



The Phoenix

In the cramped dressing room of the Peppermint Club, the air hummed with anticipation, thick with the scent of hairspray and the faint tang of nerves. Lucy stood before a full-length mirror, her peach gown cascading around her like a soft flame, its fabric catching the dim light in gentle shimmers. Her hair fell in loose waves, framing her face, where a quiet radiance battled the flicker of doubt in her eyes. She straightened, her shoulders squaring, her reflection a woman both fragile and fierce, ready to claim the stage.

Theresa stood behind her, hands steady as she adjusted a stray curl, her gaze warm but searching. "You're a vision," she murmured, her voice a tether in the whirlwind of the moment. She stepped closer, wrapping Lucy in a tight embrace, her arms a fortress against the world beyond the door. Lucy leaned into it, her breath catching, the warmth grounding her racing heart. Theresa pulled back, her smile soft but fierce, and raised her phone, snapping a quick photo—Lucy, glowing, the gown a halo around her. "For your profile," Theresa said, her tone light but proud, uploading it with a caption: *Ready to shine. Tonight's the night.*

The muffled roar of the crowd seeped through the walls, a distant tide pulling Lucy forward. Then, the introducer's voice cut through, clear and commanding: "Let's welcome, Lucy!" The words jolted her, her pulse spiking as Theresa squeezed her hand one last time, a silent *you've got this*. Lucy took a breath, her heels clicking

soft on the hardwood as she moved toward the stage door, her gown trailing like a whispered promise.

She stepped into the spotlight, a slow, deliberate walk, each step a defiance of the tremor in her chest. The Peppermint Club stretched before her, a sea of faces—some curious, some expectant—bathed in the warm glow of pendant lights. At the stage's heart stood the piano, its black lacquer gleaming, an old friend waiting to carry her voice. Her heart pounded, a wild rhythm she couldn't tame, and she settled onto the bench, the cool wood grounding her. Her fingers brushed the keys, hesitant for a heartbeat, and she looked up, the crowd blurring into shadow. "To you, my love," she whispered, her voice barely audible, a vow to John, wherever he was, half a world away or just a memory in her bones. "Wherever you are."

In the back of the room, Charlie leaned against a pillar, his denim jacket slung loose over his shoulders, eyes sharp as he scanned the crowd. His gaze snagged on a pair of men near the bar—plain jackets, postures too stiff, their glances too deliberate. Glowies, he thought, his brow creasing, the term bitter on his tongue. "I'll have to talk with Lucy about them," he muttered under his breath, a flicker of unease cutting through his focus. But then Lucy's hands moved, and the first notes of the piano rang out, pulling his attention like a magnet. The Glowies faded to the edges, their shadows no match for the light she was about to unleash.

Her fingers found the opening chords of Bette Midler's *The Rose*, the melody blooming soft and tentative, like a bud unfurling in dawn's first light. Lucy's voice followed, low and rich, each word a brushstroke of her heart: "Some say love, it is a river..." The piano came alive under her touch, its resonance filling the room, a pulse that matched the ache in her chest. Her unique emotionalism—raw, unguarded—wove through the notes, her voice trembling with the weight of longing, of loss, of hope reclaimed. She swayed faintly, her gown catching the stage lights, a peach-hued flame dancing in the dark.

The crowd stilled, glasses pausing mid-lift, conversations fading to a hush. A woman near the front leaned forward, her eyes glistening, caught in the pull of Lucy's vulnerability. A man at a side table set his phone down, the screen forgotten, his face softening as the song wrapped around him. Lucy's hands moved with precision, the piano a canvas for her grief and grit, each chord a step deeper into the story she was telling—not just Midler's, but her own. "When the

night has been too lonely..." Her voice cracked, just a fraction, and she pushed through, the piano swelling to cradle the falter, its warmth a shield against the ache.

Charlie's lips curved, a quiet pride settling in his chest. He'd seen her in bars, in studios, but this—this was Lucy unbridled, her soul laid bare on a stage that could carry her far beyond these walls. His eyes flicked to a cluster of execs at a reserved table, their heads tilted, notebooks open, pens scratching. They felt it too, he could tell—the spark, the raw edge that could cut through the noise of an industry saturated with polish. His grin widened, but the Glowies lingered in his periphery, a shadow he couldn't fully shake, their presence a question mark he'd unravel later.

Lucy's voice climbed, the final verse a soaring cry: "Far beneath the bitter snows, lies the seed that with the sun's love..." She closed her eyes, letting the words carry her, John's face flickering in her mind—not the man who'd left, but the one who'd loved her fiercely, whose gifts still held her up. The piano's notes softened, her fingers slowing, the last chord hanging in the air like a held breath. She opened her eyes, her chest heaving, and the room erupted—applause crashing over her, warm and wild, hands clapping, voices calling her name.

She exhaled, a shaky smile breaking through, her hands trembling as they rested on the keys. The stage was hers, the piano her anchor, and for a moment, the Glowies, the execs, even John faded. It was just her and the music, the seed beneath the snows blooming at last, fragile but fierce, ready for whatever came next.

Lucy rose from the piano bench, her peach gown shimmering under the stage lights, a cascade of soft fire that caught every eye in the Peppermint Club. She stepped forward, her hand resting lightly in her lap, her posture tall and unbroken, a phoenix in full flight. Her gaze lifted to the crowd, eyes bright with the fire of her performance, and she leaned into the mic, her voice steady, resonant, cutting through the lingering applause. "My love, the phoenix has risen!" The words soared, a declaration to John, to herself, to the room—a vow that she'd burned through the ashes of their past and emerged whole.

In the shadows near the bar, the Glowies stiffened, their sharp eyes narrowing at her words. The phrase hung in the air, heavy with meaning they couldn't quite grasp but felt like a signal, a flare. Their heads tilted in unison, a silent exchange

passing between them, and then—abruptly—they moved, slipping through the crowd like ghosts, their plain jackets blending into the haze as they exited the club. The door swung shut behind them, a soft thud swallowed by the room's buzz.

Charlie caught it all from his spot by the pillar, his brow creasing as the pieces clicked into place. The Glowies' quick departure wasn't random—Lucy's words had stirred something, a thread tied to her ex-husband. *John*, he thought, the name a shadow he'd only heard in whispers from Theresa. His jaw tightened, suspicion hardening into certainty. Whatever John had done, it was big enough to pull feds to a West Hollywood stage, hunting a man who wasn't even here.

Theresa appeared at his side, her steps quiet but deliberate, her hand tapping his arm lightly to draw his attention. Her eyes, sharp with recognition, met his. "Yes, you saw them too," she said, her voice low, steady, laced with a weariness that carried years. "They're not here for Lucy. They're here for John."

Charlie's lips quirked, a half-smile masking his concern. "Ah, he was a naughty boy, wasn't he?" he said, his tone light but probing, testing the waters of what she'd share.

Theresa's gaze drifted to the stage, where Lucy stood radiant, untouchable in her moment. "Unfortunately," she murmured, her voice softening, "that's my brother." The words held love and frustration, a tangle of loyalty to a man whose choices had rippled far beyond his own life.

Charlie nodded, his eyes flicking back to Lucy. He raised a hand, pointing to his watch with a subtle nod—a signal to keep the set moving, to hold the crowd's pulse. Lucy caught it, her smile flickering with understanding, and she stepped to a nearby chair on the stage, the wood creaking faintly as she settled in. Her guitar rested across her lap, its curves a familiar weight, and she adjusted the mic, her fingers brushing the stand with a quiet confidence.

The crowd hushed, sensing the shift, their anticipation a living thing in the smoky air. Lucy's fingers found the strings, plucking the opening notes of Taylor Swift's *Red*—bright, jagged, a spark of color in the room's warm glow. Her voice followed, clear and piercing: "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street..." The guitar hummed under her touch, each chord a pulse of memory, of love that burned too bright and crashed too hard. Her emotionalism poured into it, raw and unfiltered, her eyes half-closed as she leaned into the song, her body swaying faintly with the rhythm.

The room came alive with her, heads nodding, hands tapping tables, a few voices singing along softly. A young woman near the stage clutched her drink, her eyes glistening, caught in the ache of Lucy's delivery—every word a mirror to her own heart. The execs at their table leaned closer, pens poised, their focus unbroken, scribbling notes as Lucy's voice climbed: "Losing him was blue, like I'd never known..." Her fingers danced faster, the guitar's twang cutting through the haze, a cry of defiance wrapped in nostalgia.

Charlie watched, his concern for the Glowies tucked away for now, his pride swelling as Lucy owned the stage. The puzzle of John could wait—this was her night, her fire, and he'd be damned if anything dimmed it. Theresa stood beside him, her arms crossed, her gaze steady on Lucy, a quiet vow in her stance to shield this moment, this phoenix, from whatever shadows lingered beyond the lights.

Lucy's voice softened, the final chorus a whisper that carried weight: "But loving him was red..." The guitar's last note trembled, hanging in the air, and she opened her eyes, her breath shaky but strong. The crowd erupted again, applause crashing like waves, louder now, fiercer, her name a chant on their lips. She smiled, small but radiant, the guitar still warm in her hands, the phoenix soaring higher, untouchable, for this night at least.

Outside the Peppermint Club, the night air bit sharp, carrying the hum of West Hollywood's neon pulse. The two Glowies moved swiftly, their steps clipped against the pavement, their plain jackets blending into the shadows cast by flickering streetlights. As they rounded the corner, one leaned closer to the other, his voice low, edged with certainty. "They're using social media as a dead drop," he said, eyes scanning the street. "They're still in indirect contact with the perp. Continue monitoring her accounts—doesn't matter if the IPs are overseas, behind a VPN or proxy. He's still keeping tabs. The ex-wife's still getting gifts from him."

The second nodded, his jaw tight, already pulling out a phone to relay the order. "He's too careful to slip, but she's the link," he muttered, sliding into the passenger seat of a black government SUV waiting at the curb, its engine idling like a held breath. The driver didn't glance back as they climbed in, the doors thudding shut with a heavy finality. The vehicle peeled away, tires hissing on the asphalt, swallowed by the city's sprawl.

A few steps behind, Charlie lingered in the alley's mouth, his denim jacket hunched against the chill, his eyes narrowed as he clocked the SUV's taillights vanishing. He'd caught their murmurs, the word "perp" sharp in his ears, and his gut twisted—John, the ghost haunting Lucy's rise, was more than a wayward ex. Charlie's boots scuffed the pavement as he turned back, the club's muffled roar pulling him inside, his mind churning with questions he couldn't let lie.

Inside, the crowd still buzzed, thinning now as the night wound down, but Lucy's presence lingered like a spark in the air. Charlie wove through the stragglers, his stride purposeful, and found Lucy and Theresa near the stage, gathering their things. Lucy's peach gown glowed under the dim lights, her guitar case slung over her shoulder, a tired but radiant smile on her face. Theresa stood close, her jacket zipped, eyes scanning the room with that quiet vigilance Charlie had come to recognize.

He stopped before them, his hands slipping into his pockets, his voice low but firm. "Let's have a talk, here and now," he said, his gaze flicking between them, steady but insistent. Lucy's smile faltered, her fingers tightening on the guitar case, while Theresa's posture stiffened, sensing the shift. Charlie pressed on, his tone measured but cutting through the post-gig haze. "The execs were pleased—real pleased. They want you in Beverly Hills this week, Lucy, a bigger stage, bigger eyes on you." He paused, letting it land, then leaned closer, his voice dropping. "But the crowd tonight reeked of feds. Those guys weren't here for the music. Perhaps it's time you told me all of it."

Lucy's breath caught, her eyes darting to Theresa, a flicker of fear crossing her face—not for herself, but for the shadow of John, always there, always pulling. Theresa stepped forward, her hand brushing Lucy's arm, a silent reassurance, before she met Charlie's gaze, her own steady, unflinching. "It's complicated," she started, her voice low, careful, "but you're right—you deserve to know what you're stepping into."

Lucy set her guitar case down, the thud soft but grounding, and sank onto a nearby chair, her gown pooling around her like embers. "It's John," she said, her voice quiet but clear, the name a weight she carried in every note she sang. "My ex-husband. He's... not here, hasn't been for two years, but he's still out there, somewhere. And they—" she nodded toward the door, where the Glowies had vanished—"they think I'm the way to him."

Charlie leaned against the stage's edge, his arms crossing, his mind piecing it together—the gifts, the social media posts, the feds' dogged watch. "What'd he do?" he asked, his tone blunt but not unkind, his eyes on Lucy, then Theresa, searching for the truth beneath their guarded words.

Theresa exhaled, her shoulders easing just a fraction, as if unburdening herself took effort. "He's my brother," she said, echoing her earlier confession, but now with more weight. "John's brilliant—computers, systems, things most people don't even understand. But he crossed lines, got tangled in something big—too big. He ran to keep us safe, to keep *her* safe." She glanced at Lucy, her voice softening. "The gifts—the house, the RV, the piano—they're his way of staying close, even if he can't be here. The feds know it, and they're waiting for him to slip."

Lucy's hands twisted in her lap, her fingers tracing the gown's fabric, her eyes distant. "I didn't know they'd follow me here," she murmured, almost to herself. "I thought... I thought the music was mine, that I could build something new. But he's in every song, every post. And they see it too." Her voice cracked, the phoenix's fire dimming under the weight of eyes she couldn't escape.

Charlie's jaw worked, his mind racing—Beverly Hills was a chance, a leap, but the Glowies' shadow loomed larger now, a risk he hadn't bargained for. "They're not after you, Lucy," he said, his tone firm, anchoring her. "You're not the perp, like they said. But you're their bait, and that's trouble enough." He straightened, his gaze softening but resolute. "You've got a gift, and I'm not letting some suits snuff it out. We'll play Beverly Hills, but we do it smart—eyes open, no surprises. Deal?"

Lucy looked up, her eyes glistening but steady, a spark reigniting as she nodded. "Deal," she said, her voice small but fierce, the phoenix stirring again. Theresa reached for her hand, squeezing tight, her own nod a silent vow to stand guard, to keep the stage hers. Charlie's lips curved, a flicker of his usual grin breaking through, but his eyes lingered on the door, the SUV's ghost still burning in his mind, a puzzle he'd unravel to keep Lucy's fire alight.

In the sterile glow of the FBI field office, fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting sharp shadows across the cluttered desks where the two Glowies sat, their faces lit by the cold blue of their monitors. The room hummed with quiet intensity—keyboards clacking, phones pinging, the low murmur of other agents filtering through the glass partitions. Files on John, Lucy, and a web of digital

breadcrumbs were spread out, virtual and physical, a puzzle they were determined to crack.

