd have to be someone who gets it—the music, me. I'm not sure I'm ready to look."

Theresa nodded, stepping closer, her hand resting on the couch's armrest. "You don't have to be," she said, her voice warm, steady, giving Lucy the space to breathe. "Just... good to see you shining up there. That's enough for now." Lucy smiled again, smaller but real, and reached for the viola, her fingers brushing the case as if it held her answer. The Glowies lingered in Theresa's thoughts—those sharp-eyed men, their quiet watch—but she swallowed it down, letting Lucy's contentment hold, fragile and bright, a flame she wouldn't let flicker out tonight.

The morning light slanted through the flat's grimy window, a dull gray that matched the ache pulsing behind John's eyes. He slumped at the table, a chipped mug of black coffee cradled in his hands, the steam rising in lazy curls. His head throbbed, the pálinka's aftertaste sour on his tongue, but it wasn't just the hangover—it was the weight of last night, Anes's storm of energy still rattling in his skull. Zsuzsa stood across from him, leaning against the counter, her hair pulled back, her face softer in the daylight, marked by a quiet regret.

"I'm sorry about last night," she said, her voice low, steady, her accent wrapping around the words like a sigh. She crossed her arms, her fingers tapping against her elbow. "Anes was way too aggressive for you. All I wanted was some happiness for you, a little fun. You're a man, and you have needs. I know—I was married once." Her eyes flicked to his, searching, a flicker of her own past shadowing her gaze before she looked away, out the window at the drizzle streaking the glass.

John set the mug down, the clink sharp in the stillness, and rubbed a hand over his face, the stubble rough against his palm. He felt her words settle, heavy and well-meant, stirring the silt of his own buried wants. "I know you meant well," he said, his voice gravelly, worn from the night and the years. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, and met her eyes. "Please offer my apology to Anes. I'd tell her myself if you ever manage to get her back here again. Just... much slower next time, please." His lips twitched, a faint, tired attempt at a smile, but his chest tightened—Lucy's hesitance, her boundaries, flashed in his mind, a contrast to Anes's fire he couldn't unsee.

Zsuzsa nodded, her shoulders easing, a small breath escaping her. "I'll tell her," she said, her tone gentle now, a promise woven in. She stepped closer, resting a hand on the table's edge, her fingers brushing the wood. "You don't have to be alone, John. Not like this." Her voice held a warmth he couldn't quite grasp, and he looked down, the coffee's dark surface rippling as he tapped the mug, the flat's silence folding around them like a shroud.

Lucy lay in her bed, the sheets cool against her skin, the viola case a dark shape in the corner under the moonlight spilling through the blinds. The house was still, Theresa's soft footsteps long faded down the hall, but sleep wouldn't come. Her mind churned, Theresa's words from earlier looping through her—"Perhaps, one day you might meet someone at one of your gigs?"—a quiet nudge that lodged deep, tugging at threads she'd thought were knotted tight. She rolled onto her side, her hair tangling against the pillow, and stared at the ceiling, the shadows shifting as a car passed outside.

"Someone other than John," she whispered, the words slipping out, fragile and sharp, tasting of impossibility. "How? Never." Her chest ached, a hollow pang, and she pressed a hand there, feeling the steady thump of her heart. John's face flickered in her mind—his quiet eyes, the playlist, the "goodbye" in red ink—and

she saw the stage again, "A Thousand Years" pouring out of her, a tether she couldn't cut. But then the years stretched back, cold and clear: almost two since he'd left, since the divorce papers landed in her hands. Before John, even longer—years of solitude, of silence, no one's touch but her own.

She sat up, the blankets pooling around her waist, and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her bare feet brushing the hardwood. The thought hit her, sudden and unbidden—how long had it been since she'd felt wanted, since someone had reached for her? John hadn't, not at the end, and before him, the emptiness stretched back further, a void she'd filled with smoke and walls. Her fingers curled into the mattress, her breath catching as Theresa's suggestion bloomed, not as betrayal but as a question: Could she? Someone new, someone who'd hear her music and see her, not the ghost of him?

She stood, padding to the window, the night air seeping through the glass as she pressed her forehead against it, the chill biting into her skin. The gig replayed—the crowd's roar, the viola's voice, her own strength rising through the notes. She'd built something, hadn't she? Something hers. Maybe—maybe—there was room for more, a crack of light she hadn't dared look for. But John's shadow lingered, his songs still hers to sing, and she exhaled, fogging the glass, the possibility trembling in her chest, too fragile to hold, too real to let go.

The flat's door swung open, a gust of damp night air trailing Anes as she stepped inside, her heels clicking sharp against the floorboards. The tight black dress hugged her frame, its edges catching the lamplight, a stark contrast to the room's faded yellow walls. She paused just past the threshold, tossing her hair back with a grin, and let out a playful, "Ó, mi ez, egy nő, fiatal és illedelmes?" Her voice danced, light but edged with that familiar mischief, her eyes locking on John where he sat, hunched over his coffee at the table.

Zsuzsa, perched on the couch's armrest, glanced up from her phone, her brow furrowing. "What did she say?" she asked, her tone curious, a faint smile tugging at her lips. Anes turned to her, hands on her hips, and translated with a flourish, "Oh, how is this—a woman, young and proper?" She winked, her laughter bubbling up as she crossed the room, dropping her bag onto the floor with a thud.

John straightened, the mug warm in his hands, and met her gaze, the weight of the previous night still heavy in his chest. "I'm sorry about last night," he said, his

voice low, rough with the morning's grit and a sincerity he couldn't mask. He set the coffee down, the clink soft but deliberate, his fingers lingering on the handle.

Anes waved a hand, dismissive but warm, her grin softening as she leaned against the table's edge, close enough that he caught the faint scent of her perfume—something sharp, floral, alive. "I'm sorry too," she said, her accent curling around the words. "I was too teasing. You American men are too slow." She chuckled, the sound bright, unburdened, her eyes glinting with a challenge he couldn't quite meet.

He leaned back, a faint smirk tugging at his mouth despite himself, the tension loosening just a fraction. "I'm sorry, I'm not a Frenchman," he shot back, the dry edge of his humor surprising even him, a flicker of the man he'd been before the silence took root. Anes threw her head back, her giggle erupting loud and unrestrained, filling the flat with its echo.

"Of course not," she said, still laughing, her hand slapping the table lightly as she caught her breath. "Found that out last night, even with a bit of liquor in you too." Her gaze sharpened, playful but piercing, and she tilted her head, studying him. "That wife still has a hold on you." The words landed, light but pointed, a truth she tossed out like a stone into still water, ripples spreading through the quiet.

John's smirk faded, his jaw tightening as Lucy's face flashed—her voice, her viola, the playlist he couldn't shake. He looked down, his fingers curling around the mug again, the heat biting into his skin. "Maybe," he muttered, the admission slipping out before he could stop it, raw and unguarded. Anes's laughter stilled, her expression softening, and Zsuzsa shifted on the couch, her eyes flicking between them, a silent witness to the shift.

Anes slid into the chair across from him, her energy settling, her voice dropping low. "It's okay," she said, her tone gentler now, almost kind. "She's lucky, that one. But you—" She reached out, tapping his hand once, quick and light, before pulling back. "You're here now. Let's keep it slow, yeah? Friends first." She smiled, smaller this time, and John nodded, the ache in his chest easing just enough to breathe, the flat's walls holding them in a fragile, tentative truce.

Anes's fingers closed around John's hand, warm and firm, her grip pulling him gently from the spiral of his thoughts. "Friends, yes?" she said, her voice bright, coaxing, as she tilted her head, the black dress shimmering faintly under the flat's

dim light. "I wore this for you. You like?" Her eyes sparkled, bold and searching, a challenge wrapped in a gift.

John lifted his gaze, meeting hers, the intensity of her presence cutting through the haze of his hangover. The dress clung to her, a quiet elegance beneath her fire, and he felt a flicker of something—appreciation, maybe, or just the relief of her kindness. "Yes, of course," he said, his voice steady, a small smile tugging at his lips. "And you're beautiful. Thank you." The words came easier than he expected, a simple truth he could offer without breaking.

Zsuzsa's smile widened from the couch, soft and approving. "That's it," she murmured, sliding closer to Anes, her tone warm but tinged with something else—envy, perhaps, or a quiet ache. She leaned in, her voice dropping as she spoke to Anes, though her eyes stayed on John. "He would touch me that way, you know. He doesn't even look at me that way." Her words hung, vulnerable, a confession she hadn't meant to spill so raw.

John turned to her, his brow creasing, the weight of her longing catching him off guard. "Zsuzsa," he said, his voice low, firm, "nothing wrong with you. I respect you. You're not an object. You're a young, lovely woman." He held her gaze, steady, wanting her to hear it, to feel it—not pity, but a boundary he wouldn't cross, not out of disinterest but something deeper, something he couldn't name.

Anes laughed, sharp and bright, breaking the tension as she squeezed John's hand once more before letting go. "Ladies' man," she teased, her grin flashing. "So, why? Why you left the wife then, if you loved her? Frenchman would've been better off, married still." Her words tumbled out, playful but pointed, the language bending under her accent, her meaning clear enough despite the edges. She wasn't accusing, just digging, her curiosity a blade she wielded with a smile.

John leaned back, the chair creaking under him, her question sinking in. He wasn't offended—her bluntness felt honest, not cruel, and the slight twist of her phrasing softened its sting. "Wasn't about love," he said, his voice quieter now, rough with memory. "Or maybe it was too much of it. Couldn't stay, not like that." He shrugged, the weight of Lucy's silence, her walls, pressing against him even now, across the miles. Anes nodded, her grin fading to something thoughtful, and Zsuzsa watched, silent, the flat holding its breath around them.

That night, Lucy lay curled beneath the blankets, the house dark and still, the viola's shadow a quiet sentinel in the corner. Something shifted inside her, a fog lifting, the heavy shroud of her mind peeling back like mist burned off by dawn. She breathed deep, the air sharp in her lungs, and felt it—a clarity, a lightness she hadn't known in months, maybe years. But with it came something else, a yearning that coiled tight in her chest, spreading warm and aching through her limbs.

She rolled onto her back, her hands resting on her stomach, and closed her eyes, letting the feeling bloom. It wasn't just any touch she craved—it was John's. Not the act itself, not the mechanics of it, but the intimacy they'd lost long before he left—the way his fingers used to trace her spine, slow and deliberate, the way his breath would catch when she leaned into him, their bodies speaking where words failed. Years, she realized, her throat tightening. Years since that connection, since she'd felt truly seen, truly held.

Tears pricked at her eyes, hot and sudden, spilling over as the pang deepened, her body waking to the absence she'd numbed herself against. She pressed a hand to her mouth, muffling a sob, her other arm wrapping around herself, trying to fill the space he'd left. "John," she whispered, the name breaking free, a plea to the dark. She saw him—his quiet hands, his steady gaze—and her skin ached for him, not the man who'd run, but the one who'd once known her completely. The tears fell faster, her chest shuddering, the music she'd built a fragile shield against a longing she couldn't outrun.

The kitchen glowed with the soft hum of morning, the scent of coffee curling through the air as Lucy sat at the table, her fingers stained with pencil lead, sheet music sprawled out in a chaotic dance of notes. Her mug steamed beside her, half-empty, her eyes bright and restless despite the shadows beneath them. The viola's case leaned against the wall, a silent witness to her sleepless night, and she hummed under her breath, a jagged melody taking shape under her hands. Theresa shuffled in, her hair mussed, her robe tied loose, blinking against the light as she poured herself a cup.

"Did you cry last night?" Theresa asked, her voice thick with sleep, tentative as she turned to face Lucy. "I heard sobs." She cradled the mug, her gaze settling on Lucy, soft but searching.

Lucy's pencil stilled, her hand hovering over the page, and she met Theresa's eyes, unflinching, the truth spilling out raw and unfiltered. "I believe my sexuality is returning," she said, her voice steady but edged with a tremble, "and with a passion. I burned for John last night—all night. Now, he's gone two years already because of me. How ironic, huh? I feel the way he longed for, and it's too damn late. What damned fucking timing, isn't it? Life is a curse!" Her words cracked, sharp and bitter, her fingers curling into the table's edge as if to anchor the ache roaring through her.

Theresa set her mug down, the clink soft, and crossed the small space between them, her arms opening without hesitation. They embraced, Lucy's head tucking into Theresa's shoulder, her breath hitching as the tears threatened again. Theresa held her tight, her hands steady against Lucy's back, absorbing the shudder of her confession. "I'm so sorry, dear," she murmured, her voice low, warm, a lifeline in the storm. "My brother has impacted us far more than we thought. Finally, tomorrow the rest of the assets will be released—properties in our names. He did that so the feds wouldn't seize them. There's a trust as well."

Lucy pulled back, her eyes wide, glistening, the weight of John's quiet sacrifice sinking in. "He... he did that for us?" she whispered, her voice breaking, her hands falling to her lap. Theresa nodded, brushing a strand of hair from Lucy's face, her touch gentle but firm. The kitchen held them, the coffee cooling, the sheet music fluttering faintly as a breeze slipped through the window, and Lucy exhaled, the curse of timing twisting tighter around her heart.

Across the globe, Budapest shimmered under a pale autumn sun, the Danube's surface glinting as John walked along the pier, his steps slow, deliberate. He'd shaved that morning, the razor's scrape a small act of reclaiming himself, his jaw smooth for the first time in weeks. The shower had washed away the grime, and the new clothes—crisp jeans, a dark sweater—felt foreign against his skin, a shell he was trying to fit into. Anes walked beside him, her hand slipped into his, her fingers warm and light, her black dress swapped for a leather jacket and boots that clicked against the stone.

They moved in an easy rhythm, the language barrier a soft hum between them—her Hungarian lilting against his clipped English, words stumbling but finding their way. She pointed at the river, her voice bright as she said something about the bridges, and he nodded, catching half of it, filling the rest with her smile. Friends,

they'd agreed, but the air between them crackled, her closeness tugging at him, a pull he felt in his bones.

She glanced up at him, her auburn hair catching the wind, and squeezed his hand. "You look good today," she said, her accent thick, her grin teasing. "Clean, happy. Better, yes?" He shrugged, a small laugh escaping him, the sound rusty but real. "Trying," he replied, his voice low, his eyes on the water, Lucy's face flickering there unbidden—the viola, her voice, the intimacy he'd let slip away.

Anes sensed it, the shift in him, and slowed her pace, her grip tightening. "You want more, don't you?" she asked, blunt but soft, her eyes searching his. "With me. But you stop. Why?" She tilted her head, her tone gentle now, peeling back the layers he tried to hide. He swallowed, his throat tight, the truth pressing against his ribs.

"It's not you," he said, halting, turning to face her fully, the river's breeze sharp against his face. "It's her—Lucy. Even now, two years gone, divorced, I... I'd feel like I'm disrespecting her." His voice cracked, the admission raw, and he looked down at their joined hands, her warmth a lifeline he didn't deserve. Anes nodded, her expression softening, no judgment there, just a quiet understanding.

"Friends, then," she said, her smile small but real, lifting their hands to press a quick kiss to his knuckles before letting go. "Slow, like you said." They resumed walking, the pier stretching out before them, and John felt the ache ease, just a little, Anes's presence a steady hum beside him, the ghost of Lucy still there but softer now, a shadow he could carry without breaking.

The bar pulsed with life, the air thick with the hum of voices and the clink of glasses, the stage a small island of light cutting through the haze. Lucy stood at its center, her viola pressed to her shoulder, the bow slicing through the strings with a ferocity that silenced the room. Her voice poured out, raw and piercing—"Because of you, I'm afraid. I cry in the middle of the night for the same damn thing"—each word a shard of glass, her eyes closed, her body swaying as the notes trembled through her. The crowd leaned in, caught in the pull of her intensity, her pain a thread they couldn't escape.

Theresa stood near the edge, her arms crossed, her gaze steady on Lucy, a quiet sentinel in the chaos. She wasn't there to control—Lucy didn't need that—but to anchor, to catch the decisions Lucy might miss in the rush of her rising star. Word had spread, gig after gig, her name whispered through the town's smoky corners,

and the crowds grew, drawn to the woman who turned her ache into sound.

Theresa's eyes flicked to the shadows, the Glowies lingering as always—jackets too neat, stares too sharp—but she kept them to herself, her focus on Lucy's fire.

Lucy paused, the viola's last note hanging heavy, and set it down, her hands quick as she reached for the guitar slung across her back. The switch was seamless, her fingers finding the strings, a new rhythm sparking to life. "Every day, love me your own special way," she sang, her voice softening, warm now, a plea wrapped in a smile. "Melt all my heart away with a smile. Take time to tell me that you really care." The guitar strummed bright, her touch deft, weaving a contrast to the viola's mournful cry—a special flourish, her own, that made the crowd sway, heads nodding, hands clapping soft.

In the throng, amid the Glowies' cold watch, a man stood apart, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that wasn't surveillance but hunger. He was lean, mid-forties, his dark coat open over a faded band tee, a notebook tucked under his arm. His head tilted as she sang, his foot tapping faintly, caught in her spell. A manager for a small record label—though no one knew it yet, not Lucy, not Theresa—his mind already turning, hearing the raw edge of something he could shape, something that could burn beyond these walls.

Lucy's voice soared, the guitar's chords lifting her, and she opened her eyes, scanning the crowd, unaware of the weight of his gaze. "My love, always and forever," she finished, slipping back into the viola's embrace, the bow drawing out a final, aching note that lingered, thick and alive. The applause erupted, warm and wild, hands slapping tables, voices calling her name. She smiled, small but real, her chest heaving as she stepped back, the instruments at her side like extensions of her soul.

Theresa met her as she stepped off, a water bottle in hand, her grin tight but proud. "You're unstoppable," she said, her voice cutting through the din, her hand brushing Lucy's arm. Lucy took the bottle, her fingers trembling with the adrenaline, and nodded, her breath steadying. "Felt good," she said, her eyes bright, flicking to the crowd still buzzing behind her. She didn't see the man, didn't catch the way he lingered, scribbling in his notebook, but Theresa did—her instincts prickling, though she couldn't place why. For now, she let it slide, the Glowies and the stranger just shadows against Lucy's light, her music carrying her forward, unstoppable, alive.

The bar's noise faded as the man approached, weaving through the thinning crowd with a purpose that made Theresa's shoulders tense. He stopped before them, his dark coat brushing the edge of the table where Lucy sat, catching her breath, her viola and guitar propped beside her. He was wiry, his face lined with years of late nights, but his eyes gleamed sharp and alive. He pulled a card from his pocket, handing it to Theresa with a slight nod, his gaze flicking between them. "Perhaps there's much more here than you both believe," he said, his voice low, steady, carrying a weight that hung in the air. "I'll be calling." He turned, melting back into the crowd before either could respond.

Theresa flipped the card over, her thumb tracing the embossed text: *Colony Records, General Manager*. Her brow creased, a spark of possibility igniting, but she tucked it into her pocket, her eyes meeting Lucy's. "T, what was that all about?" Lucy asked, her voice buzzing with the gig's high, her fingers still twitching with leftover energy.

Theresa's lips curved, faint but deliberate. "You've picked up interest," she said, keeping it vague, her tone measured. "We'll discuss this further when we get home—in a safe environment." She grabbed Lucy's guitar case, nodding toward the exit, her mind already turning.

The house welcomed them with its quiet, the door clicking shut as Lucy set her viola and guitar against the wall, their cases thudding soft on the hardwood. She was still buzzing, her skin humming with the night's rush, and she spun toward Theresa, her eyes wide. "T, what did you mean 'a safe environment'? What, the bar wasn't safe?" Her voice danced, curious but edged with a flicker of unease, her hands gesturing as she paced to the couch.

Theresa paused, her jacket half-off, and took a deep breath, the weight of her silence breaking. She couldn't shield her anymore—not like this, not like a child. Lucy deserved the truth, raw and unsoftened. "Lucy," she said, her voice firm, stepping closer, "Glowies. They've been showing up at your gigs."

Lucy froze, her hands dropping, her gaze sharpening as the word sank in. "You mean those men in the suits?" she asked, her tone shifting, piecing it together. "Are they feds? Here for me—no, wait." She shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her. "They're still looking for John. Thinking he'd slip up and contact one of us. John's way too smart to play their games." She sank onto the couch, her

legs curling under her, her fingers digging into the cushions as the realization settled, heavy and cold.

Theresa nodded, sitting beside her, the business card still burning a hole in her pocket. "Yeah," she said, her voice softening but steady. "They're watching, waiting for a crack. But you're right—he's too good for that." She leaned back, her eyes on Lucy, watching the spark dim but not die. "That guy tonight, though—Colony Records. That's something else. Something for you." She pulled the card out, holding it between them, a small lifeline in the shadow of the Glowies' reach. Lucy took it, her fingers trembling slightly, the night's high clashing with the weight of John's ghost and the feds' eyes, her world tilting on a new edge.

The flat buzzed with the quiet hum of late afternoon, the Danube's faint ripple seeping through the cracked window as John and Zsuzsa sat across from each other, mugs of tea steaming on the table between them. The air felt easy, worn-in, until Zsuzsa's voice broke the stillness, her tone light but laced with something sharper. "Well, you two getting along," she said, her eyes flicking to the empty chair Anes often claimed. "I've seen her here as often as me. Maybe a little too much." Her words hung, a thread of envy weaving through them, subtle but unmistakable.

John didn't respond, his lips pressing into a thin line as he traced the mug's rim with his thumb. He felt it—her quiet sting, the way her gaze lingered—and instead of words, he reached for her, pulling her into a warm embrace. Her body softened against his, the tension melting as his arms tightened briefly, then eased. He pulled back just enough, their eyes locking, her dark lashes framing a look that trembled with something unspoken. She parted her lips, a slight breath escaping, and leaned in, tentative, searching.

Their lips met, gentle at first, a tender brush that sent a jolt through him. John hadn't tasted a woman's kiss in years—Lucy's last, a memory faded to ash—and Zsuzsa's was different, soft and alive, a quiet hunger stirring beneath it. Her hands slid up, caressing his neck, her fingers warm against his skin, and the kiss deepened, slow but sure. Her heart quickened—he felt it in the press of her chest, the way her breath mingled with his, hot and unsteady, pulling him under.

A sharp knock shattered the moment, the door creaking open as Anes burst in, her presence a gust of wind through the flat's stillness. Her eyes found John, bright and sparkling, oblivious to the charged air she'd interrupted. "You haven't started

the teaching job yet," she said, her voice lilting, a smile stretching wide as she crossed the room. She took his hand, her lips brushing his knuckles in a quick, playful kiss, her energy a stark contrast to Zsuzsa's lingering warmth.

John's heart skipped, caught between the two, his pulse still thudding from Zsuzsa's touch. Zsuzsa stepped back, her hands falling to her sides, her gaze flicking to Anes. She noticed it then—the shift in Anes's attire, the leather and ripped jeans traded for a soft sweater and skirt, more ladylike, less punk rock. Even her loud, wild edges had softened, tempered to meet John on his level, her laughter quieter, her movements deliberate. She was changing, bending herself for him, her interest a promise Zsuzsa couldn't unsee.