Glowie #1 leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he scrolled through Lucy's social media profile—her latest post from the Peppermint Club, the peach gown radiant, captioned *Ready to shine. Tonight's the night*. The comments poured in: fans gushing, a few cryptic replies that caught his attention, too vague to pin down but enough to raise a flag. "Get in contact with the social media provider," he said, his voice clipped, authoritative. "Pull the IP logs for her account—every post, every comment, every like. Then run down those IPs back to their sources. Get the logs from those providers too, no matter how many layers of proxies or VPNs they're hiding behind." His fingers tapped the desk, impatient, as he swiveled to a second screen, Lucy's photo of the Ford 550 and RV glowing in the driveway. "Those gifts the ex-wife's been receiving—the house, the vehicles, the piano—they're funneled through proxies or shell companies. Get the Treasury Department to trace every transaction, every company tied to them. I want names, accounts, the works."

Glowie #2 nodded, already typing, his hands a blur as he fired off requests to the tech team, his screen blooming with forms and portals. A secure window opened—a real-time feed of Lucy's social media, every post and interaction flagged for analysis, algorithms humming to detect patterns, anomalies, anything that screamed *John*. "This guy's a ghost," he muttered, his tone equal parts frustration and grudging respect. "He's been hiding for years, playing Snowden without the headlines. We can't let this drag out like Assange—holed up, untouchable." He leaned back, his chair creaking, eyes glinting with resolve. "We capture him on foreign soil, extradite him back here, and throw him under the jail. No embassy stunts, no leaks, just done."

Glowie #1 grunted, his gaze locked on a comment under Lucy's RV post—*Happy life, my loves*—the phrasing too close to John's note, a whisper of his voice. "He's still circling her," he said, almost to himself. "Not direct, but close enough—those gifts, her posts, it's a dance. She's his anchor, whether she knows it or not." He opened another tab, a map of IP pings, some bouncing from Budapest, others scattered across encrypted servers in places they couldn't yet crack. "He's watching her, feeding her, keeping her safe without stepping into the light. We follow the money, the posts, we'll find his shadow."

Their screens pulsed with data—IP logs streaming in, Treasury queries flagged for priority, Lucy's profile a living pulse under their scrutiny. Glowie #2's fingers paused, hovering over the keyboard as he glanced at his partner. "What if she's in on it?" he asked, voice low, testing the theory. "Not fully, but enough—posting for him, signaling through the captions, the songs?"

Glowie #1 shook his head, slow but certain. "Doubt it. She's too raw, too open. Those performances, the tears—you can't fake that. She's carrying him, not covering for him. But he's using that, banking on her heart to keep him tethered." He clicked to a video—Lucy at the grand piano, singing *All I need*, tears streaking her face, John's note beside her. "This is their dead drop, like you said. Not coded messages, just... her. Every note's a letter to him, and he's reading every one."

The portal beeped, a new post from Lucy flashing up—a shot from LAX, her smile wide, clouds framing her like a halo, captioned *Welcome, my love*. Glowie #2's eyes narrowed, his cursor hovering over it. "There," he said, voice tight. "That's him, right there in the words. We keep this tight, we'll catch him slipping—Budapest, Bangkok, wherever he's holed up." He hit a key, flagging the post for deeper analysis, the office's hum swallowing their focus as the hunt sharpened, Lucy's light their beacon to a man they'd bury if they could.

In the quiet of their hotel room, the hum of Los Angeles muted beyond the heavy curtains, Lucy stood by the mirror, her peach gown pooling at her feet like a fallen flame. Her hands trembled as she unhooked the body shaper, peeling it away, her skin prickling in the cool air. The weight of the night—the Glowies, Charlie's questions, the execs' offer—pressed against her chest, heavier than the shaper's grip. She turned to Theresa, her voice small, fraying at the edges. "T, what if I've inadvertently set a trap for John by posting on my profile?" Her eyes widened, panic blooming. "OMG, T, what have I done? What if he's seeing everything, and they... they catch him somehow because of me?"

Theresa sat on the edge of the bed, her jacket shed, her face steady but soft, etched with the kind of understanding that came from years of carrying John's secrets. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, her gaze locking onto Lucy's. "We can fix this," she said, her voice calm, a lifeline in the storm. "Here's what we do: you stop posting. Completely. No photos, no captions, no songs. You go dark on social media, cut the Glowies off at the knees. John—he's sharp, Lucy. He'll see

your absence, like a canary in a coal mine gone quiet. He'll know something's up, and he'll move, flee, whatever he needs to stay safe."

Lucy's breath hitched, her hands twisting together as she sank onto a chair, the plush upholstery no comfort against the ache tearing through her. Tears spilled, hot and unrelenting, streaking her face as she shook her head. "That was the only way," she whispered, her voice breaking, "the only way I could hope he'd see me—my success, my music, the life I'm building. Those posts... they were for him, T, as much as for me." Her shoulders slumped, her body curling inward, a sob choking her words. "But now... I'll have to let him go for good, won't I? Really let him go." She was in tatters, her heart a raw, open wound, the phoenix's fire dimmed to embers under the weight of sacrifice.

Theresa rose, crossing the room in two strides, and knelt before her, hands gentle but firm on Lucy's shoulders. "You're not losing him," she said, her voice fierce with love. "You're saving him, Lucy, the way he's been trying to save you—with the piano, the RV, all of it. Going quiet doesn't mean you're giving up. It means you're giving him a chance to keep running, to stay free." She brushed a tear from Lucy's cheek, her thumb steady. "And you—you keep singing, keep building. Your music's yours, not theirs, not even his. You'll carry him in the notes, always, but you don't need a post to prove it."

Lucy's sobs softened, her hands reaching for Theresa's, clinging tight as she nodded, the motion small but resolute. The room felt smaller, the city's pulse a distant echo, but in Theresa's grip, she found a thread of strength, enough to face the silence she'd have to choose—for John, for herself, for the life still waiting beyond the Glowies' shadow.

In Budapest, the air hung heavy with the tang of river damp and diesel, the city's pulse a gritty hum of trams and distant techno. The two Glowies moved through a narrow street in the 8th district, their plain jackets out of place among the faded grandeur of peeling stucco and wrought-iron balconies. They stopped at a weathered apartment block, its yellowed walls scarred by time, and climbed the creaking stairs to the flat John had once called home. The door was locked, the space behind it silent, but they weren't here for what was inside—they wanted traces, whispers of the man who'd slipped their grasp.

Glowie #1 knocked on the neighboring door, his knuckles sharp against the chipped wood. A grizzled man in his sixties answered, his shirt half-tucked, eyes

squinting through cigarette haze. The Glowie held up a grainy photo of John, his face stern in black-and-white. "Have you seen this man?" he asked, voice flat, cutting through the hallway's stale air.

The neighbor leaned forward, scratching his stubble, his English broken but clear enough. "Yeah, that guy—next door. Had two women with him, always together. Loud sex, all the time." He snorted, shaking his head. "Used to pound on the wall, yell 'shut the fuck up.' Never worked."

Glowie #1's eyes sharpened, a flicker of confirmation. "Do you know where they went?"

The man shrugged, leaning against the doorframe. "No idea. Moved out few weeks ago. Quiet since then." He waved a hand, dismissive, already turning back to his flat.

Glowie #2 nodded, jotting a note on his phone. "Thanks for your time," he said, his tone curt as they stepped away, the neighbor's door clicking shut behind them.

Out on the street, the Glowies paused, the Danube's glint visible between buildings, its current a mirror to their resolve. Glowie #1's jaw tightened, his gaze scanning the city's sprawl—rooftops, bridges, a maze where their quarry hid. "He's still in the city," he said, voice low, certain. "Somewhere."

Glowie #2 pocketed his phone, his eyes cold. "Zsuzsa and Anes—they're the key. He's not alone, and that's his weakness. We find them, we find him." They moved toward their rental car, the Budapest dusk swallowing their steps, the hunt tightening like a noose John didn't yet feel.

Half a world away, in their Los Angeles hotel room, Lucy and Theresa remained oblivious to the Glowies' transatlantic chase. Lucy sat cross-legged on the bed, her phone dark since Theresa's plan to go silent, her fingers tracing the edge of a notebook filled with lyrics she couldn't yet share. Theresa stood by the window, peering through a crack in the curtains, her vigilance a reflex now, unaware that the feds had traced John's shadow to Budapest's heart. The silence they'd chosen to protect him held, but the Glowies' footsteps echoed closer, a threat neither woman could hear.

In the quiet of Budapest's 12th district, where modern houses nestled among wooded hills, John sat in the dim glow of his makeshift office, the hum of servers a steady pulse. The new house—sleek, anonymous, bought through a shell

company with crypto—was a far cry from the grimy flat he'd left behind, but safety felt fragile tonight. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, eyes scanning a custom dashboard tracking Lucy's social media traffic. Lines of data scrolled, IPs pinging from her accounts, but something snagged his attention—clusters of probes from FBI ranges, their digital fingerprints too deliberate, too persistent. His gut twisted, a cold certainty settling in. Then he saw it: Lucy's feed, silent for days. No posts, no stories, nothing. The canary had died.

John's breath caught, his instincts screaming. The feds were closing in, and Lucy's silence was her warning shot, intentional or not. He didn't hesitate. His hand slammed a key, tripping a dead man's switch wired into the system. The house plunged into darkness, the power cut clean, lights dying with a faint pop. Battery backups kicked in, servers whirring as scripts executed, wiping drives with ruthless efficiency—encrypted files, logs, his digital fingerprints dissolving into noise. John bolted from the chair, grabbing a sledgehammer from a closet, its weight heavy but sure in his hands.

The computers beeped, their erasure complete, and John swung, the hammer crashing through monitors, drives, routers—plastic and metal splintering, circuits sparking in protest. Each blow was deliberate, a severing of his digital tether, leaving nothing for the Glowies to salvage. His chest heaved, sweat beading, but he didn't stop until the room was a graveyard of shattered tech, useless to anyone hunting him.

"Zsuzsa! Anes!" he roared, his voice raw, cutting through the house. "Get in the car—now!" The women, lounging in the living room, froze, their faces paling at his tone. Zsuzsa's coffee mug clattered to the floor, Anes's phone slipping from her hand, but his urgency left no room for questions. "No time to talk—get your fucking asses in the car, *now!*"

Fear flashed in their eyes—Zsuzsa's wide and searching, Anes's sharp but compliant—and they scrambled, grabbing only what was in reach, shoes half-on as they stumbled toward the garage. John didn't wait, his boots pounding as he hauled a canister of gasoline from a storage closet, splashing it across the office, the living room, the kitchen—walls, floors, furniture glistening with fuel, the air thick with its bite. He struck a match, the flame flaring bright, and tossed it, the house catching with a hungry whoosh, fire curling up curtains, licking at beams, a beacon he couldn't afford to watch.

The car—a nondescript sedan, another crypto purchase—was already growling when John slid into the driver's seat, Zsuzsa and Anes in the back, their breaths ragged, faces tight with questions they didn't dare ask. The garage door rattled open, and John floored it, tires screaming as they tore out of the driveway, the house a blazing inferno in the rearview, flames clawing the night sky, painting the 12th district red.

Zsuzsa clutched the seat, her voice trembling. "John, what—"

"Not now," he snapped, eyes locked on the road, weaving through quiet streets, the city's pulse a distant hum against his pounding heart. Anes leaned forward, her hand gripping his shoulder, her boldness tempered by fear. "Where are we going?" she asked, voice low, urgent.

"Away," John said, his tone final, the weight of Lucy's silence and the feds' probes a shadow he couldn't outrun yet. The car hurtled toward the city's edge, Budapest's lights blurring, the shell company's ashes behind them, his life with Zsuzsa and Anes now as fleeting as the one he'd left with Lucy. Across the ocean, Lucy and Theresa slept in their hotel, unaware of the fire, the flight, the Glowies' failure—just hours too late to catch the ghost who'd burned his world to stay free.

John's sedan cut through the Hungarian night, the road a blur of black asphalt and fleeting headlights, Budapest's glow long faded in the rearview. Hours bled together, the women silent in the back, Zsuzsa's hands clasped tight, Anes staring out the window, her jaw set but eyes flickering with unease. John's knuckles whitened on the wheel, his mind a storm of calculations—routes, borders, the feds' reach. Lucy's silence, the dead canary, looped in his head, a warning he'd heeded just in time.

Dawn was breaking, a gray smear on the horizon, when he pulled into a nondescript lot outside a small town, the kind of place no one lingered. A row of storage lockers loomed, their metal doors dull under flickering sodium lights. John killed the engine, the sudden quiet heavy, and stepped out, his boots crunching gravel as he scanned the lot—empty, no tails. He unlocked a locker, its hinges groaning, revealing a black duffel stashed inside. Passports, stacks of euros and dollars, burner phones, a Glock tucked in a holster, and three sets of plain clothes—his contingency, always ready.

He hauled the bag to the car, tossing it onto the passenger seat, and pulled out the clothes—jeans, hoodies, nothing flashy. "Please change," he said, his voice low,

steady, but edged with urgency as he handed them to Zsuzsa and Anes. "Put these on."

Anes bristled, her arms crossing, defiance flaring. "What the hell, John? You drag us out here, burn the house, and now this?" Her voice shook, but Zsuzsa touched her arm, a gentle nudge, her eyes soft but firm.

"Trust him," Zsuzsa murmured, her accent thick with conviction. "He's keeping us safe." She took the clothes, her nod urging Anes to follow, and the two women slipped behind the storage building, shadows swallowing their steps.

John waited, eyes on the horizon, the Glock's weight a cold comfort in the bag. Minutes later, they returned—Zsuzsa in a gray hoodie, jeans hugging her frame, Anes in black, her posture stiff but compliant, the fight drained for now. "Dressed," John said, a clipped acknowledgment. "Thank you." He gathered their old clothes—Zsuzsa's scarf, Anes's bright jacket—and stuffed them into a rusted barrel nearby. A splash of lighter fluid, a match, and the fabric caught, flames curling high, erasing another trace. The smoke stung his eyes, but he didn't flinch, watching until the fire ate everything.

Back in the car, the duffel at his feet, John turned to face them, his expression unreadable but resolute. "We're driving to the next airport," he said, his voice cutting through the hum of the engine as he started it up. "I have passports for you both. We're going to Asia." He didn't name a country—too many variables, too much risk—but the word hung heavy, a leap into the unknown.

Zsuzsa nodded, her hand finding Anes's, squeezing tight, her trust in John a quiet anchor. Anes exhaled, her reluctance softening, the fire's glow still flickering in her eyes. "Okay," she said, barely a whisper, the fight giving way to survival's pull. John shifted into gear, the sedan rolling forward, the storage lot shrinking behind them, another life burned to ash as they chased a horizon where the Glowies' reach might falter, Lucy's silence a ghost riding with them, her sacrifice the shield he'd never thank her for.

The small regional airport buzzed with early morning travelers, its fluorescent lights casting a sterile glow over the check-in counter. John approached, his posture casual but eyes scanning every corner—cameras, exits, faces. Zsuzsa and Anes flanked him, their new clothes blending them into the crowd, though Anes's restless energy crackled beneath her hoodie. At the counter, John slid three passports forward, his voice steady. "Three tickets to Mongolia, please."