Anes squeezed John's hand, her grin unwavering, and Zsuzsa's chest tightened, the kiss still burning on her lips as she watched them, the flat suddenly too small to hold the tangle of what they'd all begun.

Anes tilted her head, her sharp eyes darting between Zsuzsa and John, a knowing glint flickering in them. "Did I stop something?" she asked, her voice teasing but edged with curiosity. "I could see it in both of your eyes." Her grin widened, playful, testing the air.

Zsuzsa's breath hitched, her chest tightening as she glanced at John, her lips still tingling from their kiss. She opened her mouth, but John cut in, his voice calm, steady, brushing it aside. "No, not at all," he said, already turning toward the kitchen, his hands moving with purpose as he pulled a pan from the shelf. "Hungry?" he called over his shoulder, the clatter of metal a quiet shield against the moment's fraying edges.

Anes's eyebrows shot up, her laugh spilling out bright and loud. "Man can cook?" she said, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees. "Not left for all the women to do? Can't wait to taste." She swung one leg over the other as she settled into the chair, her skirt riding up, her posture loose, too comfortable—too bold. Zsuzsa's gaze flicked down, catching the absence of underwear, a flash that made her blink, her jaw tightening. John, mid-chop with an onion, noticed too, his eyes darting away fast, a deep blush creeping up his neck. He turned his head sharply, focusing on the knife, the cutting board, anything but her.

Zsuzsa watched him, the way he steadied himself, his hands deliberate as he diced, the flush fading slow. He wasn't Gordon Ramsay—nothing fancy, just simple, warm food, the kind he'd made for her before, hearty enough to fill the flat

with the scent of garlic and herbs. She knew that about him, the quiet care he put into it, and it softened the sting of Anes's ease, her sprawl across the chair like she owned the space.

Anes leaned back, oblivious or uncaring, her foot tapping a restless rhythm against the floor. "Smells good already," she said, her tone light, her eyes on John as he worked, the blush still faintly there. He didn't look up, his focus locked on the meal—chicken sizzling now, potatoes browning—a gentleman's restraint holding him steady. Zsuzsa sat straighter, her hands folding in her lap, the tension between them all a quiet hum, the flat alive with the promise of food and the unspoken edges of what they shared.

The kitchen filled with the sizzle of chicken and the earthy scent of roasted potatoes, a warm undertone cutting through the flat's stale air. John stood at the stove, his hands moving steady, a quiet tune slipping from his lips as he stirred—"Walks along the Seine, laughing in the rain, our last summer." His voice was low, almost lost under the clatter of the pan, but it carried, soft and wistful, threading through the room.

Anes glanced up from her perch, her fork twirling idly in her hand, her brow creasing. "I don't know that song," she said, her tone curious, a touch dismissive, her head tilting as she watched him.

John flipped the chicken, his lips quirking faintly. "Before your time," he replied, his voice steady, warm with memory. "ABBA."

Zsuzsa, leaning against the counter, smiled small, her eyes on him. "He loves ABBA," she said, her accent curling around the words, a fondness there that softened her earlier edge. She'd heard him hum it before, late nights when the flat was still, Lucy's ghost lingering in the notes.

The food was ready soon after, golden and steaming, and John plated it with care—crisp potatoes, tender chicken, a sprinkle of herbs he'd found in a jar. He set the dishes on the table, one before Anes, one before Zsuzsa, the clink of ceramic grounding the moment. Anes grinned up at him, her eyes bright. "Thank you," she said, her voice warm, genuine, and she dug in, her fork plunging into the meal with an eagerness that made the table shake.

John sat last, pulling his chair in, his hands folding briefly as he murmured a silent prayer of grace, a habit etched deep. He unfolded his napkin, smoothing it across

his lap, his gaze drifting to Anes as she ate—her quick bites, her careless sprawl, the way she laughed through a mouthful. In his mind, she was a child, vibrant but unformed, her energy a whirlwind he could care for but not connect to, not fully. It saddened him, a quiet ache settling in his chest. She was young, too young, and he felt the gap—her immaturity a wall he hadn't faced with Lucy. Lucy had been many things, flawed and distant, but never this, never a girl playing at a life she hadn't lived.

Zsuzsa watched him too, her fork pausing mid-bite, catching the shadow that crossed his face. The flat held them close, the meal warming their hands, ABBA's echo fading into the hum of their uneven breaths, the space between them thick with what they couldn't say.

The table grew quiet as they ate, the clink of forks against plates a soft rhythm beneath the flat's hum. Zsuzsa took her time, her movements measured, savoring each bite with a grace that spoke of years Anes hadn't yet touched. John watched them both, his acceptance a steady thread—Zsuzsa's quiet depth, Anes's wild spark—two sides of a coin he'd learned to hold without choosing. He ate slow, the food warm in his mouth, a small comfort he'd crafted for them.

Anes, though, attacked her plate like a storm, her fork a blur as she inhaled the chicken and potatoes, barely chewing before swallowing. She leaned back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, her eyes locking on John with a grin. "Not bad," she said, her tone bright, blunt. "It was good." Her words tumbled out, unpolished but honest, and she stretched, sprawling across her chair like she owned it.

Zsuzsa set her fork down, her plate half-finished, and smiled softly. "Yes, thank you," she said, her voice warmer, her gaze lingering on John with a gratitude that felt deeper, more felt. He nodded, his hands resting on the table, the napkin crumpled beside his plate. "You're both welcome," he said, his voice low, steady. "Hopefully, we'll have many more." A quiet promise, a thread of something he wasn't sure he could name.

They migrated to the couch after, the plates cleared, the flat settling into an easy dusk. John sank into the middle, Zsuzsa on his left, Anes flopping down on his right, her legs kicking up over the armrest. He flicked on the TV, the news blaring to life—talk of Trump's tariffs, stern voices droning about wrecked economies and

global shenanigans. The screen flashed charts, pundits gesturing wild, but John's eyes stayed half-focused, the words a distant hum.

Anes didn't care—her head tilted back, her fingers tapping a restless beat on her knee, the weight of it all sailing over her. She was here, now, her world built of small, bright things—John's cooking, the couch's sag, the way Zsuzsa's laugh broke the quiet. Zsuzsa leaned into the cushions, her shoulder brushing John's, her attention drifting to the news but not clinging, her maturity a quiet anchor beside Anes's carefree sprawl. The flat held them close, the meal still warm in their stomachs, the world's noise a faint echo against the strange, uneven peace they'd carved out together.

The couch creaked as Anes swung her leg over John's, her bare foot settling atop his thigh with a casual ease that pulled him slightly off-center. She inched closer, her body curling toward him, and he shifted, adjusting his weight to let her settle more comfortably against him. She sighed, a soft, contented sound spilling from her lips. "That's it," she murmured, her voice warm, lazy. "You so nice and warm." Her arms slid around him, wrapping tight as she snuggled in, her breath brushing hot against his neck, a steady pulse that sent a shiver through him.

Zsuzsa, on his other side, didn't pull back. Her eyes flicked to Anes, a quiet spark flaring, and she pressed closer, her shoulder flush against his, her warmth seeping through his sweater. Not to be outdone, she let her hand rest on his leg, her fingers tracing slow, subtle patterns across the denim—a gentle swirl, a line, then another—her touch softer, more deliberate than Anes's bold claim. The air thickened, a silent tug-of-war unfolding, their closeness a dance of warmth and unspoken want, each vying for his space, his affection.

John didn't resist. His body eased, the tension melting as he sank deeper into the couch, the news a distant drone against the rhythm of their breaths. Anes's heat pressed against his side, her arms a tight coil, her lips hovering near his ear, while Zsuzsa's fingers moved steady, a quiet pull that grounded him. He leaned into them both, slow and calm, his head tilting back, letting their advances wash over him—Anes's brash fire, Zsuzsa's tender claim—two currents he rode without steering, the scene teetering on an edge where things could spill wild, fast, if he let them.

The flat's dim light cast soft shadows across the couch, the air thick with months of unspoken want, a tension that had simmered too long. Anes and Zsuzsa

pressed close, their desires a tangle around John, each pulling in her own way. Anes's leg still draped over his, her hands restless, bold, as she reached for his jeans, fingers fumbling with the button, her touch hungry, unapologetic. Zsuzsa, on his other side, leaned in, her lips brushing his neck in a slow, sensual dance—gentle, respectful, a tender contrast to Anes's fire. Her breath was warm, her kisses deliberate, tracing a path that made his pulse jump.

John felt it all—their differences sharp, vivid. Anes was a storm, pent-up and reckless, her need spilling out in quick, eager grabs, while Zsuzsa held back, her longing wrapped in care, a quiet burn that lingered on his skin. Zsuzsa's eyes flicked to Anes, catching the raw edge of her desire, and she wasn't blind—she saw John's own tension, the dam he'd held tight for months, now trembling, ready to crack.

Anes's fingers slipped inside his waistband, exploring with a hunger that jolted him, and Zsuzsa's kisses deepened, her hand resting light on his chest, feeling his heartbeat quicken. The dam was bursting, the air electric, and John's breath hitched as their advances collided. He reached down, his hand closing gently over Anes's, stopping her mid-motion—not a refusal, but a pause. "Slow down," he said, his voice low, steady, laced with a calm authority. "Savor the moment. No rushing." His grip was firm but kind, guiding her back, teaching her the patience she'd never learned, the sensuality she'd barreled past.

Anes blinked, her hand stilling, her breath hot against his shoulder as she processed his words, the lesson sinking in. Zsuzsa pulled back slightly, her lips hovering near his jaw, a small smile curving them—she understood, her touch already a slow burn, and she let it linger, her fingers tracing his collarbone now, soft and sure. John leaned into them both, his body relaxing but alive, the moment stretching out, rich and unhurried, the dam held at bay just long enough to feel every pulse, every breath, before it gave way.

The flat's air grew heavy, the couch a cradle for the slow unraveling of months of restraint. Anes slid lower, her hands deliberate now, her descent measured as she initiated fellatio, her lips warm and bold against him. John's breath caught, a sharp intake as the sensation hit, his voice escaping in a low, surprised murmur—"Wow, Lucy would never dare do that." His words slipped out, unguarded, Lucy's shadow flickering in his mind, and Anes paused, her hand rising to deliver a gentle slap to

his thigh, sharp enough to snap him back. Her eyes flashed up at him, a silent command to stay here, with her, in this moment.

Zsuzsa, beside him, moved with a quieter grace, her fingers tugging at his sweater, peeling it off slow, the fabric whispering against his skin. She kissed his chest, her lips tracing a path down his collarbone, soft and lingering, her touch a counterpoint to Anes's fire. She glanced up, her voice a warm hum against his flesh. "Ah, not used to a woman treating you like this?" she asked, her tone teasing but kind, her hands smoothing over his shoulders as she shifted closer, joining Anes in their shared orbit.

Anes chuckled, the sound muffled as she continued, her hands steady, her rhythm unhurried now at his urging. "Yeah, that wife must've been boring," she said, her voice light, cutting, a jab tossed out between breaths. John's head tilted back, his eyes half-closing, but her words pulled a response from him, soft and steady despite the heat building in his core. "She had way too many barriers," he murmured, his voice rough, "comfort zone issues." It wasn't an excuse to him, just a truth—Lucy's walls, her hesitations, a distance he'd never bridged.

Anes lifted her head, her lips glistening, her gaze locking with his, fierce and unyielding. "Bullshit, excuses," she shot back, her tone sharp, challenging. "She told you that and you believed her?" Her eyes held his, daring him to argue, to defend the past, but she didn't stop, her hands resuming their work, slower now, her point made. Zsuzsa's kisses trailed lower, her breath warm against his ribs, and she stayed silent, letting Anes's words hang, her touch a quiet agreement that this—here, now—was different, alive, unburdened by old ghosts. John exhaled, his body yielding, caught between their fire and care, the past a faint echo against the present's pull.