The agent, a tired woman with pinned-up hair, barely glanced up as she typed. "IDs," she said, her tone flat. John handed over the passports—fresh, flawless, the product of his meticulous planning. She processed them, printed the tickets, and waved them on, oblivious to the weight of their journey.

Anes's eyes widened as she caught the destination on her ticket, her voice a sharp whisper. "Mongolia? What?" She turned to John, confusion edging into defiance, but Zsuzsa's hand grazed her arm, her gaze firm.

"We go where he goes," Zsuzsa said, her voice low, final, her accent wrapping the words in resolve. "No question." Anes opened her mouth, but Zsuzsa switched to Hungarian, her tone softening into a rapid murmur, a sisterly back-and-forth that danced between reassurance and insistence. Anes's shoulders eased, her protests fading into reluctant nods, their banter a private rhythm John didn't interrupt. Tickets in hand, they moved toward the gate, the airport's hum swallowing their steps.

Security was a gauntlet, but John had prepared. His appearance—hair cropped shorter, a faint beard shadowing his jaw—matched the passport photo, altered just enough to dodge casual scrutiny. Red notices lingered in Interpol's systems, he knew, but his forged IDs were clean, his face a mask the scanners couldn't flag. Zsuzsa and Anes followed his lead, their own passports passing muster, their bags light and unremarkable. They slipped through without a hitch, boarding passes clutched like lifelines as they reached the gate, the plane to Ulaanbaatar waiting beyond the glass.

On the flight, a long haul stretching hours ahead, they settled into a row of three, the cabin's hum a cocoon around them. John took the aisle, Zsuzsa the window, Anes between them, her restlessness muted by the plane's confines. The lights dimmed, most passengers dozing, but John's voice broke the quiet, low and deliberate, meant only for them. "Let me explain," he said, his eyes fixed forward, hands resting on his knees. "Glowies—feds. They're after me. Lucy killed the canary—she stopped posting, went silent. That was my signal. They were already in Budapest, sniffing my trail."

Anes shifted, her brow furrowing, but Zsuzsa leaned closer, her gaze steady, urging him on. John's voice tightened, a confession unraveling. "They think I was stalking Lucy and Theresa, years ago, maybe still. But that's not it—I only wanted to protect them. Yes, I hacked. Therapist offices, hospitals, cars, houses—

whatever got me close to Lucy, to know she was safe." His jaw clenched, the words bitter. "I broke laws, crossed lines, but it wasn't obsession. It was... love, the only way I knew how to show it after I left."

Zsuzsa's hand found his, a fleeting touch, her silence loud with understanding. Anes's eyes flicked to him, softer now, the defiance giving way to something heavier—empathy, maybe, or recognition of his burden. "So Mongolia," she said, testing the word, her voice quieter. "That's far enough?"

"For now," John said, his tone flat but resolute, the Glock's weight in the bag under his seat a silent promise. The plane droned on, carrying them toward a land of steppes and shadows, Lucy's sacrifice a ghost in his chest, her silence the shield that had bought them this escape—though for how long, even he couldn't say.

The plane's cabin was a cocoon of muted noise—engines humming, air hissing through vents, the occasional cough or rustle from other passengers lost in sleep or screens. John, Zsuzsa, and Anes sat pressed close in their row, blankets draped over their laps, the dim overhead lights casting soft shadows. John's voice, low and raw, lingered in the air after his confession, his gaze fixed on the seatback ahead, avoiding their eyes. "Just like I protected Lucy and still do today," he said, his words deliberate, heavy with conviction, "I'll protect you now and forever. I should've left you behind—you girls didn't know anything, didn't deserve this mess. But I couldn't leave you. I... love you."

Zsuzsa, by the window, stirred faintly, her head lolling against the shade, exhaustion pulling her under. Her breathing slowed, soft and steady, her trust in John a quiet anchor even in sleep. Anes, in the middle, was a contrast—restless, her fingers twitching beneath the blanket, her knee bouncing despite the cramped space. Her eyes darted, mind racing with the weight of their flight, Mongolia's unknown looming like a storm she couldn't outrun.

John glanced at her, catching the tension in her jaw, the way her shoulders stayed rigid. His hand moved under the blanket, slow and deliberate, finding hers, his touch gentle but firm, a bid to ground her. "Easy," he murmured, barely audible, his thumb tracing circles on her palm, an effort to pull her from the spiral of fear and frustration. Anes froze, her breath catching, her eyes snapping to his in shock—wide, searching, a flicker of something raw beneath her guarded edge.

No words passed, but her body spoke—her legs parted slightly, a subtle shift, leaning into his touch, her defiance softening into need. John read it, his hand

moving with care, slow and measured, slipping higher, his fingers brushing her thigh, then inward, a quiet offer to ease the storm in her. He knew her pent-up energy, her tendency to be loud, and he kept his movements calm, deliberate, meant to relax rather than ignite. The blanket hid them, the cabin's hum a shield, Zsuzsa's soft snores a reminder to stay discreet.

Anes's breath hitched, her eyes fluttering shut for a moment, her hand gripping the armrest as she surrendered to the release he sought for her—a distraction, a balm to quiet her mind, maybe enough to let her sleep through part of this endless flight. John's focus stayed steady, his touch a silent promise, not of passion but of care, a way to say *I'm here* when words weren't enough. Her body softened, tension bleeding away, and she leaned her head back, a faint sigh escaping, barely a sound.

The plane droned on, carrying them toward Mongolia's vast unknown, John's vow to protect them both a weight he'd carry through every border, every shadow. Anes's eyes opened, meeting his for a fleeting second—gratitude, trust, something unspoken passing before she let herself drift, not to sleep, but to a quieter place, the blanket a fragile shield against the world they'd left burning behind.

The plane descended into Ulaanbaatar's Chinggis Khaan International Airport, the vast Mongolian steppe stretching beyond the window, a raw expanse of earth and sky that felt like the edge of the world. John's eyes traced the horizon, but his mind was already steps ahead, plotting a path beyond Mongolia's borders. Ulaanbaatar was a stop, a breath, not the goal. China loomed in his calculations—a fortress where extradition battles could be fought, where the CCP's iron grip might shield him from the Glowies' reach, but at a cost. He'd have to deal with them, offer his skills: exploits, zero-days, sandbox escapes, remote code executions, proof-of-concepts—dark arts he'd mastered long ago. Hacking for Beijing wasn't freedom; it was a leash, but one he'd take to keep Zsuzsa and Anes safe, to carve out a life where the women he loved could breathe without fear. If it came to it, he'd sacrifice himself—his name, his soul, whatever it took—to ensure they walked away whole.

Beside him, Anes stirred, her restlessness finally spent. She shifted under the blanket, her arm slipping around John's shoulders, pulling him close in a quiet, unguarded hug, her cheek brushing his neck. Her breath warmed his skin, a fleeting anchor in the cabin's stale air, and then she drifted off, her body slack

against his, sleep claiming her at last. John's chest tightened, her trust a weight he both craved and feared. Zsuzsa slept too, her head against the window, her face soft in the dawn's gray light, unaware of the choice clawing at him.

His mind flickered to marriage—not a dream, but a tether. Marrying Zsuzsa and Anes would bind them to him, give them legal shields in some places, a shared name to hide behind. But it would also paint targets on their backs, tie them to a man the Glowies hunted relentlessly. Worse, it would mean letting Lucy go forever—not just as his past, but as the ghost he still carried, her silence the spark that had saved him in Budapest. The thought cut deeper than he expected, her face flashing in his mind—singing at the Peppermint Club, the piano gleaming, her voice a lifeline he'd clung to through screens and shadows. To marry meant closing that chapter, burning the last bridge to her light.

John's hand rested on Anes's arm, her warmth grounding him, but his eyes stayed on the window, Mongolia's rugged sprawl coming into focus below. China was the plan—Ulaanbaatar a pause to regroup, to secure new SIMs, new routes, maybe a fixer to grease their crossing. He'd hack for the CCP if they demanded it, trade his freedom for their safety, but marriage... that choice hung unresolved, a knot of love and risk he couldn't untangle yet. Anes's soft snores, Zsuzsa's steady breathing—they were his now, his to protect, just as Lucy had been. He leaned his head back, the plane's descent pulling them toward a new unknown, his vow to shield them burning brighter than the steppe's cold dawn, even if it meant losing himself in the deal.

The trio stepped into Ulaanbaatar's cold embrace, the airport's bustle fading as they cleared customs with practiced ease—John's forged passports holding under scrutiny, Zsuzsa and Anes silent but alert beside him. The city greeted them with a raw edge: concrete Soviet-era blocks mixed with gleaming new towers, the air sharp with coal smoke and steppe wind. They found refuge in a small hotel, its neon sign flickering in Cyrillic, the room clean and quiet, a sanctuary of worn wood floors and thick wool blankets. It was a pause, a breath before the next move, but for now, it was enough.

John had already reached out to a local contact—a fixer with ties to Mongolia's gray underbelly and, crucially, to China. The man could secure residency, papers to root them here temporarily, a stepping stone to the border John eyed warily. Mongolia was foreign soil, beyond the EU's grasp, a place where he could hack

the planet if needed—servers, networks, anything to stay ahead of the Glowies. His crypto investments, carefully layered through wallets and exchanges, still flowed, yielding enough to fund their lives, but John's mind churned. He wanted more—a safety net, a nest egg for Zsuzsa and Anes, assets shielded in their names alone, untouchable by feds or fate. Lucy, too, lingered in his plans—her house, her RV, the piano already hers, but he'd ensure more, a final gift to sever their tie cleanly, to let her soar without his shadow.

Inside the room, Zsuzsa and Anes collapsed onto the bed, exhaustion claiming them like a tide. They sank into the mattress, curling together under the heavy blankets, their faces slack, breaths syncing in the quiet. Zsuzsa's arm draped over Anes, protective even in sleep, while Anes's hand clutched the edge of a pillow, her restlessness finally stilled. They were beyond spent, the flight, the fire, the fear draining them to their bones.

John, wired on adrenaline, couldn't rest. He sat at a small desk, the room's single lamp casting a pool of light over his laptop—new, untraceable, bought with cash en route. His fingers moved fast, pulling up news from Budapest: reports of a blaze in the 12th district, "arson suspected," no suspects named, the shell company's house reduced to ash and questions. A grim satisfaction flickered—he'd left nothing for the Glowies to claw through, no drives, no clues. Another tab opened, a backdoor he'd long maintained into Lucy's world: her gig roster, tour dates scraped from her label's servers, her next stop in Beverly Hills glowing on the screen. She was moving forward, her silence on social media a shield, her music a flame he could still see from half a world away.

He leaned back, the chair creaking, his eyes flicking to Zsuzsa and Anes, their forms soft in the lamplight. The fixer would meet them tomorrow—papers, plans, a path to China if Mongolia wasn't far enough. John's crypto would buy time, but he'd need to work soon—exploits, deals, whatever kept them safe. The women were his now, their futures his to secure, just as he'd tried for Lucy. He'd hack, barter, burn himself out if it meant their freedom, his love for them a quiet vow in the room's hush, unbroken even as Lucy's shadow lingered in the gigs he'd never see.

In the plush suite of a Beverly Hills hotel, the air was thick with anticipation, scented with jasmine from a bouquet Charlie had sent up. Theresa stood behind Lucy, her hands deft as she zipped up a sleek black gown that hugged Lucy's

frame like a shadow made solid, its fabric catching the light in subtle gleams. The dress was elegant, daring—a statement for the Greystone Mansion, where Lucy's next gig loomed, a leap from the Peppermint Club's intimacy to a stage that carried weight. Theresa adjusted the neckline, her eyes meeting Lucy's in the mirror, a quiet pride in her gaze. "You're ready," she said, her voice steady, a tether as Lucy's nerves flickered beneath her calm.

Charlie had pulled strings to get her here, calling in favors from industry contacts who'd whispered about the Greystone's prestige. Earlier, over coffee in the hotel lobby, he'd leaned across the table, his denim jacket creased, his eyes bright with conviction. "I've managed others before, Lucy," he'd said, "but you—you're one of a kind. Special. The way you sing, it's not just notes. It's... truth." Lucy had smiled, her fingers tracing the rim of her mug, her voice soft but firm. "I'm not in it for the money, Charlie. I'm in it to express my music, my talent." Unspoken, beneath her words, was the deeper drive—to show John she could thrive, prosper, build a life that shone without him, even as her heart ached for the man who'd shaped her songs. She missed him dearly, a wound she poured into every chord.

That night, the Greystone Mansion buzzed, its opulent halls packed with LA's elite—producers, influencers, fans who'd caught her Peppermint glow and wanted more. Crystal chandeliers cast golden light over velvet drapes and polished floors, the crowd a sea of anticipation. Lucy had insisted the event stream live, a digital pulse to reach beyond the room, and Charlie had made it happen, techs rigging cameras to capture every note. She stepped onto the stage, her black gown a stark contrast to the white grand piano at its center, its curves gleaming like a beacon. The crowd hushed, phones dimming, eyes on her as she settled onto the bench, her hands hovering over the keys, her breath steadying.

Before she played, Lucy leaned into the mic, her voice clear, unguarded, cutting through the room's hum. "This is dedicated to you, John," she said, her eyes lifting to the void beyond the lights, "my forever love." The words hung, raw and heavy, a confession she didn't hide, even knowing the Glowies might be watching, their algorithms sniffing for John's shadow. The crowd stirred, a ripple of whispers—some moved, some curious—but Lucy's focus was inward, John's face flickering in her mind, his absence a note she'd play through.

Her fingers found the keys, and the opening chords of Lady Gaga's *I'll Never Love Again* spilled out, slow and mournful, each note a brushstroke of longing. Her

voice followed, rich and aching: "Wish I could... I could've said goodbye..." The piano sang under her touch, its resonance filling the mansion, her emotionalism raw, unfiltered, a tide that pulled the room into her heart. The gown shimmered as she swayed, her eyes glistening, tears held back but felt in every phrase: "Don't wanna feel another touch..." It was for John—not a plea, but a farewell, a way to say she'd survive, even if love's scar lingered.

The stream carried her to thousands—fans, strangers, maybe John, somewhere in the world's shadows. Comments flooded the feed: *She's breaking my heart, Who's John?, This is everything.* Charlie stood at the back, arms crossed, his grin soft but fierce, watching execs nod, their pens scratching deals in their minds. The crowd leaned in, some wiping eyes, others clutching hands, Lucy's truth binding them in the Greystone's glow. She was thriving, prospering, her music a fire no Glowie could dim, John's memory both her wound and her wings as she played on, the white piano her altar, her voice her vow.

Lucy's fingers lingered on the keys, the final notes of *I'll Never Love Again* fading into the Greystone Mansion's hushed reverence. The crowd's applause swelled, warm and reverent, but her eyes darted briefly across the room, scanning for the telltale stiffness of Glowies—those plain jackets, those too-steady gazes. Nothing. No shadows lurking at the bar, no figures lingering by the exits. A flicker of relief sparked, but she pushed it aside, her focus snapping back to the white grand piano, its gleam a grounding force. She had to stay sharp for the next piece, her heart already leaning into the music's pull.