Zsuzsa slid lower, joining Anes, their presence a tandem warmth that enveloped him. They took turns, each woman's touch distinct—Anes bold and eager, her lips firm, her rhythm instinctual; Zsuzsa softer, more deliberate, her movements a slow tease that lingered. John's hands found their shoulders, gentle but firm, pressing lightly to ease their pace. He wanted to stretch it out, to feel every second—too long since he'd been touched, too long since he'd let go. "Slow," he breathed, his voice a low plea, the words rough with need. There was no turning back after this, and he knew it, the line crossed in a quiet, irreversible rush.

Their hands and mouths adjusted, honoring his request, and the flat's stillness wrapped around them, the only sounds their mingled breaths and the faint creak of the couch. John's body tightened, that familiar sensation building, a wave cresting slow but sure. Anes sensed it, her eyes flicking up, and she eased back, her movements slowing to a deliberate crawl, drawing it out. Zsuzsa shifted, rising to press herself against his side, her body soft and warm as she leaned in, her lips finding his in a passionate kiss.

He was out of practice, his response clumsy at first, lips hesitant against hers, but Zsuzsa guided him—gentle, patient, her mouth coaxing his open, showing him what she liked. Her tongue brushed his, slow and sure, her hand cupping his jaw as she deepened it, her breath hot and steady. Anes stayed below, her touch a steady pulse, and John surrendered, caught between Zsuzsa's tender lead and Anes's careful fire, the climax hovering close, unhurried, a moment he let himself fall into completely.

Anes's instincts sharpened, her fingers and lips finding the exact rhythm to unravel him. John's body tensed, then released, a surge like a volcano breaking free, the sensation overwhelming after so long held back. He gasped, his hands gripping the couch, the world narrowing to the heat and pulse of it. Anes pulled back, a triumphant giggle bursting from her lips—"Yeah, that's it, baby!"—her voice bright, unrestrained, her eyes glinting with mischief as she watched him ride the wave.

Zsuzsa moved fast, her arms wrapping around him, her body pressing close as she snuggled into his side, craving the warmth of his afterglow. Her cheek rested against his shoulder, her breath steadying with his, a quiet claim on the intimacy still humming through him. Anes, meanwhile, leaned back on her heels, bold and unapologetic, her knees parting as she put herself on display. Her hands roamed, diving into her own adventure of self-discovery, her movements brazen, a spectacle unfolding right there on the floor.

Zsuzsa glanced over, a soft giggle escaping her, her eyes flicking back to John, locking with his. Their gaze held, steady and deep, a silent thread tying them through Anes's wild performance. Anes moaned low, her head tipping back, fully aware of their attention and reveling in it, her show a loud contrast to the stillness between them. Zsuzsa's hand found John's, guiding it gently to her breast, pressing his palm against the soft curve beneath her shirt. Her touch was tender,

an invitation, her eyes never leaving his as the flat pulsed with their shared heat, Anes's chaos a backdrop to the quiet connection they held.

Anes's cries tore through the flat, sharp and unrestrained, her peak a burst of passion that echoed off the walls. The sound hit like a wave, loud enough to rattle the neighbors, and soon a fist pounded against the thin divide, a gruff voice shouting in Hungarian—"Shut the fuck up over there!"—the words muffled but clear, irritation cutting through the haze.

John exhaled, a low laugh rumbling out as he leaned back, his body still humming. "Perhaps a hotel's in order next time our adventures are in threes," he said, his voice dry, tinged with amusement and a touch of disbelief. He hadn't planned this—none of it—the night spiraling far beyond the meal, the news, the quiet he'd expected. His eyes flicked to Anes, sprawled at the couch's end, her chest heaving, a grin plastered across her face as she caught her breath.

Zsuzsa moved then, swift and sure, straddling his lap, her thighs pressing against his hips as she found a rhythm. Her hands braced on his chest, her touch electric, and she leaned in, her breath hot against his jaw. She enjoyed him—his warmth, his steadiness—and her movements deepened, slow at first, then building, a dance she controlled. Anes watched from her perch, her eyes tracing Zsuzsa's flow, studying the sway of her hips, the way she rode him with purpose.

John's hands settled on Zsuzsa's waist, encouraging her, his voice a low murmur—"Keep going"—wanting her to feel it, to reach that edge before he let go again. Her pace quickened, her body pressing harder against him, and his tensed, the familiar heat coiling tight. He held back, determined not to peak until she did, his focus locked on her—her breath hitching, her back arching, the signs building. She didn't slow, her rhythm relentless, and soon her nails dug into his shoulders, sharp and desperate, as her body tensed, then shattered, a cry spilling from her lips as she released.

John felt her pulse around him, her grip biting into his skin, and only then did he let go, the wave crashing through him a second time, quieter but deep, his hands tightening on her hips as they rode it out together. The flat trembled with their shared breath, Anes's gaze still fixed on them, the neighbor's shouts a distant echo against the raw, unscripted night.

Their breaths slowed, a steady rhythm settling over the flat as the heat of the night ebbed into a shared afterglow. Zsuzsa slid off John's lap, her body curling against

his side, her head resting on his chest, while Anes scooted closer, tucking herself into the curve of his other arm. Exhaustion pulled them under, and they stayed there, tangled on the couch, a quiet surrender to the moment. John reached for the thick, heavy blankets stacked nearby, draping them over the three of them, the weight transforming the couch into a cocoon of warmth and togetherness. Slumber came soft and deep, the flat silent save for the faint hum of the city beyond, their breathing a gentle chorus in the dark.

Morning crept in, gray light filtering through the window, and they slept on, peaceful, undisturbed. Anes stirred first, her eyes blinking open to the sight of Zsuzsa and John still nestled close, the blankets a fortress around them. A small smile tugged at her lips—she was happy here, waking among friends, the wild night softened by this quiet belonging. She slipped free, half-dressed in her skirt and a loose shirt, tiptoeing into the small kitchen, her bare feet silent on the cold floor.

She fired up the coffee maker, the machine gurgling to life as she scooped grounds into the filter, brewing a large pot. The rich, dark scent curled through the air, a warm thread that began to rouse the others. Anes rummaged through the fridge, pulling out eggs, bacon, sausage—her hands moving quick, instinctual, a grin on her face as she lit the stove. She knew after a night like that, hunger would hit hard, and she wanted to give back, to fill the flat with more than just coffee's promise.

The sizzle of bacon joined the coffee's hum, fat popping in the pan as she cracked eggs, whisking them with a fork. Zsuzsa stirred next, her head lifting from John's chest, her hair mussed as she inhaled deep, the smell tugging her awake. John followed, his eyes cracking open, a low groan escaping as he stretched, the blanket slipping to reveal the marks of Zsuzsa's nails on his shoulders. They blinked at Anes, the kitchen alive with her energy, and the flat felt full—warmth, food, the echo of last night binding them in a strange, unspoken peace.

The morning sun spilled through the windows of Colony Records, a modest brick building tucked on the edge of town, its walls humming with the promise of sound. Theresa and Lucy stepped inside, greeted by Charlie—the man from the gig—his lean frame relaxed in a faded denim jacket, his smile warm but sharp with intent. "Welcome, and thanks for coming," he said, his voice smooth, carrying the weight of someone who'd seen dreams built and broken. "Happy you both came and

accepted my offer to show you around." He gestured them forward, leading the way through a narrow hall, the air thick with the faint scent of electronics and old vinyl.

They reached the recording studio, a glass-walled sanctuary where a woman sat at the mixing board, her headphones slung around her neck. She glanced up, offering a quick wave, her fingers hovering over sliders and knobs, a quiet maestro in her domain. Lucy's eyes widened, taking it all in—the sleek equipment, the padded walls, the promise of her voice captured, shaped, sent out into the world. She stood frozen, awed, her breath catching as the possibility sank in.

Theresa's hand found her arm, a gentle grip from behind, grounding her. "Tempered," she said, her voice low, steady, a warning wrapped in care. "Lots of work and many hours of touring—jet lag too, if you blossom." Her fingers squeezed lightly, a reminder of the cost, the grind beneath the glow, and Lucy nodded, her buzz dimming just enough to feel the weight.

Charlie pushed open the door to the recording room, a small space lined with foam, a stool at its center, a microphone dangling like a beckoning hand. "Have a seat and look around," he said, motioning her in, his eyes glinting with quiet confidence. Lucy stepped inside, her boots soft on the carpet, and sank onto the stool, her hands brushing the armrests as she turned, absorbing it—the intimacy of the space, the silence waiting to be filled. Theresa lingered at the threshold, watching, and Charlie leaned against the frame, letting her feel it—the first taste of a future she could claim, if she dared.

Theresa slipped her phone from her pocket, the screen glowing as she angled it toward Lucy, capturing the scene—the small room, the stool, the way Lucy's fingers brushed the guitar she'd lifted from the floor. The camera clicked soft, freezing the moment, a keepsake for the hard days ahead. "Never forget where you came from," Theresa said, her voice a quiet murmur, steady and warm, "and remember this moment. Let it burn in." Her words sank into the air, a tether to the past as Lucy's future unfolded.

Lucy's voice broke the stillness, soft at first—"Be my hero"—the notes spilling out unbidden, raw and clear, filling the padded walls. Charlie's head snapped up, his eyes sharpening, and he waved quick at Casey in the booth, a silent urgency in his gesture. "Get that on tape, shall we?" he said, his voice low but firm, an informal

recording sparking to life. Casey nodded, her hands flying over the board, sliders shifting as the red light blinked on.

Lucy tuned the guitar fast, her fingers deft on the strings, coaxing it into harmony. She started again, stronger now—"There's a hero, if you look inside your heart. You don't have to be afraid of what you are." Her voice rose, rich and resonant, weaving through the chords, each strum a pulse that echoed in the small space. Charlie's grin stretched wide, ear to ear, his arms crossing as he leaned back, hearing it—the depth, the ache, the power in her sound. Theresa lowered her phone, her eyes glistening, the moment burning in as Lucy sang, the room alive with her voice, a hero waking in the notes.

Casey swiveled in her chair, flashing a thumbs-up through the glass, her grin confirming the track was caught—clean, raw, alive. Charlie nodded, his hands slipping into his pockets as he turned to Lucy, his voice steady but brimming with quiet excitement. "I'm gonna give this small sample to a few others," he said, "and I'll want you to come back for an official recording session. But this—this was a surprising start." His eyes glinted, seeing beyond the room, already hearing her echo in bigger spaces.

Lucy's smile broke wide, her fingers still resting on the guitar strings, the warmth of the moment settling in her chest. "It just came over me," she said, her voice soft, almost awed. "Like I was drawn to it." The words felt true, a pull she couldn't explain, the music rising from somewhere deep.

Charlie's grin softened, his head tilting as he studied her. "The passion shows," he said, "and that's what I'm looking for. You'll do great out there." His confidence was a spark, a promise of stages and crowds, and Lucy felt it catch, a fire she hadn't known she could carry.

Theresa stepped forward, her hand brushing Lucy's shoulder, her voice warm with gratitude. "Thank you, Charlie," she said, her tone firm, heartfelt. "A new lease on life. This will give her purpose and meaning." Her eyes flicked to Lucy, pride shimmering there, steady as ever.

Lucy reached into her small backpack, pulling out the playlist—John's songs, her tether to him, scribbled and worn. She held it close for a moment, then set it on the stool beside the guitar, her fingers lingering. "John, my love," she murmured, her voice catching, soft but clear. "Hopefully, the crowds will learn how much you're loved and mourned. Maybe I can write my own love songs." The words

hung, a vow to herself as much as to him, her past and future tangling in the quiet. Charlie watched, silent, and Casey's thumbs-up lingered in the air, the room holding the weight of her beginning.

The car hummed softly as Theresa pulled into the driveway, the house looming quiet and familiar under the late afternoon sun. Lucy sat beside her, the guitar case resting in the back, her hands fidgeting with the edge of her jacket. As they stepped inside, she turned to Theresa, her voice small, unsteady. "T, will I ever give up on him?" she asked, her eyes searching. "He's probably moved on, and I have not." The words spilled out, raw and heavy, a confession she couldn't hold back.

Theresa set her keys down, her gaze softening as she watched Lucy pull out her phone, transferring the photos from the studio—snapshots of her on the stool, guitar in lap, voice caught mid-flight. Lucy's fingers moved fast, posting them to her social media, the captions simple but aching: *First steps. For you, always.* She handed the phone to Theresa, who scrolled through, her lips curving faintly. "Wherever my brother may be," Theresa said, her voice low, steady, "he might see it." She handed it back, a quiet hope threading through her words, a bridge she still held for them both.

Half a world away, Budapest drowsed under a gray afternoon sky, the flat's single window letting in a slant of muted light. John sat alone on the couch, his burner phone in hand, scrolling through encrypted feeds to keep his edge sharp. A notification blinked—*New update available*—and Lucy's profile popped up, unbidden, a ghost from the algorithms he couldn't outrun. He hesitated, his thumb hovering, then clicked, her page loading slow on the shaky connection.

He scrolled, and there it was—a photo of her in a recording studio, guitar across her lap, her face lit with something fierce and alive. His heart lurched, a jolt that stole his breath, and tears sprang to his eyes, hot and sudden. He blinked hard, but they fell anyway, tracing silent paths down his cheeks. She'd done it—stepped into the light he'd always seen in her, the music he'd left behind now hers to claim. Pride swelled, sharp and bittersweet, tangled with the ache of her absence.

He was glad to be alone, the flat empty—Zsuzsa and Anes still out, their laughter and warmth hours away. He swiped at his face, the phone trembling in his grip, and stared at the screen, her caption cutting deep: *For you, always.* His chest

tightened, a sob catching in his throat, and he let it sit there, the tears quiet, the moment his alone to hold—her triumph, his loss, and the love he'd never stopped carrying, half a world apart.

The next morning broke bright, the sun cutting through the blinds as Theresa bustled into the kitchen, her energy sharp and purposeful. "Come with me," she said, catching Lucy mid-sip of her coffee, her voice firm but warm. "I wanna show you something." Lucy raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued, and set her mug down, grabbing her jacket as she followed Theresa out the door. They slid into the car, Lucy claiming the passenger seat, and Theresa hit the gas, the engine roaring as they sped off, the town blurring past in a rush of color.

They reached the edge of town, where the road hugged the beach, the salt air seeping through the cracked windows. Theresa turned up a winding drive, gravel crunching under the tires, and pulled to a stop before a sprawling property. A cobblestone circular driveway stretched out, framing a grand fountain at its heart, water cascading down in shimmering arcs, catching the light. Lucy's breath hitched as she stepped out, the scale of it sinking in—massive, elegant, a world apart from the cramped bars and modest house she'd known.

Theresa dangled a set of keys, her expression soft but steady. "Lucy, this place—John left it for us," she said, her voice carrying the weight of his unseen care. "I wanted to wait till you were in a better state of mind before showing it." She unlocked the door, pushing it open, and Lucy stepped inside, her boots echoing on polished marble. Chandeliers glittered overhead, casting prisms across mahogany wood paneling, the grand staircase spiraling up like something from a dream. It was overwhelming, every detail screaming wealth and intention, a gift she hadn't expected.

Theresa followed, her hands in her pockets, watching Lucy's awe unfold. "This will be our new home shortly," she said, her tone matter-of-fact but warm. "Pick out where you wanna be." Lucy turned, her eyes wide, tracing the expanse—high ceilings, arched windows framing the ocean beyond—and felt John's presence in the walls, his love woven into the space. She nodded, speechless, the weight of it settling in her chest, a new chapter opening in a house he'd left to hold them both.

Lucy's steps echoed through the vast house, a hollow rhythm bouncing off the marble and wood as she wandered, her fingers brushing the walls, tracing the life John had left behind. She pushed open a set of double doors, stepping into a

large room bathed in soft light, and stopped short. At its center stood a black grand piano, its polished surface gleaming, a silent giant commanding the space. Her breath caught, eyes drawn to a single note resting atop it, the paper crisp, edges sharp. She reached for it, her hands trembling, and unfolded it: *My love, here is something more for you to learn and play till your heart's content.* John's handwriting—unmistakable, steady—and her gasp broke the silence, sharp and raw.

How long had it been there? The note looked fresh, untouched by dust, as if placed yesterday, though reason told her it couldn't be. Her chest tightened, a flood of questions tangling with the ache of his absence, and she sank onto the bench, the leather cool beneath her. Her fingers found the keys, hesitant at first, then pressing down, chords spilling out—rich, resonant, filling the house with a sound that seemed to breathe. The notes climbed, reverberating through the high ceilings, a melody unformed but alive, carrying her longing, her wonder.

Theresa heard it from down the hall, the music pulling her fast, her steps quickening until she reached the doorway. She paused, catching Lucy mid-song, lost in the swell of it—head tilted back, fingers dancing over the keys, tears streaming down her face, glistening trails in the light. The sight hit hard, Lucy's raw emotion laid bare, moved beyond words by John's thoughtfulness, his quiet gift reaching across time and distance. Theresa stayed still, letting the chords wash over her, the house alive with Lucy's heart, John's love echoing in every note.

The piano's notes softened, Lucy's fingers slowing as the melody tapered into a quiet hum, the last chord lingering in the air like a held breath. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, the tears smearing, her chest still tight with the weight of John's note. Theresa stepped closer, her shadow falling across the piano's gloss, and rested a hand on Lucy's shoulder, gentle but firm.

"He knew you'd find this," Theresa said, her voice low, steady, a thread of awe woven through it. "Even now, he's giving you something to hold onto." She squeezed lightly, her eyes tracing the note still clutched in Lucy's hand, its edges creased from her grip.

Lucy nodded, her throat too thick to speak at first. She set the note back on the piano, smoothing it out, her fingers lingering over the words—*My love*—as if she could feel him through the ink. "It's like he's still here," she whispered, her voice

breaking, "waiting for me to catch up." She pressed a key, a single note ringing out, sharp and clear, and looked up at Theresa, her eyes glistening but alive. "I'm keeping this room," she said, a small, determined smile breaking through. "This is where I'll write."

Theresa's lips curved, pride flickering in her gaze. "Good choice," she murmured, stepping back to let Lucy claim it, the grand piano a cornerstone for the songs yet to come, John's echo a quiet partner in the silence.

Lucy turned to Theresa, her voice trembling but resolute. "T, can you snap me a video? I'll upload it in the hopes that one day John will see me here, as a way of letting him know his gifts of love are received and being put to use." Her eyes, red-rimmed and puffy, glistened with fresh purpose, the smeared makeup a raw map of her emotions.

Theresa nodded, pulling out her phone with a steady hand, her thumb tapping the screen to life. She positioned herself across from Lucy, framing her against the grand piano, its black shine catching the light. "Ready," she said, her voice soft but firm, and pressed record, the red dot blinking as the moment began to unfold.

Lucy straightened on the bench, her shoulders squaring despite the weight of her tears. Her fingers found the keys, hesitant at first, then flowing, chords spilling out in a melody that matched the sway of her body—slow, aching, alive. "All I need," she sang, her voice low and rough, "tell me you love me. Tell me you need me." The words broke free, each note a plea, her head tilting as the music took hold. "Under this mask I wear, I just want someone to care. Maybe that's all I need. That's all I need."

Her voice cracked, a fresh wave of tears spilling down her cheeks, glistening trails catching the camera's eye. Her emotionalism surged, her hands pressing harder into the keys, the sound swelling as her body leaned into it—shoulders hunching, then rising, her breath hitching between lyrics. The tears flowed unchecked, her face a raw canvas of longing and gratitude, John's note a silent anchor beside her. Theresa held the phone steady, her own throat tightening, capturing every tremble, every note, a message to the man half a world away, carried on Lucy's song.

Lucy's voice softened, the chords fading as she looked into the camera, her eyes glistening, her hands resting on the keys. "I'll forever hold you in my heart, my love," she said, her tone steady despite the tears, each word a vow carved deep.

"For there will be no one else, till the day I die. I miss you so much." Her breath shuddered, the final note lingering as she bowed her head, the piano's echo wrapping around her like a shield.

Theresa's breath caught, a quiet hitch in her throat as she stopped recording, her thumb hovering over the screen. She uploaded it to Lucy's profile, her fingers trembling slightly, the video a raw, unfiltered piece of her soul sent out into the ether. "It's done," she murmured, setting the phone down, her eyes on Lucy, who sat still, lost in the weight of her own words.

The next morning in Budapest, the flat was hushed, the gray dawn seeping through the window as John stirred on the couch. Zsuzsa and Anes sprawled beside him, their bodies tangled in the blankets, passed out from a late night of cards—laughter and clinking glasses fading into snores. He'd stayed up too, but not with them, his burner laptop glowing as he wove new exploits, dark pool trades to net himself cash on the black market. Two million, easy, if he played it right, his fingers still itching with the code's rhythm.

He shifted, careful not to wake them, their warmth a quiet comfort he didn't disturb. Zsuzsa's arm draped over his chest, Anes's leg hooked around his, their breathing deep and even. He reached for his phone, the screen lighting up, and scrolled absently—until Lucy's profile blinked, a new post. His heart kicked, a reflex he couldn't stop, and he opened it, the video loading slow on the shaky connection. Her face filled the screen, the piano behind her, and his chest tightened, knowing before she even sang what it would do to him.

John's eyes locked on the video, the grand piano gleaming in the background, its black curves a silent proof—she'd claimed the property he'd left them, the house he'd poured his care into from a world away. The sound kicked in, Lucy's voice spilling through the phone, deep and rich, her emotionalism a blade that cut straight to his core. Her face filled the screen—red-rimmed eyes, smudged makeup, tears carving paths down her cheeks—and his own tears welled up, hot and fast, a tide he couldn't hold.

He clenched his jaw, fighting them back, aware of Zsuzsa and Anes beside him, their warmth pressing close. He didn't want to crack, not here, not with them—but her voice kept going, each note a hammer against his walls. Then her final words hit—"I'll forever hold you in my heart, my love. For there will be no one else, till the

day I die. I miss you so much.”—and he broke. The flood came, tears streaming down his face, sobs ripping out of him, raw and uncontrollable, shaking his frame.

Anes stirred, her sleep-heavy eyes blinking open, concern flashing across her face as she registered his distress. She reached out, her hand finding his arm, her touch tentative but warm. “John?” she murmured, her voice thick with sleep, her fingers tightening as she sat up, the blanket slipping off her shoulder. Zsuzsa shifted too, still half-lost to dreams, but Anes was awake now, her gaze fixed on him, worry cutting through the morning’s haze as his sobs echoed in the flat, Lucy’s love a weight he couldn’t hide.

Anes’s eyes flicked to the phone, Lucy’s voice still spilling from the tinny speaker, the piano’s chords a haunting backdrop. She saw the grand room, heard the raw ache in Lucy’s song, and the pieces clicked—John’s sobs, his trembling hands, the tears he couldn’t stop. She understood, her face softening, no trace of anger, just a quiet realization. Zsuzsa shifted, the thick blankets sliding off as she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close. “Oh, my, John,” she whispered, her voice thick with empathy, “I’m so sorry.” Her head rested on his shoulder, her hair brushing his neck, a steady warmth against his shaking.