She adjusted the mic, her black gown catching the chandelier's glow, and spoke, her voice soft but piercing, carrying the weight of her truth. "Love, and never forgotten," she said, her eyes lifting to the unseen, to John, wherever he was. "Close to my heart, close to my soul." The words settled over the room, a vow that needed no explanation, and the crowd leaned in, their silence an embrace.

Her hands found the keys again, and the opening chords of Lady Gaga's *I'll Always Remember Us This Way* spilled out—bright, tender, a melody that held both ache and defiance. Her voice joined, clear and raw: "That Arizona sky burning in your eyes..." Each note was a memory woven into sound, John's shadow in every lyric, but also her own strength, her refusal to let loss define her. The piano hummed under her touch, her emotionalism pouring through, her gown a dark flame as she swayed, her eyes half-closed, lost in the song's truth.

At the back of the hall, Charlie stood, his arms crossed, his usual grin softened by pride. His eyes, too, swept the room, instinct honed from nights at the Peppermint Club, expecting Glowies to slink through the crowd. But the space was a void—no feds, no cold stares, just enraptured faces caught in Lucy's spell. His brow furrowed, surprise mixing with unease—were they really gone, or just better hidden? He shook it off, his focus returning to Lucy, her voice a tide pulling even him under: "But when I'm all choked up and you're not by my side..."

Theresa sat beside him, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze fixed on Lucy, radiant at the piano. Her sister-in-law's performance was a beacon, each note a testament to her resilience, but Theresa's heart carried a quiet weight. She couldn't leave Lucy to face life alone—not out of pity, but a deep-rooted sense of duty, tied to John's choices, his absence. She wasn't here to coddle; she guided, protected, a steady hand to help Lucy navigate the glow of stages and the shadows of their past. Watching now, Theresa's lips curved faintly, pride mingling with resolve—she'd stand by Lucy, not to shield her from the world, but to ensure she could conquer it.

The stream carried Lucy's voice beyond the mansion, screens lighting up with comments—*She's unreal, This hits so hard, Forever love, wow*. The room held its breath, some swaying, others clutching hands, Lucy's truth a thread binding them. No Glowies broke the spell, no eyes pierced her light. She sang on, her voice soaring—"I'll always remember us this way"—John close to her soul, but her music hers alone, a fire that burned bright, unyielding, in the Greystone's golden glow.

As Lucy's voice carried the final, lingering notes of *I'll Always Remember Us This Way* through the Greystone Mansion, the crowd sat spellbound, their applause delayed by a collective breath, as if afraid to break the moment. Whispers rippled softly—*Is she a widow?*—sparked by her raw dedications to John, the "forever love" she wore like a wound. She'd never said, never told, her story veiled in songs rather than statements. Yet no one doubted her authenticity; her sincerity, her unguarded emotion, poured into every chord, every lyric. It was what made her special, what drew them to her light—a woman who bared her soul without apology, her pain and strength intertwined.

Lucy's eyes swept the room as the applause rose, warm and fervent, catching familiar faces in the sea of strangers. Regulars were emerging, their presence a

quiet rhythm at her gigs—same seats, same eager nods, their connection to her music a bond she felt but didn't fully grasp. One man stood out, near the front tonight, his tailored jacket and attentive gaze marking him as more than a casual fan. His eyes met hers briefly, a gentle smile flickering, interest clear but unspoken. He'd been at the Peppermint Club too, she realized, his face sharper in memory now. Her heart flickered—not with attraction, but with awareness, a spark she quickly tucked away.

She wasn't ready, couldn't be. Two years had passed since John left, but her emotions remained tangled in him, a knot of love and loss she hadn't unraveled. His shadow lived in her songs, her silences, the assets he'd left behind—each a thread binding her to a man she might never see again. To pursue someone new, to let that gentleman's smile linger, would mean dragging her baggage into a relationship, unfair to anyone who dared step close. Lucy knew herself well enough: until she could cast John's weight, let him fade from her heart's center, she'd stay single, her music her only lover, her stage her only home.

The crowd's energy pulled her back, their cheers a tide she rode as she nodded, her black gown shimmering under the chandeliers. She offered a small smile, gratitude in her eyes for their love, their questions unanswered but felt. Charlie, at the back, caught the man's gaze too, his brow quirking—not a Glowie, but someone to watch, his instincts humming. Theresa, beside him, saw Lucy's fleeting glance, her sister-in-law's heart laid bare in that moment, and felt a pang—she'd guide her, protect her, but Lucy's healing was her own to claim.

The stream's comments surged—*Who's John?, She's so real, I'm crying*—but Lucy didn't see them, her focus inward as she prepared for the next song, her fingers brushing the white grand piano's keys. The gentleman in the crowd leaned forward, his interest a quiet note she'd ignore for now, her entanglement with John a chain she wasn't ready to break, her music the only truth she'd share tonight.

In Ulaanbaatar's gritty heart, where Soviet blocks loomed beside ger districts, John met the fixer under the shadow of a neon-lit café, its sign buzzing in Mongolian script. The man was wiry, his coat patched but his eyes sharp, a broker of shadows who'd navigated borders for years. John handed over a thick envelope—cash, untraceable, the last of his euros from the storage locker. In return, the fixer slid a manila folder across the table: three sets of documents—residency papers, IDs, all pristine, stamped, ready to root them in Mongolia's soil. John

checked each page, his jaw tight, satisfied but never trusting fully. The fixer led him through icy streets to a low-rise building, its concrete facade cracked but sturdy, and up a narrow stairwell to a flat—small, clean, quiet, a blank slate smelling faintly of bleach and damp wool.

"This'll do," John said, his voice low, scanning the bare walls, the single window overlooking a courtyard of packed snow. The fixer nodded, vanishing without a word, his job done. John pocketed the keys, the documents safe in his bag, and headed back to the hotel to get Zsuzsa and Anes, his steps quick against the steppe's biting wind.

At the hotel, the women were awake, bleary but alert, their bags packed, blankets folded. John led them through Ulaanbaatar's dawn, the city waking in bursts of coal smoke and honking taxis, until they reached the flat. He unlocked the door, stepping aside to let them in, his voice calm, warm, a contrast to the chaos they'd fled. "This is our new home," he said, the words simple but heavy, a promise of safety, however fleeting.

Zsuzsa stepped inside, her eyes tracing the sparse room—a sagging couch, a table, two narrow beds pushed against a wall. She turned to John, her smile small but resolute. "We'll make it home, right, Anes?" she said, her accent softening the edges, her hand brushing Anes's arm, pulling her into the vow.

Anes, still wired from the journey, scanned the space, her restlessness tempered by Zsuzsa's calm. "As long as we're with John," she said, her voice firm, a spark of defiance in her eyes, "I don't care where we go." She stepped closer to him, looping her arm through his, her body pressing against his side, seeking his warmth, his solidity in this cold, unfamiliar place. Her cheek grazed his shoulder, a quiet need to feel him there, to anchor herself after days of fire and flight.

John's arm tightened briefly around her, his warmth a silent answer, though his eyes flickered to Zsuzsa, ensuring she felt included, safe. The flat was temporary, a foothold until China's border beckoned, but for now, it was theirs—a space to breathe, to plan, to rebuild. His crypto still flowed, enough to bolster their nest egg, but he'd need to work soon, hack deeper, secure assets for Zsuzsa and Anes, and for Lucy, too, her shadow lingering in his plans. As Anes nestled closer and Zsuzsa began unpacking their meager bags, John stood in the doorway, the fixer's papers in his pocket, Ulaanbaatar's hum a reminder that safety was never certain, but his vow to protect them burned steady, a fire no distance could dim.

In the small Ulaanbaatar flat, the air was warm with the hum of new beginnings, the faint scent of bleach mingling with the steam slipping from the bathroom. John sat at the table, unpacking a sleek new laptop—bought with cash, untraceable, its box discarded in a dumpster miles away. He tethered it to a fresh SIM, his fingers moving with practiced speed to cloak his presence: VPNs layered, traffic bounced through servers in obscure corners of the globe, his digital footprint a ghost. The screen glowed, a portal to the world he'd fled, and he leaned in, focus sharp, adrenaline still a low hum in his veins.

On the couch, Anes sprawled, her hoodie loose, engrossed in a mobile game, the tinny sounds of explosions and chimes cutting through the quiet. She glanced up occasionally, restless, waiting for Zsuzsa. The bathroom door was ajar, steam curling out as Zsuzsa stripped off her travel-worn clothes, stepping into the shower's hot spray, the water a luxury after days of chaos. Anes shouted in Hungarian, her voice playful but edged with impatience, "Don't linger, I'm dirty!" Zsuzsa's laugh echoed faintly, a muffled retort lost in the water's rush.

John chuckled under his breath, catching the gist of their banter despite his spotty Hungarian, a fleeting warmth softening his focus. His screen shifted as he dug into Lucy's world, pulling up her gig roster—a habit he couldn't break. The Greystone Mansion glowed on the list, Beverly Hills' opulence a world away from Ulaanbaatar's grit. He scoured the internet, fingers flying, hunting for a feed, any scrap of her light. Luck struck—a live stream, pirated from the event, its link buried in a fan forum. He clicked, the feed buffering, then stabilizing, and the Greystone's grandeur filled his screen: chandeliers, velvet drapes, a packed crowd buzzing with anticipation.

The camera panned, revealing Lucy at the white grand piano, her sleek black gown a second skin, its shimmer catching the spotlight like starlight on ink. John's breath hitched, his chest tightening. "OMG, Lucy," he whispered, voice cracking, "you've changed. Look how gorgeous you are." She was radiant, stronger, her presence commanding in a way that both broke and mended him. Then her voice cut through, clear and raw, before her first song: "This is dedicated to you, John, my forever love." Tears stung his eyes, spilling over, his hand trembling as he gripped the laptop's edge, her words a blade and a balm, slicing through the distance he'd forced between them.

Anes looked up from her game, her phone's glow dimming as she caught John's hunched form, his face wet, eyes locked on the screen. His emotion was raw, unguarded—a side of him she rarely saw, and it stirred something in her, a mix of empathy and hesitation. She wanted to cross the room, to touch his shoulder, to share the weight, but fear held her back—fear of intruding, of not understanding the depth of his bond with Lucy. Her lips parted, then closed, and she stayed on the couch, her game forgotten, watching him wrestle with a love she could feel but not fully grasp.

Zsuzsa's shower shut off, the flat's quiet settling again, but John didn't move, the feed looping Lucy's performance in his mind—her gown, her voice, her dedication. Anes's gaze lingered, her arm twitching as if to reach out, but she held still, the moment fragile, John's tears a silent bridge to a woman half a world away, whose light still burned in the flat's dim glow.

Steam curled from the bathroom as Zsuzsa stepped out, a thin towel wrapped around her, barely clinging to her damp skin, her hair dripping dark trails onto her shoulders. In Hungarian, her voice light but warm, she called to Anes, "The water's nice and hot." Anes, sprawled on the couch, sprang up, her restlessness igniting into motion. "I can't wait," she shot back, her clothes flying off in a flurry—hoodie, jeans, socks scattering like leaves as she bolted for the bathroom, her laughter trailing behind. The door swung shut, and soon the sound of water mingled with Anes's voice, belting a Hungarian pop song, carefree and off-key, echoing through the flat's thin walls.

John's eyes flicked up from the laptop, catching Anes's blur of movement, her body emerging briefly as her clothes fell away—a flash of skin, curves, energy—before she vanished into the steam. His gaze lingered on the empty doorway, a reflex, not lust but a quiet marvel at her unbridled spirit, so different from the weight he carried. Zsuzsa, toweling her hair, caught him staring, her lips curving into a knowing smile—gentle, not jealous, a spark of warmth in the flat's dim light. But as she stepped closer, her smile faltered, her eyes tracing his face: the dried tear tracks, the red rims around his gaze, raw and unguarded.

She glanced at the laptop, the Greystone stream paused on Lucy, mid-song, her black gown a stark contrast to the white piano, her face alight with emotion. Zsuzsa understood instantly, the pieces clicking—John's tears, his silence, the dedication he'd heard. She moved to him, her towel slipping slightly, and he

reached out, pulling her close, his arms wrapping around her tightly, almost desperately, as if anchoring himself to her warmth, her presence. Her damp skin pressed against his shirt, the scent of soap and her grounding him, and he buried his face in her shoulder, his breath uneven.

Zsuzsa's arms encircled him, her embrace fierce, matching his intensity. In a soft voice, barely above a whisper, she said, "You can't let go of her... or me." Her words carried a double weight—teasing the tightness of his hold, but also naming the truth of his heart, caught between Lucy's ghost and the women here now. She didn't pull away, her fingers tracing slow circles on his back, offering comfort without demand, her own love steady in the quiet.

Anes's singing floated from the bathroom, a bright counterpoint, her Hungarian lyrics weaving through the steam, oblivious to the moment's depth. John held Zsuzsa tighter, the laptop's glow casting their shadows on the wall, Lucy's paused image a silent witness. He didn't speak, but his grip said enough—he wouldn't let go, not of Zsuzsa, not of Anes, even as Lucy's light burned in his tears, a flame he'd carry across borders, through this small, clean flat, into whatever shadows waited next.

The morning sun spilled through the blinds of Charlie's office in Beverly Hills, casting warm stripes across a cluttered desk stacked with contracts and vinyls. Lucy and Theresa sat across from him, hands folded in their laps, the air thick with possibility. Charlie leaned forward, his denim jacket swapped for a rare button-down, his grin warm but professional as he slid a document toward them—a contract, crisp and weighty, the Greystone gig's success crystallized on paper. "The execs love you, Lucy," he said, his voice genuine, eyes crinkling. "As do I. Take your time, review it. No rush."

Lucy's fingers brushed the pages, her heart racing—not with fear, but with the thrill of a door opening wider than she'd dreamed. Theresa, ever vigilant, leaned in, her eyes scanning the fine print with a practiced flick, her brow creasing slightly. "Entertainment attorney?" she asked, her tone cautious but not accusatory, testing Charlie's intent.

Charlie nodded, unfazed, his transparency a shield. "By all means," he said, "I recommend it, encourage it even. No hidden agendas or shenanigans from me." He slid a business card across the desk, the name of a trusted attorney embossed

in clean type—a referral, not a push. “She’s sharp, fair. Helped a few of my acts before.”

Theresa’s lips curved, a rare smile softening her guard. She liked Charlie’s openness, the way he didn’t dodge or deflect. It felt safe, a contrast to the shadows of Glowies and John’s lingering weight. She tucked the card into her purse, her trust in Charlie solidifying, a quiet comfort in a world that often felt unsteady.