Anes watched, her hand still on his arm, her voice soft but sure. “Wow, he still loves her,” she said, not a jab but a truth, her tone laced with compassion. She leaned in, her fingers sliding down to caress his back, joining Zsuzsa in a tender shower of care—stroking his hair, rubbing his shoulders, their love a balm against his unraveling. Another pair might’ve bristled, jealousy driving them out the door, but not them; they stayed, their empathy a lifeline, holding him through the storm.

John swiped at his face, his sobs easing into ragged breaths, the weight of Lucy’s words still crushing his chest. “I have to get myself out of this funk,” he said, his voice hoarse, broken but firm. “I can’t stay here. Zsuzsa, Anes, will you go with me? I don’t want to leave you here alone. I want you both in my life.” His eyes, red and wet, flicked between them, a plea beneath the pain.

Anes squeezed his hand tight, her gaze lifting to meet his, fierce and certain. “Yes, take me,” she said, her voice steady, a spark of her usual fire breaking through. Zsuzsa smiled, small but warm, her hand resting on his chest, feeling the thud of his heart. “John, you’re hurting,” she murmured, “I know and feel it too. Now is not a time to abandon you, but to hold close.” She pressed closer, her embrace

tightening, and Anes nodded, their unity a quiet promise as the flat held them, the echo of Lucy's song fading into the morning's fragile light.

John hunched over his burner laptop, the flat's dim light casting shadows across the keys as he dug into HackerOne programs—bounties, research, reverse engineering—his mind a blade slicing through code. He worked under a veil of secrecy, proxies and VPNs cloaking his tracks, every move calculated to keep the feds at bay. The cash flowed—bug bounties piling up, research gigs paying out—and he funneled it all into cryptocurrency, a digital river he could ride. Overnight, the value tripled, a windfall he split across mixers and scattered into multiple wallets, his wealth a ghost dancing through the blockchain.

He glanced at Zsuzsa and Anes, still asleep on the couch, their forms soft under the blankets, and felt the itch to move. That dingy flat—yellowed walls, creaking floors—wasn't enough anymore, not for them. They weren't Lucy, no one could be, but they cared for him, held him when he broke, and he wanted to give them something better—somewhere modern, comfortable, out past the city limits where the air wasn't thick with smoke and noise. He tapped away, scouting properties, his fingers steady, his resolve hardening.

Unbeknownst to Lucy and Theresa, half a world away, more assets waited—properties, trusts, pieces of his past he'd tucked away for them, breadcrumbs they'd uncover in time. He'd built a life once, for her, and now he was building again, for these women who'd chosen him, his hands weaving a future from the shadows, crypto humming in the background like a heartbeat.

The car wound through the outskirts of Budapest, the city's clamor fading as the river came into view, its surface glinting under the late morning sun. John pulled up to a luxurious home in the 12th district, a sleek, modern sprawl of glass and stone, its lines sharp against the soft ripple of the water nearby. He stepped out, Zsuzsa and Anes following, their eyes wide as they took in the expanse—far cry from the cramped flat they'd shared.

"So," John said, turning to them, his voice steady but tinged with a rare lightness, "do you girls like?" He gestured to the house, its windows reflecting the sky, a quiet pride in his stance.

Anes spun in a slow circle, her heels clicking sharp on the cobblestone drive, her gaze darting from the towering facade to the river's edge. "Wow, large house," she

breathed, her voice bright with awe. "Never lived in a place so big." Her grin flashed, wild and unguarded, as she took a step closer to the entrance.

Zsuzsa lingered, her hands clasped, her eyes tracing the clean lines of the architecture. "Very nice," she said, her tone softer, thoughtful, then turned to John, a question flickering in her gaze. "John, how did you pull this off? A flat to now this?" Her heels echoed too as they stepped inside, the open space vast and empty, hardwood floors gleaming under the hollow sound of their steps, no furniture yet to fill the void.

John shrugged, his hands slipping into his pockets, a faint smile tugging at his lips. He could explain—the late nights cracking code, the bounties, the crypto surge—but it'd be noise to them, a language they wouldn't grasp. "I do projects that make lots of money," he said simply, his voice low, steady. "You women deserve better than that flat." His eyes flicked between them, a quiet vow in the words, the weight of his care unspoken but felt.

Zsuzsa's smile bloomed, warm and genuine, her hand brushing his arm briefly. "Thank you," she murmured, her voice thick with gratitude, her heels clicking again as she stepped further in, the empty house a canvas for the life he was building them, river whispering outside like a promise.

Anes let out a bright chuckle, her voice bouncing off the bare walls as she spun on her heel, her smirk wide and playful. "We can make all the noise we want making love," she said, her tone teasing, unrestrained. "No more annoying neighbors." Her eyes glinted, daring, as she tossed her hair back.

John laughed, a low rumble that matched her energy, his hands still in his pockets. "Always ready for a show, Anes," he shot back, his grin easy, a rare lightness breaking through his usual reserve.

Anes smirked wider, stepping closer, her heels clicking sharp. "Show and tell," she purred, "I love to do." Her words hung, bold and unapologetic, a spark in the empty space.

Zsuzsa rolled her eyes, a smile tugging at her lips despite herself. "Anes, yeah, you would," she said, her voice warm but dry. "Maybe sound like a church mouse instead." Her tone teased, a gentle nudge at Anes's fire.

John shook his head, his chuckle softening. "Nonsense," he said, his voice steady, warm. "Let mother nature do her thing." He reached for Zsuzsa's hand as she

offered it, her fingers slipping into his, and they moved together, exploring further. The living room stretched wide, flowing into a large kitchen—gleaming countertops, stainless steel appliances, a space that begged to be filled. John paused, his eyes tracing the setup, a quiet satisfaction settling in. “Yes, now I can cook to my heart’s content,” he murmured, his free hand brushing the edge of the counter, the house already feeling like a home under their steps.

The kitchen in the grand house glowed warm under morning light, the scent of coffee lingering as Theresa leaned against the counter, her hands wrapped around a mug. Lucy stood opposite, her fingers tracing the edge of the marble island, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. “Perhaps today you can venture on your own to the recording studio,” Theresa said, her voice gentle but firm. “You’re capable of driving on your own.” She slid her car keys across the counter, the metal glinting as they stopped before Lucy. “Time for you to be independent.”

Lucy’s face shadowed with sadness, her hand hesitating over the keys. “Are you pushing me away?” she asked, her voice small, a tremor of fear threading through it as her eyes lifted to meet Theresa’s.

Theresa’s gaze softened, steady and sure, locking with hers. “Oh, no, dear,” she said, stepping closer, her tone a quiet anchor. “It’s a sense of normalcy, and you can do it. You did it when you were married.” Her words carried weight, a reminder of Lucy’s strength, buried but still there.

Lucy nodded, hesitant, her fingers closing around the keys with a faint tremble. She grabbed her bag, the playlist tucked inside, and made her way to the car, the engine humming to life as she pulled out of the cobblestone drive. The road to the studio stretched before her, unfamiliar yet conquerable, and she gripped the wheel tight, her breath steadying with each mile.

At Colony Records, Casey greeted her with a wave from the booth, her headphones slung loose as she motioned Lucy inside. “Charlie left instructions,” she said, handing over a folded note, her voice casual but warm. Lucy unfolded it, her eyes scanning his scrawl: *Freestyle today—just play and show Casey what you’re all about. Take care, Charlie.* She stepped into the recording room, the guitar waiting, and sat, her fingers finding the strings, ready to let her soul spill out, alone but standing.

Lucy paused mid-strum, her fingers hovering over the guitar strings, her brow furrowing. “Casey, a piano?” she asked, her voice tentative but curious, cutting

through the booth's quiet hum.

Casey grinned, pulling off her headphones and motioning toward the door. "Set that down and come with me," she said, stepping out of the recording room. Lucy followed, her boots soft on the hall's worn carpet as Casey led her to a small side room, a upright piano tucked against the wall, its keys gleaming under the overhead light. "Let me get set up," Casey said, dragging a mic stand closer and adjusting a small recorder, her movements quick and practiced.

Lucy slid onto the bench, her hands brushing the keys, and started with a few warm-up tunes—light, playful riffs: the slinky swing of *The Pink Panther*, the chaotic chase of *Tom and Jerry*, then *Woody Woodpecker's* sharp, staccato laugh. Casey chuckled from behind the setup, her laugh warm and easy. "Ok, I'm ready," she said, giving a thumbs-up, the recorder's red light blinking on.

Lucy took a deep breath, her shoulders squaring as she steadied herself, her fingers finding their place. The notes flowed, soft at first, then building—"Dear Mama," she sang, her voice low, rich, spilling out like a confession. "You were there for me to love and care for me when skies were grey. You'll always be the girl in my life for all times." Her hands moved sure, the melody weaving through her words, tender and fierce. "Mama, you know how much I love you. Queen of my heart." Her soul poured into it, every chord a pulse of gratitude, her eyes closing as the song took her.

Casey watched, leaning forward, caught in the raw depth of it, Lucy's voice filling the room. Her phone sat propped at the piano's corner, angled to capture it all—the tears brimming, the way her fingers danced, the love she laid bare—a silent witness to a performance that was all her own.

Lucy's fingers lingered on the piano keys as the last note faded, her chest rising and falling with the song's weight. She reached for her phone, the video still warm from recording, and uploaded it—*Dear Mama, for you, always*—her heart a quiet prayer that John might see it, might feel her across the miles. She gathered her bag, ready to slip out, when Charlie's voice cut through the studio's hum. "Lucy, before you go," he called, strolling in, his denim jacket slung over one shoulder. "Step into my office."

Lucy hefted her stuff—guitar case, backpack—and followed, her steps light but curious. She tapped a soft knock on his door, peering in. "You need something?" she asked, her voice tentative, a thread of nerves beneath it.

Charlie waved her in, his grin wide and easy. "Perfect, sit," he said, nodding to a chair across his cluttered desk—papers, vinyls, a coffee mug teetering on the edge. "Great news. I've circulated your material to a few others, and they're interested in a gig for you—live, up close, so they can hear what you've got." He leaned forward, sliding a pair of plane tickets across the desk, the word *Los Angeles* bold on the top. "This is your time to shine," he said, his eyes glinting with belief. "So, put your best foot forward."

Lucy's breath caught, her fingers closing around the tickets, the paper crinkling under her grip. LA—big, loud, a stage she hadn't dreamed of yet. She looked up, her smile small but growing, the weight of it sinking in. "Thank you," she murmured, her voice thick, the chance a spark she'd carry home.

Lucy snapped a quick photo of the plane tickets, her fingers blurring the QR codes with a swipe of her thumb before uploading it to her social media. *Going to LA!* she captioned it, her profile blooming into a living scrapbook—each post a step, a flare of her new life rising from the ashes, a phoenix unfurling its wings. The likes trickled in, her story taking flight, piece by piece.

A week later, the grand house still echoed with the shuffle of boxes as Theresa and Lucy worked to settle in, their voices bouncing off marble and wood. The growl of engines interrupted them, two tow trucks rumbling into the cobblestone driveway—one hauling a beefy Ford 550, the other a sleek 5th wheel RV, its chrome glinting in the sun. Theresa stepped outside, her brow furrowing as she approached the wrecker, arms crossed. "What is all of this?" she asked, her tone sharp with confusion.

The driver shrugged, wiping his hands on a rag. "Don't know," he said, his voice gruff. "All I was told was to deliver these to this address." He handed her a clipboard, the paperwork stark and simple, and climbed back into his cab, the trucks groaning as they pulled away.

Theresa's lips pressed tight, a spark of recognition flickering. "My brother, again," she muttered, her eyes narrowing. "He must know—or seen Lucy's social profile." She crossed to the Ford 550, popping open the glove box with a creak. Inside, a note waited, folded neat, the handwriting unmistakable. She unfolded it, reading aloud: *You girls will need this for your road trips and tours. Happy life, and good luck. Love you, my loves.*

Lucy stepped closer, peering over her shoulder, her breath catching at John's words. The trucks loomed large, practical and extravagant, his care etched into every detail—a lifeline for the road ahead, his love a shadow they couldn't shake.

Theresa climbed into the RV, the door creaking as she stepped onto the polished floor, her eyes landing on the island in the small kitchenette. There sat the title, her name printed bold across it, and beside it, another note in John's familiar scrawl. She picked it up, her fingers brushing the paper as she read aloud, her voice steady but laced with wonder: "T, this is yours and out of the reach of the Glowies. This is to protect Lucy. You girls don't have to sleep in cheap hotels while on the road. Take the RV cross country and enjoy life."

Lucy followed close, her breath hitching as she leaned in, scanning the words over Theresa's shoulder. Her chest tightened, a mix of awe and ache swelling inside her. "Even being gone for two years so far," she murmured, her voice trembling, "and he still cares and continues to show his love. Will he ever stop?" Her eyes glistened, the note a fresh wound and a balm all at once, John's presence a thread she couldn't cut.

Theresa folded the note, setting it back on the island, her gaze softening as she turned to Lucy. "Why would he?" she said, her tone quiet, thoughtful. "He may feel guilty for leaving, and this is his way of forgiveness." Her hand rested on the counter, the RV's sleek interior a silent testament to his intent—protection, freedom, a life he still shaped from afar, guilt or love or both driving every gift.

Lucy wandered through the RV, her fingers trailing along the smooth countertops, the space still humming with John's unseen hand. She turned to Theresa, a spark lighting her eyes as she reached into her backpack. "Well, T, I have more good news," she said, pulling out the plane tickets with a flourish, their edges crinkling in her grip. "We're going to LA."

Theresa's eyebrows shot up, her mouth parting in a soft, "Wow," as she stepped closer, peering at the tickets—*Los Angeles* bold and real in black ink. Lucy grinned, her voice bubbling with excitement. "Charlie lined up a gig for me," she continued, "and there'll be others in the music industry there. He wants me to show off my talent in front of them."

Theresa's face broke into a wide smile, pride flashing in her gaze. "That is crazy," she said, her tone warm, marveling. "Charlie has faith in you, believes in you. Who knows who exactly will be in that crowd." She paused, her mind already racing,

then clapped her hands together, decisive. "We'll have to go shopping for an elegant gown—something smashing. You've got to look the part. Ready to step into a serious gown?"

Lucy's grin faltered for a heartbeat, the weight of it sinking in—LA, a crowd of strangers, a gown—but then she nodded, her shoulders squaring. "Yeah," she said, her voice steadying, "I'm ready." The RV gleamed around them, a cocoon of possibility, and Theresa's eyes sparkled, already picturing Lucy on that stage, shining brighter than ever.

The RV tour led them to the bedroom, a cozy nook with a wide bed and sleek wood paneling, the river's faint murmur seeping through the walls. Theresa poked around, her curiosity tugging her to the drawers beside the bed. She slid one open, her fingers brushing paper and something else, and paused, her breath catching. "Come here," she called to Lucy, her voice low, tinged with a mix of surprise and care. "I want you to handle this. This might be intimate."

Lucy stepped over, her brow creasing as she joined Theresa's side, peering into the drawer. She reached in, pulling out another note—John's handwriting, steady and familiar—and read aloud, her voice soft, halting. "My love, something for you and for your self-care. You'll need it for when things get stressful while on the road." Her eyes flicked to the back of the drawer, spotting a small, discreetly wrapped box. She lifted it, her fingers trembling slightly as she peeled back the paper, revealing an adult toy—sleek, unassuming, but unmistakable. Her face flushed hot, a deep blush spreading as she turned to Theresa, wide-eyed.

Theresa chuckled, a warm, knowing sound breaking the quiet. "That's my bro," she said, her tone light, teasing. "Thinks of everything in sexuality." She leaned in, her grin widening as she nudged Lucy's arm. "You know how to use that thing, don't you?" she joked, her laughter soft but playful, easing the moment's edge.

Lucy froze, the box small and heavy in her hands, her blush deepening. "I haven't gone down this road in a very long time," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper, raw with honesty. "It's actually been years." Her eyes dropped to the toy, then back to Theresa, the intimacy of John's gift—a care so personal, so him—hitting her hard, a mix of embarrassment and longing tangling in her chest.

Theresa's grin turned playful, her eyes glinting as she leaned against the RV's bedroom doorway. "Someone's out of practice," she teased, her voice light but warm. "You may need to spend a night here and reclaim. Don't worry—I'll be in the

house. So you two can become acquainted. I'll give you some privacy." She winked, stepping back with a chuckle, then turned, pulling the door shut behind her. The soft click echoed in the small space, followed by the faint creak of the RV's outer door closing and Theresa's footsteps fading toward the house.

Lucy stood alone, the box still in her hands, her blush lingering as the silence settled. *Theresa was serious*, she thought, her mind spinning. She sank onto the bed, the mattress dipping under her, and stared at the toy, its sleek shape a quiet challenge. *Maybe T knew all along that I needed some kinda release but didn't want to say anything*, she mused, her breath steadying. *She knew it'd been a long time, and that I was feeling better mentally. All those feelings are coming back with a roar.* Her fingers tightened around the box, John's note a whisper in her mind—*self-care, for when things get stressful*—and a flicker of curiosity stirred, mingling with the ache she'd buried deep.

"Should I test this little thing out?" she murmured aloud, her voice soft, hesitant, but edged with a spark she hadn't felt in years. The RV hummed around her, a cocoon of possibility, and she glanced at the closed door, Theresa's absence a gift of space, a nudge toward reclaiming something she'd let slip away.

Lucy slipped into the RV's small bathroom, her steps quiet on the tiled floor, and grabbed a towel from the rack, its soft weave rough against her fingers. She returned to the bedroom, spreading it across the bed, a practical shield as she climbed atop it, settling in. She shifted, finding comfort, then slid her underwear off, the fabric whispering against her skin as she positioned herself—open, vulnerable, the toy resting beside her. Her hands hesitated, then moved, exploring slow, tentative, as her mind churned.

What was John doing? she wondered, her breath catching. *Was he making love to another woman? Would I be cheating on him?* The thoughts tangled, sharp and unbidden, her eyes closing as she tried to sink into the moment. Her hands wandered—over her thighs, her stomach—searching for the spark, the mood, but something tugged at her, a weight she couldn't shake. Her fingers faltered, the toy untouched, and she exhaled, frustration mixing with a dawning clarity.

It wasn't just nerves. There, beneath the surface, lingered a shadow—trauma, unprocessed, holding her back from fully embracing herself. The years of silence with John, the loss, the walls she'd built—they weren't gone, not yet. She opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling, her chest tight. This wasn't just about release; it

was a door she wasn't ready to walk through, not without facing what still ached inside her.

Lucy lay still on the towel, her breath shallow as tears slipped down her cheeks, hot and silent. "Why me, why here?" she whispered, her voice breaking. "We're divorced, and we're both free to do what we wish. We're supposed to rebuild our lives without each other. Do I miss and love you, John? Oh, God, yes. But you aren't here, and I'm not there, wherever you are. I am free and should be able to please myself without guilt—I don't need a man for that. I wish you were here touching me." The words spilled out, a raw confession to herself, to God, her hands clutching the towel as the ache poured free.

She rose, semi-nude, her underwear abandoned, and wandered the RV, her bare feet soft against the floor. Her eyes caught on a small liquor bar tucked in the corner—stocked with scotch, John's foresight etched into every bottle. *He thought of everything*, she mused, a bitter twist in her chest. She grabbed a glass, poured a shot, and sank onto the couch, legs parted, the amber liquid burning down her throat as she chugged it. A bad mix with her SSRI, she knew—the side effects amplifying, a dizzy warmth spreading fast, her head spinning as the edges blurred.

She started to sing, her voice rough, slurring—"You're a traitor, you fell in love with someone that quickly. All of the questions you used to avoid. Your betrayal, you never felt sorry." The liquor loosened her, its heat sinking deep, and her hands slid between her thighs, exploring again. This time, the buzz relaxed her, melting the guilt, the trauma's grip softening just enough. She let go—fully, finally—her fingers moving with a rhythm that matched her song, the RV a cocoon of her unraveling, John's ghost fading into the haze.

The feeling swelled inside her, a tide rising from a place she'd nearly forgotten, dormant for years—electric, unfamiliar yet achingly known. Her breath quickened, her pulse hammering in her chest, a frantic rhythm she couldn't slow. *Was this it?* she thought, her mind reeling. *Was it going to happen after all these years?* Her hand reached for the toy, the small box still warm from her grip, and she applied it—properly, instinctively—its hum amplifying the sensations, sending her soaring fast, higher than she'd dared imagine.

The waves hit, crashing one after another, relentless, forceful, her body no longer hers to control. Her back arched sharp off the couch, muscles quivering, a tremor

rippling through her as the intensity peaked. Her breath came in rapid gasps, caught in the throes, and she bit the side of her cheek, the sting grounding her as the pleasure surged. Then, slowly, she crested, gasping, the high ebbing as she sank back, sprawled across the couch, limbs heavy in the afterglow.

She lay there, chest heaving, the RV silent save for her ragged breathing, disbelief washing over her. She'd done it—alone, without John—her hands, the toy, the scotch weaving a release she hadn't touched in years. The weight of him lifted, just for a moment, and she stared at the ceiling, dazed, alive, reclaiming a piece of herself she'd thought lost.

The scotch's side effects crept in, intensified by the SSRI, and Lucy's vision blurred, the edges darkening as she slipped into a blackout, still sprawled on the couch. She came to the next morning, stirring slow as songbirds trilled outside, their notes weaving with the mournful calls of morning doves. Her eyes fluttered open, squinting against the light seeping through the RV's blinds. She shifted, realizing she was topless, and jolted upright, her hands fumbling to snap the blinds shut, shielding herself from the world beyond.

Her head throbbed, a pounding ache like a hangover, though she'd only downed one shot of scotch. It hit hard—she hadn't touched alcohol in years, never her thing, but last night she'd used it as a key, unlocking the pent-up release that had worked its magic. She stood, unsteady, her legs wobbling as she stumbled toward the RV's small bathroom, the promise of a shower pulling her forward. The cool water cascaded over her, sharp and waking, easing the headache's grip. It washed away the fog, refreshing, rejuvenating, her skin tingling as she leaned into it, the night's chaos fading into clarity.

The morning sun cast soft rays through the RV's windows as Theresa tapped gently on the door, letting herself in with a quiet creak. Her eyes landed on the scene—the empty shot glass glinting on the couch, the toy resting beside it, evidence of the night scattered in plain view. The sound of running water stopped, and Lucy's voice called out from the bathroom, "T, is that you? I'll be out in a sec." Her tone was casual, still groggy, as the door swung open.

Lucy emerged, damp and nude, her hair clinging to her shoulders, water dripping as she padded toward the bedroom, her back to Theresa the whole way. She grabbed her clothes from the day before, slipping into them with a grimace. "I

need to change," she muttered, tugging the shirt over her head. "These are yucky."

Theresa leaned against the counter, her gaze soft but curious, taking in Lucy's flustered energy. "What happened last night?" she asked, her voice gentle, an invitation rather than a demand. "If you wish to tell?"

Lucy turned, her cheeks flushing slightly as she smoothed her damp hair back. "Well," she started, her voice low, honest, "I couldn't get it out. So I turned to the scotch—just one shot, and I was loose. After that, I came so fast when I used the little baby." She nodded toward the toy, a shy smile breaking through. "Couldn't have done it otherwise." Her words hung, raw but unashamed, the night's release a victory she'd wrestled free with John's unexpected nudge.