That afternoon, Lucy and Theresa sat in the attorney’s office, a sleek space with glass walls and a view of palm trees swaying in the LA breeze. The attorney, a woman with gray-streaked hair and a no-nonsense air, flipped through the contract, her pen tapping as she spoke. “Tour schedule—common,” she said, her voice clipped but clear. “Recording time, also standard. They want an album, which is great, but there’s no timetable specified. You’ll need to pin that down, amend it in for clarity. Payment options are decent for a starter—royalties, advances, nothing predatory, but you could negotiate a bit more on the backend.”

Lucy nodded, absorbing it, her black gown from the Greystone swapped for jeans and a loose sweater, her stage radiance now a quiet focus. Theresa, beside her, jotted notes, her pen steady, her mind tracking every detail. The attorney leaned back, her eyes narrowing slightly. “The tours—flights covered, or are you handling travel?”

Lucy’s lips quirked, a spark of her independence flaring. “No flights,” she said, her voice firm but warm. “We have a fifth wheel—an RV. We’ll drive. No thank you to dirty hotels.” The memory of John’s gift, the RV parked back home, flickered in her mind—a tether to him, but also her freedom, her way to carve this path on her terms.

Theresa chuckled softly, pride in her glance, and the attorney raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Smart,” she said, making a note. “Keeps costs down, gives you control. I’ll flag that for the contract—travel stipends instead of booked flights.” She slid the document back, her tone encouraging. “It’s a solid start, Lucy. Get those timetable details, maybe nudge the royalty split, and you’re in good shape. You’re building something real here.”

Lucy exhaled, her hands unclenching, the contract a tangible step toward a future she was shaping, John’s shadow present but not defining her. Theresa reached

over, squeezing her hand, her role as guide steady, her belief in Lucy unwavering. Outside, LA buzzed, oblivious to their quiet victory—a deal taking form, a career rising, and a woman finding her voice, one note, one choice at a time.

The next morning, sunlight filtered through Charlie's office, glinting off the vinyls stacked on his shelf, the air carrying a quiet hum of purpose. Lucy and Theresa sat across from him again, their contract now marked with careful notes, scribbled in Theresa's precise hand and Lucy's looser scrawl. Lucy looked up, her eyes steady, a mix of nerves and resolve as she slid the document toward Charlie. "I'd like to make some modifications," she said, her voice clear, grounded. "Since we'll be using my fifth wheel for travel, that eliminates airfare and hotels. We could roll that into something else."

Charlie leaned back, his grin easy but attentive, nodding as he processed her words. "Royalties, perhaps," he said, tapping a pen against the desk. "Or a stipend—makes sense. You'll need it for maintenance, fuel, cost per mile, those kinda things. No problem." He pulled the contract closer, skimming their notes, his respect for Lucy's pragmatism clear in his glance. "Smart move, keeping control like that."

Theresa spread out the tour schedule, her finger tracing the dates—West Coast for now, intimate venues in Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, a slow build before expanding eastward later. She exchanged a look with Lucy, both feeling the weight of the moment, the reality settling in. This was where the real work began—soundchecks, late nights, dusty roads in the RV—but for Lucy, it was a fire worth stoking. John's gifts, the RV and assets easing her path, were a quiet undercurrent in her thoughts. She was grateful for his generosity, the safety net most starting artists lacked, though his absence still ached, a note she'd weave into her songs rather than let define her.

Charlie flipped to the album clause, his eyes lighting up. "They're pushing for songs written just for you, Lucy," he said, "and I've heard some of the demos—your emotionalism, that raw edge, it's all there. Unique, like nothing else out there." He leaned forward, his voice warm. "You're not just cutting an album—you're telling your story. They're giving you room to breathe on this, no hard deadlines yet, which is rare."

Lucy's lips curved, a spark of pride flaring. The songs taking shape—some penned in quiet moments with her guitar, others born from late-night talks with

Theresa—were hers, steeped in her heart's truth, her love and loss distilled into melodies. "I want them to feel me," she said softly, almost to herself, "every word, every note."

Theresa squeezed her arm, her own pride unspoken but clear, her role as guide steady as ever. Charlie scribbled a note, adjusting the contract's travel clause, his pen quick. "We'll get the stipend locked in, royalties bumped a touch—nothing crazy, but enough to keep you comfortable. Tour's lean to start, but it'll grow. You're building something real here, Lucy."

The office hummed, the contract's pages a map of Lucy's future—roads she'd drive, stages she'd claim, songs she'd birth. John's generosity was her foundation, but her talent, her grit, would raise the roof. She nodded, the weight of work ahead a challenge she welcomed, her music a beacon no shadow could dim, not even his.

With the LA trip in the rearview, Lucy and Theresa returned to their small-town haven, the Greystone's glow a spark fueling their focus. Their first tour loomed a month away, a West Coast string of gigs that would test their grit, and they dove into preparations with quiet determination. The RV and Ford 550, John's enduring gifts, stood parked in the driveway, their chrome catching the late spring sun. The women set to work, ensuring both were road-ready—cleaned, packed, and checked stem to stern.

Theresa crawled under the truck, inspecting the chassis, while Lucy scrubbed the RV's interior, the scent of lemon cleaner mingling with the promise of the journey ahead. They changed oil, tested tires, topped fluids, and double-checked the hitch, their hands steady, their banter light but purposeful. Contingency plans took shape: a roadside assistance membership, a spare tire kit, a list of trusted mechanics along their route, even a backup generator tucked in the RV's storage. They'd learned from John's absence—freedom demanded foresight, and they wouldn't be caught unprepared.

The RV's kitchen gleamed, stocked with staples—rice, beans, spices, coffee—because eating out wasn't their style. "We cook," Theresa had said, tossing a skillet onto the counter, and Lucy nodded, picturing late-night meals after gigs, the road's hum their soundtrack. The fifth wheel's space was a gift in itself, its fold-out beds, cozy dinette, and tiny shower offering comfort most touring artists could only dream of. John had known, somehow, when he'd left it—seen Lucy's budding

music career before she had, his provisions not just generosity but a blueprint for her future. He'd wanted her path bright, unburdened, and every inch of the RV felt like his quiet faith in her, a love she carried even as she forged her own way.

With the truck purring and the RV gleaming, they packed their gear—Lucy's guitar, a portable keyboard, stage outfits folded neat beside jeans and tees. The tour schedule sat taped to the fridge: Portland first, then Seattle, San Francisco, each date a step toward something bigger. Lucy traced the route on a map, her finger lingering on the coastal highways, a mix of nerves and excitement bubbling up. Theresa caught her eye, grinning. "Ready, rockstar?" she teased, and Lucy laughed, the sound freer than it had been in months.

They climbed into the truck, Lucy at the wheel, Theresa navigating, the RV hitched tight behind them. The engine roared to life, and they pulled out, the driveway shrinking in the side mirrors, their small town fading as the open road stretched ahead. The hum of tires on asphalt became their rhythm, the fifth wheel a home John had built for this moment, Lucy's music the fire that would light their way across the country, one mile, one song at a time.

In the FBI field office, the air was thick with the hum of monitors and the faint buzz of frustration. The Glowies sat hunched over their desks, screens casting pale light on their faces as they scoured digital trails gone cold. Budapest had yielded nothing—John's shadow slipping through their fingers like smoke. Their latest lead flickered on a news feed: a fire in the 12th district, a modern house reduced to charred bones, labeled "suspected arson" in Hungarian reports. They reached out to local authorities, their queries sharp, urgent, pulling every scrap of data: property records, witness statements, anything to tether the blaze to their quarry.

The house, recently bought by a shell company—crypto-funded, layers deep—screamed John's handiwork, its anonymity a hallmark of his moves. Neighbors, questioned by police, painted a vague picture: a man living there with two young women, their presence marked by muffled arguments and late-night music. The Glowies circulated John's photo again, but faces shook heads—no recognition, his features likely altered, a chameleon's trick they'd come to expect. "He's too sharp for a clean ID," Glowie #1 muttered, tossing the report aside, his jaw tight.

Glowie #2 leaned back, eyes narrowing as he sifted through the Budapest flat's old intel—the neighbor's complaint about "loud sex," two women with a man matching John's vague outline. "It's the women," he said, voice low, certain. "They're the

constant. He's twice their age, dragging them along—same ones from the flat, same ones in the 12th district." He pulled up files, cross-referencing snippets: Zsuzsa's accent, Anes's bold streak, fragments from intercepted chatter and hazy CCTV. "John can hide his face, but they're his anchor. We find them, we get him."

They drafted a new alert, marking Zsuzsa and Anes as persons of interest—not suspects, but keys to the puzzle. Sketches and descriptors went out, vague enough to avoid tipping John off, sharp enough to snag a lead: two women, early twenties, one reserved, one fiery, tied to a ghost who burned houses to stay free. "They're not trained like him," Glowie #1 said, typing fast, sending the bulletin to Interpol, local PDs, even Mongolian contacts on a hunch. "They'll slip—post something, call someone. He's careful, but they're human."

The office hummed, their focus narrowing, John's trail a faint heat they chased through ashes and aliases. They didn't know he'd already landed in Ulaanbaatar, didn't know Zsuzsa and Anes were curled in a quiet flat, their new IDs clean, their phones dark. The Glowies' net was wide but fraying, the women's faces their best bet, a thread to pull until John's shadow finally broke into light.

In the FBI field office, a phone buzzed, cutting through the hum of keyboards and coffee-fueled murmurs. Glowie #2 answered, his posture straightening as a university administrator's voice came through, clipped and certain. "Yes, I saw the photos you circulated," the woman said, her tone carrying the weight of recognition. "They used to attend here at the university. Their names—Zsuzsa and Anes." She offered a few details—enrollment dates, vague memories of quiet students—before Glowie #2 thanked her, his voice curt but grateful, hanging up with a quick scribble: *Zsuzsa. Anes. Confirmed.*

He turned to Glowie #1, the note landing like a spark. "University in Budapest," he said, eyes narrowing. "Why there? What was he planning?" The question hung, heavy with suspicion. John wasn't the type to linger without purpose—every move calculated, every choice a layer of his escape. They fired off a request to Interpol, pulling records on the women, their screens soon blooming with sparse files: Zsuzsa, a literature major, dropped out two years ago; Anes, art and media, same. No arrests, no red flags, just ordinary lives that had veered into John's orbit. Nothing stood out, which only deepened the Glowies' unease—normalcy was John's perfect cover.

Glowie #1 leaned back, tossing a pen onto his desk, his brow creased. "An older guy with younger women," he said, voice laced with disdain. "Sounds like a sex addict to me. Usually it's cougars pulling that move, going for younger men, but this... he's got two half his age trailing him."

Glowie #2's lips twitched, not quite a smile, his mind turning. "Maybe that's how we get him—women, sex. If he's got a weakness, it's them. Lure him out, use what he can't resist." He tapped a file, Zsuzsa's photo staring back, her quiet gaze a contrast to Anes's defiant smirk.

Glowie #1 shook his head, unconvinced, picking up the pen again. "He's too smart for that. Sex might pull a lesser man, but John? He's not sloppy. Those women—they're not just flings. They're his shield, his reason, maybe even his blind spot, but he won't fall for a honey trap." He flipped through the Interpol report, frustration creeping in. "No priors, no ties to his hacks, nothing. They're clean, which means he picked them for a reason—low profile, loyal."

The office pulsed with their focus, screens glowing with Zsuzsa and Anes's faces, now sharper in their hunt. The university lead was a thread, thin but real, tying John to Budapest's past. They didn't know he was already burrowed in Ulaanbaatar, his new flat a fortress of silence, Zsuzsa and Anes asleep under wool blankets, far from lecture halls or lures. The Glowies leaned into their theory—sex, loyalty, weakness—mapping a man they underestimated, chasing a ghost who'd already burned his bridges, his women not pawns but partners, their bond a wall no trap could breach.

In the Ulaanbaatar flat, the dim glow of John's laptop cast jagged shadows across the bare walls, the city's coal-smoked chill seeping through the window's edges. John sat at the table, his new SIM tether humming, his presence cloaked behind layers of encryption. His screen flicked to an Interpol bulletin, a routine check that snagged his breath—Zsuzsa and Anes, their faces staring back, labeled persons of interest. No names, just sketches and descriptors, but close enough to burn a hole in his gut. He smelled the trap, the Glowies tightening their net, not just on him but on the women he'd sworn to shield.

"Zsuzsa," he called, his voice low, urgent, cutting through the flat's quiet. She padded over, wrapped in a sweater, her hair loose, Anes trailing behind, her phone game paused mid-explosion. John pointed to the screen, his eyes steady but heavy. "Look here. You know who that is, right?"

Anes leaned in, her breath catching as she saw herself—her sharp jaw, her defiant tilt—beside Zsuzsa's softer features, both pinned to Interpol's digital wall. Zsuzsa's hand flew to her mouth, a flicker of fear in her eyes, but she didn't flinch. John's voice softened, carrying the weight of their new reality. "My dears, you can never go back home. Even if you wanted to."

Anes slid closer, her body pressing against his side, her arm looping around him, snuggling tight. "No need," she said, her voice firm, a spark of loyalty burning through her fear. "We have nothing there." Her warmth was a defiance, her choice clear—she'd left Budapest's ghosts behind for him.

Zsuzsa moved to John's right, mirroring Anes, her own embrace quieter but no less fierce, her cheek resting against his shoulder. "You are our protector," she murmured, her accent thick with conviction. "We feel safe with you. Yes, we're on the run, but we live life with you." Her words were a vow, her loyalty beyond question, matching Anes's fire with her own steady flame.

John's arms encircled them both, pulling them close, their warmth a shield against the trap he'd glimpsed. The Interpol notice glowed on the screen, a reminder of the world hunting them, but in this moment, their bond was stronger—unbreakable, a life carved in shared risk and trust.

That evening, the flat's chill deepened, Ulaanbaatar's cold biting harder as the heater sputtered, barely cutting the nip in the air. In their cozy bed, John lay flanked by Zsuzsa and Anes, a heavy wool blanket draped over them, its weight a comfort. Their nude bodies pressed close, skin against skin, gathering warmth from each other in the small, clean space. Zsuzsa's breath was soft on his chest, her arm slung across him, while Anes curled tighter, her leg tangled with his, her restlessness stilled in sleep. The cold couldn't touch them here, their closeness a fire of its own, their dedication to him a pulse in the dark, holding fast against the Glowies' distant snare.

The open road stretched before Lucy and Theresa, a ribbon of asphalt cutting through the vast American landscape, their East Coast home now a memory as they aimed for Portland. With a month until the tour's first gig, they'd chosen the scenic route, craving the slow beauty of mountains, plains, and endless skies over the haste of interstates. The Ford 550 purred under Lucy's hands, the RV trailing steady behind, John's gifts making this journey not just possible but a kind of

freedom they savored. They had time—time to breathe, to marvel, to let the road shape their days.

At a quiet stretch of highway, golden fields rolling out under a late afternoon sun, Lucy pulled to the side, gravel crunching under the tires. “Potty break,” she called, grinning at Theresa as they hopped out, stretching their legs. The RV’s door swung open, its compact bathroom a luxury—no gas station stalls, no grime, just their own space. Lucy washed her hands, catching her reflection in the tiny mirror, her face brighter than it had been in years. Theresa waited outside, leaning against the truck, her eyes on the horizon. They were back on the road in minutes, the ease of it a quiet thrill, their rhythm seamless.

Lucy took the driver’s seat this time, her hands sure on the wheel, the truck’s power familiar now. They’d swapped driving duties somewhere in Ohio, and she’d grown to love the feel of it, the weight of the RV behind her a challenge she’d mastered. As they wound through a valley, pine-dotted hills rising sharp against a watercolor sky, Theresa leaned back, her boots propped on the dash. “Well, Lucy,” she said, her voice warm, “love the view.”

Lucy laughed, her eyes flicking to the scenery, then back to the road. “I’m surprised I can handle this huge truck, let alone the RV in the back,” she said, a spark of pride in her tone. “So grateful we have the custom suspension system.” John’s foresight—upgraded shocks, reinforced frame—smoothed the miles, turning a beast of a rig into something she could command. It was another piece of his love, woven into her journey, easing the weight of her dreams.

They kept an eye out for campsites, preferring quiet spots over crowded lots—places with fire pits, maybe a stream, where they could park the fifth wheel and sleep under stars instead of neon. Theresa scrolled through a camping app, bookmarking a few near Wyoming, her voice thoughtful. “We’ll stop tomorrow night, cook something proper, stretch our legs.” Lucy nodded, picturing it: chili simmering in the RV’s kitchen, their laughter cutting through the dusk, the road’s hum a song she was learning to sing.

The RV sat parked at a Wyoming campsite, nestled among pines with a creek murmuring nearby, the night sky a deep velvet pricked with stars. Inside, the fifth wheel glowed with warmth, the scent of chili—spicy, rich, meat-only for Lucy’s taste—lingering in the air. Lucy perched on the dinette bench, a portable keyboard balanced on a fold-out stand, its keys gleaming under the RV’s soft lighting. Her

fingers danced, coaxing out a melody, one of her own songs, a piece she'd crafted in quiet moments, raw and true. It was a contender for her first album, a milestone that felt closer with every mile, and this song—still unnamed—held a special place, its chords woven with her heart's ache and hope.

She sang softly, her voice a gentle tide, swaying as the lyrics spilled out: "Chasing shadows, finding light, every road a piece of night..." The words were hers, born from John's absence, her growth, the road stretching behind and ahead. Each note carried her emotionalism, unguarded, her eyes half-closed, lost in the music's pull. Sheet music lay scattered on the table, multiple copies marked with pencil notes—phrases tweaked, chords adjusted—but Lucy was committing it to memory fast, the song becoming part of her, as natural as breath.

Theresa lounged in the RV's recliner, one leg slung over the armrest, a bowl of chili cradled in her hands. She savored a spoonful, the heat just right, her eyes on Lucy but her body relaxed, sinking into the moment's ease. She counted the tempo silently, her head nodding faintly to the beat, tracking Lucy's pitch with a musician's ear—not to critique, but to marvel. "That's it, Luce," she murmured between bites, her voice warm, encouraging. "Right there, that bridge—it's gold."

Lucy's lips curved, her fingers never pausing, the keyboard's hum filling the RV's cozy space. The chili she'd cooked simmered in a pot on the counter, a second batch cooling for tomorrow, proof of their self-sufficiency, their refusal to lean on roadside diners. The fifth wheel's comforts—kitchen, recliner, the bed waiting in the back—were John's foresight made real, his gifts cradling them as Lucy chased her dreams. She felt his presence in the song, too, not a weight but a thread, stitched into lyrics that mourned and celebrated in equal measure.

The campsite's quiet wrapped around them, the creek's babble a soft counterpoint to Lucy's voice. Theresa set her bowl down, leaning forward now, her eyes bright with pride, watching her sister-in-law shape a piece of her soul. The sheet music fluttered as Lucy hit a high note, pure and piercing, the song's heart laid bare. It was practice, yes, but also a promise—an album taking root, a career blooming, Lucy's light burning bright in the RV's glow, with Theresa's steady presence the harmony she needed to keep singing.

Lucy's fingers lingered on the keyboard's final chord, the song's echo fading into the RV's warm quiet. She stretched, her shoulders loosening, a small smile tugging at her lips—practice done for now, the melody tucked safe in her heart. The

Wyoming night called, its crisp air promising clarity, and she craved a moment outside, away from sheet music and chili-scented coziness. She slid the keyboard aside, grabbed a light jacket, and opened the RV's door, stepping barefoot onto the cool earth. The grass tickled her toes as she walked toward the creek, its gentle gurgle a song of its own, blending with the rustle of pines under a star-strewn sky.

She wandered along the water's edge, the stream's flow steady, soothing, washing away the day's weight. Her breath caught at the beauty—the moonlight glinting off ripples, the vastness of the night wrapping her close. Softly, almost to herself, she murmured, "When a hero comes along, we carry on," the words slipping out like a prayer, a fragment of a song or maybe just her truth, tied to John, to her own resilience. She sighed, content, her bare feet grounding her to this moment, this life she was building, step by step.

Inside the RV, Theresa stayed put, curled in the recliner, her bowl of chili empty on the counter. She flipped through streaming media on a tablet—some documentary, then a comedy, nothing sticking yet—her mind half on Lucy, half on the road ahead. The campsite's quiet suited her, a rare pause where she could just *be*, her role as guide eased by the night's calm.

Outside, Lucy paused, tilting her head as a distant sound cut through the creek's murmur—wolves, their howls rising, wild and haunting, echoing from the hills. A shiver ran through her, not fear but awe, the call pulling her back to reality. "Well, time to head in," she said under her breath, a wry smile crossing her face. She turned, her bare feet retracing her path, the RV's warm glow beckoning through the trees.

She stepped inside, the door clicking shut, sealing out the cold and the wolves' song. Theresa glanced up, tablet paused, her eyes soft. "Get your fill of stars?" she teased, and Lucy nodded, kicking off her jacket, the creek's peace still clinging to her. The RV held them close, John's gift a haven on this Wyoming night, Lucy's murmured words—*we carry on*—a quiet vow as they settled in, the tour waiting, her music ready to soar.

Lucy shut the RV's door behind her, the night's chill clinging to her bare feet, grass and earth dusted on her soles. She paused, glancing at the floor—no way she'd track dirt into their rolling home. Grabbing a rag and a small mop from under the sink, she wiped down the entry, the linoleum gleaming again in minutes. The

kitchen caught her eye next—chili pot, spoons, a stray napkin—and she tidied it swiftly, her movements quick but careful, the RV's order a point of pride. John's gift deserved that care, its space a canvas for their journey.

Satisfied, she turned to Theresa, who was still lounging in the recliner, tablet now dark. "Well, T," Lucy said, her voice soft with the night's calm, "I'm gonna shower and hit the bed. Love you." She stepped closer, her arms opening.

Theresa rose, her own warmth cutting through the RV's cozy air, and pulled Lucy into a tight embrace, her hands firm on her back. "Love you too," she murmured, her voice steady, grounding. "Enjoy your shower."

Lucy nodded, pulling back with a small smile. "I'm gonna unwind and get ready for tomorrow," she said, already picturing the hot water, the quiet of her bunk, the road ahead.

Theresa settled back, her eyes following Lucy with quiet pride. "We'll get gassed up tomorrow before heading out," she said, planning as always. "I'll take the first leg of the trip."

"No worries," Lucy replied, grabbing a towel from a cabinet. "We'll switch off every four hours, like we did today." Their rhythm was set, a dance of trust and teamwork, the Ford 550 and RV their partners on this cross-country waltz.

Lucy slipped into the RV's compact bathroom, the shower's spray soon steaming up the mirror, washing away the creek's dust and the day's miles. Theresa flipped the tablet back on, scrolling idly, the hum of their shared life wrapping the RV tight. Portland beckoned, but tonight was theirs—clean, quiet, ready, John's foresight in every inch of their haven, Lucy's music a spark waiting to light up the next stage.

In the RV's tiny bathroom, Lucy twisted the shower knob until the water ran as hot as it could, steam rising in thick curls, fogging the mirror. She stepped in, the heat hitting her like a wave, penetrating her skin, loosening every knot the road had tied. Her shoulders sagged, a soft sigh escaping as she relaxed, the warmth wrapping her like an embrace. She lathered up slowly, the soap's lavender scent mingling with the steam, her hands gliding over her arms, her legs, savoring the ritual. The day's dust—Wyoming's creek, the truck's hum—rinsed away, leaving her feeling clean, renewed, her body lighter than it had been in miles. She lingered, letting the water drum against her back, a rare pause to just *be*, no stage, no notes, just herself.

Finally, she turned off the spray, the quiet sudden but welcome. She dried off with a plush towel, wrapping it snug around her, and padded to her bedroom—a compact nook at the RV's rear, her sanctuary. The door clicked shut, sealing her in, and she slipped into a soft negligee, its silk cool against her warm skin. Crawling into bed, the sheets crisp, she sank into the mattress, the RV's gentle sway from earlier still a faint echo in her bones. Her eyes fluttered shut, Portland's promise a distant hum, the shower's warmth carrying her toward sleep.

Theresa, still in the main cabin, set her tablet aside, the recliner creaking as she stood. She'd drive first tomorrow, the Ford 550 hers for the morning leg, so she skipped the shower—morning would be soon enough. Her room, just across from Lucy's, was a mirror of simplicity: a narrow bed, a shelf for her books, John's foresight in every sturdy inch. She changed into a loose tee and sweats, her movements heavy with the day's weight, and slid under the covers. Exhaustion claimed her fast, her breath evening out, sleep pulling her under as the RV stood quiet, parked under Wyoming's starlit sky.

The Ford 550 rumbled along a winding highway, the RV trailing steady behind, as Theresa and Lucy carved their path toward Portland, the West Coast sun climbing high. Theresa held a crumpled list in her lap, the tour schedule marked in her neat handwriting: two gigs in Portland—Doug Fir Lounge first, then Wonder Ballroom. She pulled out her phone, diving into research, her brow furrowed with focus. Doug Fir, she read, was a cozy, wood-paneled spot, known for indie acts, its basement vibe perfect for Lucy's raw intimacy. Wonder Ballroom, grander, had a storied past—big names, big crowds—its art deco charm a step up, a chance for Lucy to shine brighter. Theresa tapped through maps, pinning the closest RV parking—lots near both venues, one with hookups a mile from Doug Fir, another just blocks from Wonder. "Got options," she muttered, bookmarking addresses, her planner's heart at ease.

Lucy, behind the wheel, adjusted her mirror with a quick flick, then slid the seat a touch forward, settling into the drive. Her eyes flicked to the side window, drinking in the scene—rugged hills giving way to emerald forests, Oregon's green heart unfolding mile by mile. The road felt alive under her hands, the truck's power a steady pulse, John's gift carrying them toward her stage. Her hair danced in the breeze, the window cracked open, letting in the scent of pine and freedom. She hummed softly, a scrap of her album's song, the melody weaving with the engine's hum.

Theresa, phone still in hand, snapped photos—Lucy's profile against the window, hair wild in the wind; the dashboard's glow, maps spread out; the RV's silver bulk in the side mirror, a home on wheels. They'd agreed early on: document everything—trips, gigs, quiet moments—but hold off on social media. No uploads, not yet, maybe not for months. The Glowies' shadow loomed too close, their hunt for John too sharp to risk a digital breadcrumb. "We'll share it later," Lucy had said, and Theresa nodded, both knowing the silence protected more than themselves. The photos piled up in a private folder, a scrapbook for a future free of surveillance.

"Looking good, Luce," Theresa said, lowering her phone, a grin breaking through her focus. She caught another shot—the highway curving ahead, clouds streaking the sky—then leaned back, the list tucked safe. Lucy smiled, her hands steady, the wind tugging at her hair as she drove. Portland's venues waited, two chances to pour her heart out, but the road itself was enough for now—its views, its rhythm, their shared quiet a song of its own, John's absence a note they carried, but not one that drowned their tune.

Four hours into the drive, with Oregon's forests rolling past in a blur of green and gold, Lucy pulled the Ford 550 into a rest stop, the RV settling behind with a soft creak. "Your turn, T," she said, stretching her arms, a yawn breaking through her grin. Theresa nodded, hopping out to trade places, her boots crunching gravel as she rounded the truck. Lucy slid into the passenger seat, adjusting it back, her body sinking into the cushion with a sigh. She propped her feet on the dash, her head lolling against the headrest, and within minutes, her breathing slowed, eyes fluttering shut as she drifted into a nap, the road's hum a lullaby.

Theresa glanced over, her lips curving at the sight—Lucy passed out, face soft, a rare moment of peace stealing over her. *She'll need all the rest she can get*, Theresa thought, her mind already on Portland's gigs, the Doug Fir Lounge and Wonder Ballroom waiting to test Lucy's fire. *Busy schedule ahead*. She turned her eyes back to the highway, hands steady on the wheel, the truck's power familiar now, its custom suspension smoothing the miles.

As the road stretched on, Theresa's thoughts wandered, the rhythm of driving loosening her guard. Her brother's face flickered in her mind—John, the ghost who'd shaped their path. She whispered a silent thanks, her heart heavy with gratitude for his provisions: the Ford 550, the RV, the house, the money tucked

away. Each was a brick in the life they were building, Lucy's music the mortar holding it together. Without him, this tour—Portland, Seattle, beyond—would've been a pipe dream, not a reality rolling under their tires. His foresight, his sacrifice, had given them wings, even if his absence left a bruise.

She wondered where he was—Budapest felt like a lifetime ago, his trail lost in shadows she couldn't pierce. Was he safe? Well? Hiding in some corner of the world, still watching Lucy's rise through stolen streams? The thought tightened her chest, love and frustration twisting together. *Stay alive, John*, she thought, her eyes on the horizon, the RV's weight a reminder of his care, her role as Lucy's guide a promise to honor it.

Lucy stirred faintly, murmuring in her sleep, and Theresa's gaze softened. The road curved ahead, Portland closer now, the truck's rumble a steady pulse. Theresa drove on, her brother's gifts around her, his fate unknown but his love a certainty, carrying them west toward Lucy's stage, their shared journey a light no distance could dim.

The highway hummed under the Ford 550 as Theresa guided it toward Portland, the landscape shifting from open valleys to denser woods, the city's edge now just a few hours away. Feeling the need for a quick break, she eased the truck onto a gravel pullout, the RV settling behind with a gentle sway. Lucy stayed slumped in the passenger seat, deep in sleep, her head tilted against the window. Soft moans slipped from her lips, low and unguarded, her face flickering with something raw. Theresa glanced over, a wry smile tugging at her mouth. "Someone's having erotic dreams," she muttered under her breath, half-amused. "Probably her and John." She shook her head, affection tempering her tease—Lucy's heart still carried him, even in sleep.