While Theresa and Lucy chatted in the RV's warm glow, half a world away in Budapest, John was already up, the early morning light slanting through the windows of his new home in the 12th district. He'd claimed a spacious room as his office, setting it up with precision—large monitors mounted on the walls, cables neatly tucked, a rig humming with power. It was a hacker's sanctum, screens flickering with code, a setup rivaling auxiliary control on the *Enterprise*. He worked fast, crafting exploits, reverse-engineering hardware, chasing gigs on HackerOne—his mind sharp, his fingers flying.

Anes strolled in, her hair tousled from sleep, a mug of coffee in hand. "MI6, GCHQ, in here," she said, her heavy accent wrapping around the terms, a playful smirk on her lips. John's eyebrows shot up, surprised she knew the agencies, let alone tossed them out in English—her grasp of his world sharper than he'd guessed.

Zsuzsa followed, her voice warm as she leaned against the doorway. "Morning, Anes," she said, her tone teasing. "Come to see John in his castle?" Her eyes flicked to the monitors, amusement dancing in them.

John chuckled, swiveling his chair toward Zsuzsa, his hands reaching out to pull her into a fierce embrace. His lips found hers, the kiss passionate, hungry, a spark igniting fast. She leaned into it, her hands sliding to his shoulders as it deepened, her breath mingling with his, the room's hum fading against the heat of the moment. Anes watched, sipping her coffee, her smirk widening—she didn't interrupt, just let them burn, the castle alive with their fire.

John leaned back in his chair, the glow of the monitors casting sharp lines across his face, Zsuzsa still close after their kiss, her warmth a quiet anchor. He trusted them—Anes and Zsuzsa—no threat despite how deep they'd woven into his life. He'd dug into their backgrounds months ago, meticulous, exhaustive, peeling back every layer until he was sure: no ties to the Glowies, no hidden agendas, just two women who'd chosen him, nerd or not. They lived with him now, wanted him, and his love for them was real, a steady pulse beneath his guarded edges.

He was letting Lucy go, or trying to—each gift, each asset a brick in the wall between them, building her a life where she could thrive without him. The piano, the RV, the Ford 550—he'd made sure of it, pouring his resources into her and Theresa, even though his sister didn't need the help. She was strong, always had been, but he couldn't stop himself. Marriage, though—he'd sworn it off, the vow etched deep after Lucy, and Anes and Zsuzsa knew it, accepted it, their bond with him unshaken by that line he wouldn't cross.

One monitor flickered, Lucy's profile open, a habit he couldn't kick. A photo loaded—the Ford 550 and RV parked in the driveway, gleaming under the sun, her caption a quiet triumph. His chest tightened, a pang he swallowed fast, his eyes lingering before flicking back to Zsuzsa's smile, Anes's smirk, the life he'd carved here pulling him forward even as Lucy's shadow lingered on the screen.

By week's end, the grand house buzzed with last-minute energy, Lucy and Theresa's bags packed and lined up by the door, zippers straining with clothes and gear for LA. Lucy's excitement crackled—she paced, grinned, her hands restless as she double-checked her guitar case. A five-hour flight loomed ahead, a stretch of sky between her old life and this new chance. They drove to the airport, the Ford 550 rumbling steady, and boarded the plane, settling into their seats with the hum of engines vibrating through them.

Theresa turned to Lucy as they buckled in, her voice warm, steady. "Lucy, I'm proud of you," she said, her eyes soft with it. "You've done this all on your own." Lucy glanced out the window, the tarmac blurring past, and laughed lightly. "Not often I get on a plane," she replied, her tone bright, nerves dancing beneath it. She pulled out her phone, snapping a photo by the window seat—her face lit with a huge smile, the clouds framing her like a halo. She typed quick, *Welcome, my love*, and posted it to her profile, the words a quiet nod to John, to herself, to the journey unfolding.

Their arms looped together, a tether as the plane climbed, the hours slipping by in a haze of turbulence and chatter. Five hours later, LAX sprawled beneath them, a chaotic welcome as they touched down. They stepped off, bags in tow, the California air hitting them sharp and warm—Lucy's grin unshaken, Theresa's pride a steady hum beside her, the city waiting for her to claim it.

Lucy and Theresa navigated the bustling streets of North Hollywood, the taxi weaving through traffic until they pulled up to a small, unassuming building—Colony Records' LA outpost. They stepped inside together, the air cool and tinged with the faint musk of old vinyl. Charlie's office sat at the hall's end, door ajar, and Theresa paused, her eyes catching on the rows of records lining the walls—vintage sleeves, faded colors, a history she could trace with her fingers. "I'll wait out here," she said, giving Lucy a nod, her choice deliberate, letting Lucy step into this on her own.

Charlie's voice called from within, warm but brisk. "Lucy, come in—sit," he said as she entered, gesturing to a chair across his desk, papers and a half-empty coffee mug scattered before him. "We've got a booked schedule. We get this through, we'll have a contract to sign." Lucy's eyes widened, her breath catching as she sank into the seat, the weight of it hitting her.

Charlie leaned forward, his grin sharp with excitement. "The Peppermint Club in West Hollywood is your first major gig," he said. "Execs in the business will be there observing. If they're pleased, we'll have a deal—if you choose and agree with the terms." He tapped a pen against the desk, letting it sink in.

Lucy echoed, "Peppermint Club," her voice soft, testing the name, the reality of it blooming in her chest. Charlie nodded, adding, "Honda Stage. Piano would be a nice touch—Casey mentioned it, said she was impressed." His eyes glinted, seeing her potential unfold, the gig a doorstep to something bigger, waiting for her to claim it.

Lucy leaned forward, her hands clasped tight, a nervous energy humming through her. "I bought a special gown for the occasion," she said, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. "Put my best foot forward. This is important, and if done right, could change my life. Thank you for believing in me and giving me this opportunity—I won't let you down."

Charlie waved a hand, his grin easy, reassuring. "You'll do fine," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I'm only here to nudge you and point you in the right direction."

Your talent will do the rest. Go run along—tomorrow night will come too soon.” His tone was light, but his eyes held a quiet confidence, a push for her to seize it.

Lucy nodded, rising with a small smile, and stepped out of his office, her boots soft on the floor. She found Theresa in the hall, phone in hand, snapping photos of the vinyl on the walls—vibrant covers, relics of sound frozen in time. Theresa glanced up, her grin widening. “Spa day tomorrow,” she said, “in prep for the big night.” Her voice carried a lift, a promise of pampering before the plunge.

Lucy pulled out her own phone, capturing the building’s quirks—the faded sign, the vinyl glow—and posted them to her profile, captions short but bright: *LA vibes. Tomorrow’s the night.* She tucked the phone away, linking arms with Theresa as they headed out, the weight of the gown and the gig settling in, a spark ready to ignite.

Across the planet in Budapest, the 12th district house hummed with quiet, the river’s faint ripple a backdrop as John hunched over his desk, lost in his work. His fingers danced across the keyboard, crafting exploits, the glow of his monitors painting his face in sharp blues and greens. He was alone, Zsuzsa and Anes out somewhere, the silence a rare gift for focus—until an alert pinged, sharp and insistent, snapping him out of his reverie.

He frowned, leaning closer, his eyes scanning the network logs. One of the devices was streaming video out, heavy bandwidth spiking the metrics. It wasn’t a phone, not a Zoom call—the traffic pattern was off, erratic, heading to a streaming site. His gut twisted as he traced it to Anes’s system. She knew computers—enough to get by, he’d thought—but he’d never gauged the full extent of her skill. His hands moved fast, isolating the stream, and when the feed popped up, his breath caught. It was an adult site, and Anes was the star—live, bold, her face unmistakable on the screen.

He froze, the room’s quiet shattered by the realization, his mind racing between shock and the implications—her prowess, his network, the life he’d built here suddenly teetering on an edge he hadn’t seen coming.

John leaned back, the monitor’s glow flickering as Anes’s stream played out, her voice and movements drawing a crowd—chat buzzing, tips rolling in fast, a digital cascade of dollars and euros. She’d built a following, a small empire he hadn’t clocked, and he watched, torn between cutting the feed and letting it ride. He didn’t want to barge in, didn’t want to embarrass her—shutting it down mid-show

felt too harsh. He'd wait, let her finish, then talk. Shock outweighed anger; this wasn't betrayal, just a blind spot he hadn't seen.

He wasn't upset—more startled, recalibrating what he knew about her. She wanted money, her own stake, and that was fair, normal even. He wouldn't stop her, wouldn't clip her wings, but the setup gnawed at him—unsecured equipment, an open stream, software ripe for exploits. His mind ticked over fixes: encryption, a VPN, locking it down tight. She could've told him, been upfront, and he wondered why she hadn't. Embarrassment, maybe, or fear of a fight—either way, it didn't change his instinct. He'd keep her safe, protect her hustle, even if she'd kept it in the shadows. The stream rolled on, and he waited, patient, steady, ready to bridge the gap when she signed off.

Anes threw herself into the stream, bold and unapologetic, her body a canvas of confidence as she climaxed—once, twice, then again, each wave crashing harder. The last one hit, rippling through her, leaving her breathless, sprawled on her bed as she reached for the keyboard and ended the feed. She sank back, chest heaving, basking in the afterglow, the room quiet save for her ragged breathing.

John replayed the final minutes, his eyes narrowing not at her, but at the chat—names, comments, tips flashing—and the traffic patterns spiking across his screen. He dissected it, cool-headed, already sketching a mitigation plan in his mind: tighter encryption, rerouted streams, software patches to shield her gig from prying eyes. By the time Zsuzsa returned home, her arms full of books from the university, the house smelled of dinner—chicken and herbs, a meal John had thrown together.

They sat at the table, plates steaming, and John cleared his throat, his voice steady. "Let's get this out in the open," he said, his gaze settling on Anes. "I know about your gig. We need to secure it better." Zsuzsa's fork paused mid-air, her eyes widening—she hadn't known, her days spent buried in academia, not streams. John pressed on, calm but firm. "Anes, you don't have to stop, but I have to lock it down tighter. I'm not upset. You just need to be more transparent."

Anes blinked, processing, her English shaky under pressure. Zsuzsa leaned in, her voice soft as she translated, breaking it into Hungarian—clear, gentle, making sure Anes caught every word. The table held a quiet tension, but no anger, just the weight of honesty settling between them, John's care a steady thread weaving through it all.

Anes pushed back her chair, the scrape soft against the hardwood, and crossed to John, settling onto his lap with an easy grace. "I may do what I do," she said, her voice low, her accent thick, "but I'll always be ready for you." Her eyes locked with his, bold and warm, a promise shimmering there.

John held her gaze, his hand finding hers, fingers curling gentle but firm. "No, Anes," he said, his tone steady, cutting through the air. "You're not an object, and you're not a slave. It's not duality—it's desire." He glanced at Zsuzsa, a silent signal, and she nodded, her voice slipping into Hungarian, translating smooth and clear, the words flowing between them like a bridge.

Anes's smile bloomed, soft and genuine, and she turned to John, her hand rising to wipe a smudge from his mouth with a tender swipe. Then she leaned in, her lips meeting his in a slow, deliberate kiss—her thank-you, quiet but deep. John held her close, his arms steady around her, his voice a murmur against her ear. "You can always talk to me. You don't have to hide. I'm here as a partner, not a parent. I won't scold or spank you like a child. You are—you're a beautiful woman."

Zsuzsa's voice followed, soft and precise, carrying his words to Anes in her language, the translation sealing the moment. Anes nestled closer, her head resting against his shoulder, the table a small circle of trust, their bond tightening in the open light of his care.