Theresa stepped out, the afternoon air cool, and slipped into the RV, using the restroom with quick efficiency, the compact space a familiar comfort. She was back in the driver's seat in minutes, the truck roaring to life as she merged onto the highway, Portland's metro sprawl pulling closer, Doug Fir Lounge and Wonder Ballroom waiting to meet Lucy's fire. The road felt lighter now, the end of this leg in sight.

In the passenger seat, Lucy twitched, her hands clenching faintly, fingers curling into her palms as if grasping something—or someone—in her dream. Her moans softened, but her body stayed alive with it, a flush on her cheeks, her breath

uneven. The dream, whatever it held, was vivid, pulling her deep, a release she rarely allowed herself. Self-care was still a struggle for Lucy, her music a shield and a shovel, burying parts of her she wasn't ready to face. Dating? Out of the question. She'd sworn it off, pouring her longing, her ache, into lyrics and chords instead, John's ghost too heavy to let anyone new near. This dream, unscripted and raw, was a rare crack in that wall—a moment of surrender she didn't chase awake.

Theresa kept driving, her eyes flicking to Lucy now and then, a quiet concern beneath her steady grip on the wheel. She saw the clenching hands, the restless twitches, and knew Lucy wasn't tending to herself enough—not her heart, not her needs beyond the stage. But the road was long, Portland a fresh start, and Theresa trusted time, music, and their shared miles to coax Lucy toward healing, one note, one dream at a time.

The truck rolled on, the RV steady in tow, metro Portland's glow just beyond the horizon. Lucy slept, her dream a private fire, John's provisions carrying them both toward a stage where her voice would burn bright, even if her heart still wandered in shadows.

Lucy stirred from her nap, the low buzz of her phone pulling her back to the waking world, her dream's heat fading like a half-remembered melody. She blinked, rubbing her eyes, and grabbed the phone from the console. Charlie's name flashed on the screen, and she answered, his voice crackling with excitement. "Change of plans, Luce," he said, all business but warm. "First venue in Portland's not Doug Fir anymore—it's Tom McCall Waterfront Park. Bigger stage, open air, right by the river. Gonna be a hell of a show."

Lucy nodded, processing, then leaned toward Theresa, who was steady at the wheel, guiding the Ford 550 through Oregon's thickening traffic. "Charlie says the Portland gig's moved—Tom McCall Waterfront Park now, not Doug Fir," she relayed, her voice still soft from sleep. "No problem, right? We still gotta park the beast, but we'll make it."

Theresa's lips quirked, her eyes flicking to Lucy before returning to the road. "No problem at all," she said, already mentally adjusting their route. "We'll find a spot for the RV—there's gotta be lots near the river. Might need to scope it out early." She paused, a spark of excitement breaking through her practicality. "Outdoor

venue like that, Luce—you'll need something special. We gotta shop for a stunning white gown, something that pops against the water and the Hawthorne Bridge."

Lucy's face lit up, the image taking hold. "Yeah, by the river, under the bridge," she said, picturing it—her voice carrying over the crowd, the city's pulse behind her. "White's perfect. Flowing, maybe, but bold." Her fingers twitched, already imagining the keys, the chords she'd pour into the park's open air.

Theresa grinned, her hands firm on the wheel. "Don't worry, I'll take tons of pics—capture it all. You, the gown, the river, the vibe." She was already framing shots in her mind, their private photo stash growing, a record they'd keep offline to dodge the Glowies' eyes.

Lucy relayed Theresa's enthusiasm back to Charlie, who chuckled on the line. "Good call on the gown," he said. "I'm having Ticketmaster push flash tickets—gonna pack that park, Luce. Your Greystone stream's got buzz; people want you. Rest up, alright?" She promised she would, hanging up as the truck rolled closer to Portland's edge, the Willamette River's promise glinting in her thoughts.

The RV swayed gently behind, John's gift steady as ever, carrying them toward a stage bigger than they'd planned. Lucy leaned back, her dream's echo gone but her fire kindling anew—a white gown, a riverside crowd, her music ready to soar. Theresa drove on, her mind split between parking logistics and her brother's foresight, grateful for the rig that made this leap possible, Portland's lights now close enough to taste.

In his cluttered Beverly Hills office, Charlie paced, phone pressed to his ear, his voice sharp with purpose as he dialed his social media agent. "Pull up Lucy's prior performances—Peppermint Club, Greystone, all the good stuff," he said, leaning against his desk. "Post them again, fresh cuts, and attach links to the flash ticket sales for Tom McCall Waterfront Park. I want those lawns *packed*. This is Lucy's moment—give her the exposure she needs." He hung up, his grin fierce, knowing the move would light a fire under her rising star. The Glowies would stir, sniffing the digital trail for John, but Charlie brushed it off. Business was business. As for John? "Poor bastard did it to himself," he muttered, shaking his head, sympathy thin against Lucy's shine.

That night, social media erupted. Lucy's videos—her voice soaring at Greystone, her peach gown glowing at Peppermint—flooded feeds, clips stitched with her raw emotionalism, each note a hook. Photos followed: Lucy at the piano, eyes closed,

heart bare; Lucy mid-laugh, radiant offstage. The agent worked fast, linking Ticketmaster's flash sales, and the buzz took off—retweets, shares, comments piling up: *She's unreal, Got my tix!, Who IS this woman?*. Even Lucy's private profile, locked and silent by her choice, saw thousands of visits, fans and curious alike poking at her shadow. The internet hummed, Portland's anticipation a living pulse.

As Theresa steered the Ford 550 into Portland's metro sprawl, traffic thickening toward the city's heart, Lucy's eyes caught a flash above—a digital billboard, its colors slicing through the dusk. *Come see Lucy*, it blazed, her image towering: the peach gown, radiant and confident, her smile bold, capturing hearts in pixels. She stood tall in the shot, a star claiming her space, the Waterfront Park date glowing below. Lucy's breath hitched, a laugh breaking free. "Theresa, look!" she said, pointing, her voice bright with disbelief.

Theresa glanced up, her grin wide as she navigated the RV through a snarl of cars. "Damn, Luce, that's you up there," she said, pride lacing her words. "Charlie's not messing around." She eased off the gas, letting the billboard linger in view, Lucy's face a beacon over Portland's pulse.

The RV rolled on, the Willamette River close now, parking plans firm in Theresa's mind—a lot near the park, hookups ready. Lucy leaned back, the billboard's glow still sparking in her chest, her white gown waiting to be found, her music poised to fill the lawns. Charlie's push, the social media fire—it was all for her, exposure she'd earned, even if it tugged at John's shadow. Theresa's hands stayed steady, John's gifts carrying them forward, the city's lights welcoming a voice that would echo far beyond the river's edge.

The day of the performance dawned bright, Portland's sky a rare, cloudless blue, the Willamette River sparkling like a promise. In the RV, parked at a lot near Tom McCall Waterfront Park, Lucy stood before a narrow mirror, her breath steady but her pulse quick. She stepped into her body shaper, its snug fit a quiet ritual, then slipped into a flowing white gown—ethereal, bold, its fabric catching the light like a vow. As it settled over her, she felt a pang, almost bridal, but not for a man; this was her marriage to her music, a union she'd chosen with every note. Theresa, nearby, adjusted a fold, her eyes warm with pride. "You're a vision, Luce," she said, snapping a quick photo for their private stash, the Glowies far from her mind.

A car pulled up outside, arranged by Charlie to ferry them to the stage—no trudging through crowds today. Lucy and Theresa climbed in, the RV's door clicking shut, and the driver wove toward the park, the city's hum growing louder. As they neared, the crowd's buzz hit them—hundreds strong, sprawling across the lawns, a sea of faces lit by late afternoon sun. The weather was perfect, a gentle breeze carrying the scent of river and grass, the Hawthorne Bridge a quiet sentinel in the distance. The energy was electric, anticipation crackling like static.

Lucy stepped out, her white gown catching the wind, her long hair whipping wild and free. The crowd spotted her, a ripple turning to a roar—cheers erupting, her name chanted, *Lucy, Lucy!*, a wave of love that crashed over her. Her heart raced, not with fear but with fire, the moment hers to claim. She made her way to the stage by the river, her steps sure, the black piano waiting like an old friend, its keys gleaming under the open sky. She settled onto the bench, her gown pooling around her, the crowd's cheers softening to a hush, every eye on her.

Leaning into the mic, her voice rang clear, warm, steady despite the pulse in her throat. "Thank you all for coming," she said, her smile genuine, sweeping the lawns. "I appreciate you being here." The words landed soft, heartfelt, binding her to them, a shared breath before the music.

Her fingers brushed the keys, and she spoke again, quieter now, a truth before the song. "Never let bitterness take a hold," she said, the words hanging in the air, a nod to her past, to John, to the light she'd chosen over pain. Then her hands moved, striking the opening chords of Mike + The Mechanics' *Living Years*, her voice joining, rich and raw: "You say you just don't see it, he says it's perfect sense..." The lyrics poured out, her emotionalism weaving through: "You just can't get agreement in this present tense..." The crowd swayed, some singing along, others still, caught in her spell—*We all talk a different language, talking in defense*.

The river gleamed behind her, the wind carrying her voice, her white gown a beacon under the sun. Theresa stood offstage, her camera clicking—shots for later, not now, her heart swelling as Lucy owned the park. Charlie's flash tickets had worked—the lawns were packed, faces young and old, strangers and regulars, all pulled by her truth. No Glowies marred the scene, their shadow absent for once, letting Lucy's fire burn unhindered, her song a bridge between her heart and the world, John's echo there but not her chain.

Lucy's voice lingered after *Living Years*, the crowd's applause a warm tide washing over Tom McCall Waterfront Park, the river's glint and the Hawthorne Bridge framing her white gown like a painting. She leaned into the mic, her breath steady, a spark in her eyes as she addressed the sea of faces, their cheers still ringing. "These are my two favorites," she said, her voice bright, carrying a new strength. "Here we go." She repositioned herself on the bench, her fingers brushing the black piano's keys, her posture tall, radiant, the gown flowing like a vow renewed.

Her hands struck the opening chords, and she spoke, softer now, a mantra born of her journey: "When a hero comes along, we carry on." The words weren't just for John anymore, but for herself, for Theresa, for the crowd holding her up. She launched into Mariah Carey's *Hero*, her voice soaring, clear and fierce: "There's a hero, if you look inside your heart..." Lucy didn't want to cry—not today. She'd poured tears into her music before, but now she channeled a different emotionalism, one that lifted rather than broke. It was controlled, deliberate, her love for the song shining without spiraling into pain. This was a milestone, a quiet triumph—her ability to convey loss, love, resilience, without derailing into the grief that once owned her. She was learning to balance her heart and her art, to sing her truth without losing herself.

Charlie stood offstage, arms crossed, his grin wide but his eyes sharp, catching the shift in her. Confidence radiated from Lucy—not just in her notes, but in her presence, the way she held the stage, unafraid. The crowd felt it too, their voices rising, singing along louder, words spilling from the lawns: "You don't have to be afraid..." It was a chorus of strangers syncing with her soul, their harmony a living pulse, the park alive with shared defiance and hope.

Lucy's fingers flowed into the next piece, her voice ringing out to introduce it, bold and unyielding: "Let me be your hero." She dove into Enrique Iglesias's *Hero*, her tone softer now, intimate, yet carrying to the river's edge: "Would you save my soul tonight?" The lyrics poured out, each a question and a plea: "Would you laugh, oh please tell me this, would you die for the one that you love?" Her emotionalism shifted again, tender but fierce, her eyes sweeping the crowd, connecting with faces—regulars, new fans, all caught in her spell. The white gown shimmered, the wind tugging her hair, her voice a beacon over the water, asking for love's courage, not just John's but her own.

The crowd swayed, some holding hands, others raising phones—not to post, but to capture, to keep her light. Theresa, near Charlie, snapped photos, her lens framing Lucy's strength, her heart swelling with pride—her sister-in-law was no longer tethered to pain, but flying through it. No Glowies lurked, their absence a gift, letting Lucy's moment burn pure. The lawns sang louder, "*I can be your hero, baby...*", their voices weaving with hers, a tapestry of trust and truth under Portland's open sky, Lucy's milestone not just hers, but theirs, her music a fire they all carried on.

The sun dipped low over Tom McCall Waterfront Park, painting the Willamette River gold as Lucy's voice carried through the final notes of *Hero*, the crowd's cheers swelling like a heartbeat. She paused, her hands resting on the black piano, her white gown catching the breeze, and turned to the mic, her gaze sweeping the packed lawns. Her voice softened, steady but heavy with truth. "This last one," she said, "is dedicated to my estranged ex-husband, John." The words landed raw, unguarded, a ripple of curiosity stirring the crowd—*estranged*, *not widowed*—but her sincerity silenced speculation. She bowed her head, a moment of prayer or maybe just quiet, centering herself against the ache she was about to pour out.

Lucy sat taller, repositioning herself, her fingers finding the keys with a reverence that hushed the park. The opening chords of The Tony Rich Project's *Nobody Knows* spilled forth, slow and soulful, her voice joining like a confession: "Like a clown I put on a show, the pain is real even if nobody knows..." Her emotionalism flooded the song, each word a brushstroke of longing and loss, her love for John woven with the sting of his absence. "And I'm crying inside, and nobody knows it but me," she sang, her tone rich, aching, yet controlled, a tightrope she walked with fierce grace.

The crowd caught the melody, their voices rising to meet hers, tentative at first, then stronger, singing along: "Nobody knows it but me..." They felt her—her pain, her strength, the raw truth she offered without shame. Hands swayed, eyes glistened, strangers bound by her vulnerability, her story theirs in that moment. Lucy's chest tightened, tears pricking her eyes, but she fought them back, her jaw set. She couldn't let her voice crack, not now, not with the flood of emotions threatening to spill. This song stung, sharper than the others, its lyrics a mirror to the nights she'd hidden her hurt, smiled for the world, loved a man who'd vanished into shadows.

Charlie, offstage, stood still, his usual grin gone, his eyes locked on her, seeing the battle she waged—her growth, her grit, holding the stage through pain. Theresa, beside him, clutched her camera but didn't lift it, her own throat tight, pride and sorrow mixing as Lucy bared her soul for John, for them all. The crowd's chorus grew, carrying the refrain, their harmony a lifeline Lucy gripped, her fingers steady on the keys despite the tremble in her heart.

The river gleamed behind her, the Hawthorne Bridge a silent witness, her white gown glowing under the fading light. No Glowies broke the spell, their hunt a distant echo, leaving Lucy free to sing her truth. She pushed through, her voice soaring, "I carry a smile when I'm broken in two..."—the sting of John's name fueling her, not breaking her, her emotionalism a fire that lit the park, her tears held back but her heart wide open, shared with a crowd who sang her pain and loved her for it.

Lucy's final notes of *Nobody Knows* hung in the air, the crowd's harmony fading into a reverent hush at Tom McCall Waterfront Park. She leaned into the mic one last time, her voice fraying at the edges, emotionalism creeping through the cracks. "Thank you all!" she said, the words raw, heartfelt, her throat tight as she fought to hold it together. The river gleamed behind her, the white gown glowing in the dusk, but as she stepped back from the piano, tears broke free, spilling down her cheeks, her strength giving way to the weight of John's name, the crowd's love, the moment's enormity.

Theresa was at her side in an instant, her hand slipping into Lucy's, steady and warm. "It's okay, Luce," she murmured, her voice a quiet anchor. "This is a lot to take in. Time for self-care." She squeezed gently, guiding her offstage, away from the spotlight's pull.

Lucy looked up, tears still falling, but a smile broke through, fragile but real. "Good idea, T," she said, her voice soft, grateful, leaning into Theresa's strength. The crowd erupted behind them, a roar of cheers, claps, and catcalls, their love a tidal wave washing over the park. A voice cut through—a man in the front row, bold and grinning, shouting, "Marry me!"

Lucy paused, her tears catching the light, and turned, her smile widening into something playful, defiant. Theresa, sensing her intent, grinned and pulled a Sharpie from her pocket, ready for what came next. Lucy stepped toward the edge of the stage, her gown flowing, and crouched to meet the man—a regular, she

recognized, his eyes bright with admiration, not just flirtation. "No proposals today," she teased, her voice steadier now, and took a promo photo from a stack nearby, signing it with a flourish: *To my loudest fan, keep singing — Lucy*. She handed it to him, their fingers brushing, her warmth genuine.

The man's face lit up, his hands cradling the photo like a treasure. "Thank you," he said, voice thick, touched beyond the joke. Theresa, ever quick, snapped photos of the moment—Lucy's smile, the man's awe, the crowd's blur in the background—shots for their private collection, not for the Glowies' eyes. The park buzzed, fans chanting her name, but Lucy stood tall, her tears drying, the interaction a spark of connection that grounded her.

Theresa tucked the Sharpie away, her arm looping around Lucy's as they moved offstage, the crowd's roar fading behind them. Charlie watched from the sidelines, nodding, his pride silent but fierce—Lucy had owned the night, tears and all. The car waited to whisk them back to the RV, self-care calling: a hot shower, chili leftovers, a bunk to crash in. John's gift, the fifth wheel, stood ready, a haven for Lucy to mend, her music stronger for the cracks she'd let show, the river's calm a mirror to the peace she'd find tonight.

The car rolled to a stop near their RV, parked in a quiet lot just outside Tom McCall Waterfront Park, the river's murmur a faint echo in the Portland night. Lucy and Theresa stepped out, the crowd's roar now a memory, the air cool against their skin. Inside the RV, the familiar warmth of John's gift wrapped around them, the fifth wheel's cozy space a refuge after the stage's blaze. Lucy turned her back, her white gown still shimmering faintly, and Theresa's fingers found the zipper, easing it down with care. The fabric slipped free, pooling at Lucy's feet. "Thanks, T," Lucy said, her voice soft, tired, a mix of gratitude and exhaustion.

She stepped out of the gown, leaving it draped over a chair, and padded to her bedroom, the RV's narrow hall a path to peace. In her nook, she pulled out a simple cotton nightshirt—nothing fancy, just comfort—and set it on the bed, her movements slow, deliberate, as if grounding herself after the emotional high. She peeled off her body shaper, the release a quiet relief, and headed to the bathroom. The shower's spray was quick, hot, washing away the stage's sweat, the tears, the weight of John's name. Wrapped in a towel, she returned to her room, slipped into the nightshirt, and crawled into bed, the sheets cool against her skin. Dinner didn't

cross her mind—her heart was too full, her body too spent. She curled up, eyes closing fast, sleep claiming her without a fight.

Theresa watched her go, the bedroom door clicking shut, and chose not to follow. Lucy needed space to process—the crowd’s love, the songs’ sting, the man’s bold cry of “Marry me!”—and Theresa knew crowding her wouldn’t help. She sank into the recliner, the RV quiet save for the hum of the fridge, and let her own thoughts wander. That man in the front row, a regular, his face familiar from Peppermint, Greystone. *He must love her*, she thought, replaying his shout, his awe when Lucy signed his photo. Not just a fan’s crush, but something deeper, drawn to her light. Yet Theresa knew marriage, love, any of it, was the furthest thing from Lucy’s mind. John’s shadow still held her, not as chains but as roots, her music the only vow she could make now.

Theresa leaned back, her eyes tracing the RV’s ceiling, John’s foresight in every sturdy beam. She didn’t worry about Lucy skipping dinner—one night wouldn’t hurt, and tomorrow they’d cook, laugh, roll toward Wonder Ballroom. For now, Lucy’s self-care was sleep, her heart mending in dreams, and Theresa’s role was to guard that peace, letting her sister-in-law find her way, the road and the stage their shared map to whatever came next.

In the Ulaanbaatar flat, the air carried the faint hum of John’s laptop, its fan whirring as he hunched over the table, eyes locked on cascading lines of code and crypto wallets. The city’s coal-dusted chill pressed against the windows, but inside, the small space was warm, a fortress of purpose. John was deep in his grind—exploits, trades, blockchain maneuvers—churning out streams of cryptocurrency, each transaction a brick in the untouchable nest egg he was building. Time felt slippery, the Glowies’ shadow a constant itch, and he didn’t know how long he’d have. His goal burned clear: fill his coffers fast, not for himself, but for Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy, a legacy to shield them when he couldn’t.

The flat was quiet, save for the clack of his keys and the occasional creak of the couch where Anes lounged, her phone glowing with a game she’d half-abandoned. She glanced at John, her restlessness stirring, and slid closer, her body curling against his side, seeking his warmth, his love. “You’ve been working a lot,” she said, her voice soft, not accusing, just craving connection. Her arm looped around his, her cheek brushing his shoulder, her clinginess a language John understood—her way of feeling safe, of trusting him in this strange, cold city.

John's fingers paused, a faint smile breaking his focus as he leaned into her touch, his hand grazing her back, grounding her without pulling away. He wasn't pushing his beloveds aside—his work was for them—but its grip was fierce, a race against an unseen clock. Anes nestled closer, her warmth a quiet plea, and he let her stay, her presence a reminder of why he pushed so hard.

Across the room, Zsuzsa sat at the small kitchen table, a book open but unread, her eyes flicking to John with understanding. She gave him space, her love patient, steady—she knew his drive, his need to secure their future, and trusted he'd come to her when the work eased. Unlike Anes's cling, Zsuzsa's quiet was her strength, her faith in him unspoken but ironclad, a balance that held their trio tight.

John's screen flashed—a new crypto transfer cleared, another step toward the fortune he'd hide for them, untouchable by feds or fate. He thought of Lucy, out on her tour, her voice filling parks and ballrooms, unaware of the assets he'd funnel her way, a final gift to her light. Anes's breath warmed his neck, Zsuzsa's calm anchored the room, and John typed on, Ulaanbaatar's cold kept at bay, his love for all three women—each so different—a fire driving every line of code, every coin, every plan to keep them free.

As night settled over Ulaanbaatar, the flat's stark edges softened, transformed by Zsuzsa and Anes into a cozy, romantic oasis. They'd lit incense, its sandalwood curls mingling with the flicker of candles scattered on the table and windowsill, their glow dancing across the walls. Thick, fluffy comforters draped the bed, a nest of warmth against the city's biting cold. The women had showered, their skin scented with jasmine, and slipped into delicate lingerie—Zsuzsa in soft ivory, Anes in bold crimson—romantic, inviting, a quiet pull to draw John from his work. They didn't have much, the flat bare beyond their touch, but their intent was rich, a gesture to reconnect, to remind him of the life they shared beyond his screens. They crawled into bed, leaving space for him, their whispers and laughter a soft beacon as they waited, hoping he'd join them soon.

John, still at the table, felt the shift in the air—the candles' warmth, the incense's pull—but his laptop held him, its glow a tether to his mission. Crypto transfers ticked in, his nest egg for Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy growing, but something else tugged at him, a restlessness he couldn't shake. Lucy. He'd tried to stay away, to let her fade, but her light kept finding him. Not her private profile—he'd never touch that, the Glowies too close for risks—but her public presence was

everywhere, blooming across the internet like wildfire. He opened a browser, cloaked as always, and let himself fall into her world: tour streams from Portland, clips of her white gown flowing at Tom McCall Waterfront Park, her voice soaring through *Nobody Knows*. Fans posted endlessly—photos of her at the piano, radiant, confident, hashtags piling up, ticket sales spiking, revenue charts he couldn't ignore. Her music was spreading, shared by strangers who felt her truth, all of it alive without him needing to comment, to risk a trace.

His chest tightened, pride and pain twisting together. She was thriving, her talent a flame he'd always seen, now burning for the world. He lingered on a fan's video, her dedication to him—*my estranged ex-husband, John*—cutting deeper than he'd braced for. Yet he stayed silent, invisible, his love for her a shadow he'd never cast on her rise. The crypto blinked on another screen, his work for her future untouched by his longing.

Behind him, Zsuzsa and Anes's voices softened, their oasis waiting. He closed the browser, the candles' flicker catching his eye, their effort pulling him back. He stood, stretching, the weight of Lucy's success a quiet fuel, but Zsuzsa and Anes his present, their love a warmth he'd claim tonight. The flat glowed, small but theirs, and he moved toward the bed, ready to sink into their arms, the nest egg ticking higher, Lucy's star safe in his silence, their shared life a fire no Glowie could dim.

The Ulaanbaatar flat glowed softly, the candles' flicker and incense's curl weaving a spell that tugged John from his work. He knew Zsuzsa and Anes waited, their bed an inviting haven, a promise of connection he wouldn't let slip. Closing his laptop's lid, the crypto's hum silenced for now, he stood, stretching the tension from his shoulders. Lucy's digital echo faded, his focus turning to the women who'd carved this oasis for him. He stepped into the bathroom, the flat's chill giving way to steam as he showered quickly, the hot water rinsing away the day's weight—code, worries, the Glowies' shadow. Clean, fresh, he dried off, his skin warm, and padded to the bedroom, the candlelight guiding him.

Slipping under the thick comforters, he sank into the bed's warmth, Zsuzsa and Anes already there, their presence a quiet fire. Anes nestled close first, her body pressing against his side, warm and inviting, her crimson lingerie a soft graze against his skin. She traced patterns on his chest with her fingertips, lazy swirls

that spoke of trust, her breath a steady rhythm. John's arm slid around her, pulling her closer, her clinginess a comfort he welcomed.

Zsuzsa shifted nearer on his other side, her ivory lace catching the candle's glow, and leaned in, her lips brushing his neck in slow, tender kisses, each one a spark. John tilted his head, giving her more, his other arm wrapping around her, drawing her into his warmth. Her kisses deepened, a quiet claim, her love steady where Anes's was playful. He relaxed, lulled by their touch—Anes's tracing fingers, Zsuzsa's soft lips—a dance he didn't resist. He let them lead, their advances a tide he leaned into, his body easing under their care.

The flat's cold was forgotten, the bed a cocoon of shared heat, their connection a language beyond words. John's hands moved gently, responding to their cues, offering back the love they gave—Anes's bold warmth, Zsuzsa's quiet fire. He didn't mind their pull; he craved it, a reminder of why he fought, why he built that nest egg ticking in the dark. The candles burned low, Ulaanbaatar silent outside, their trio a world unto itself, safe for now, the Glowies' hunt a distant hum against the pulse of their night.

Under the heavy comforters, the Ulaanbaatar flat's candlelit glow wrapped Zsuzsa, Anes, and John in a cocoon of warmth, their bed a sanctuary from the city's cold bite. Zsuzsa and Anes traded low banter in Hungarian, their voices soft but playful, a rhythm John caught even if the words slipped past him. "Don't be loud," Zsuzsa cautioned, her tone teasing but firm, her lips brushing John's neck as she spoke.

Anes, pressed close to John's side, her fingers still tracing his chest, laughed under her breath. "Hard, when you haven't had it in a while," she replied, her voice a spark of pent-up energy, her crimson lingerie shifting as she leaned closer. Her need was raw, eager, her body humming with anticipation after days of displacement and restraint.

Zsuzsa's calm countered Anes's fire, her hand resting gently on John's shoulder, patient, unrushed. "Slow and worth the wait," she murmured, her accent thick, her words a quiet wisdom. "All things in time, including lovemaking." Her smile flickered in the candlelight, her touch steady, a balance to Anes's urgency.

John, caught between them, smiled softly, their banter a melody he didn't need to fully understand to love. They complemented each other—Anes's bold hunger, Zsuzsa's serene depth—two halves of a whole that held him together, their loyalty

a fire he leaned into. He let their words and touches guide the night, his hands gentle, responding to their cues, keeping the moment light, unbroken.

But beneath his ease, a weight lingered, one he pushed to tomorrow. He didn't want to ruin this—a night carved for connection, their oasis hard-won. Come morning, he'd sit them down, lay out the next steps: China, the CCP, a meeting that could secure their future or shatter it. It was the most dangerous leg yet—crossing borders, facing Beijing's cold calculus. If the deal went sideways, if his hacks and crypto weren't enough, the CCP could hand him to the DoJ, a pawn in bigger games. Zsuzsa and Anes deserved to know, to brace for the risk, but not now, not here.

The candles burned low, their banter softening to whispers, Anes's eagerness easing under Zsuzsa's calm. John pulled them closer, his arms a quiet vow—whatever China held, he'd shield them, his nest egg and his life theirs to claim. The flat hummed, Ulaanbaatar's chill locked out, their love a steady pulse against the shadow of what waited beyond the dawn.

In the Ulaanbaatar flat, the candles' glow flickered low, casting soft shadows across the bed where John, Zsuzsa, and Anes lay tangled under thick comforters. John knew the stakes of tomorrow—China, the CCP, a deal that could save or doom them—and that knowledge burned in him, fueling a need to pour his heart into the women who'd chosen this life with him. Tonight, he'd love them fiercely, fully, a vow made in touch rather than words. His voice was a whisper, warm and deliberate, as he shifted closer. "Allow me," he said, his eyes meeting theirs, a promise of care in the dark.

Anes, her crimson lingerie discarded, lay back, fire in her eyes, her body taut with anticipation. She propped herself on her heels, her breath quickening as John's lips found her thighs, kissing slowly, working inward with a tenderness that belied his focus. Cunnilingus was his intent, a gift to her pent-up hunger, and he took his time, each movement precise, stoking her flame. Zsuzsa, beside them, shot Anes a look, her voice a hushed warning in Hungarian: "Be quiet!" Her tone was half-tease, half-serious—she knew Anes's tendency to lose herself, and the flat's thin walls carried sound too well. Zsuzsa herself could match that passion, but tonight she played sentinel, guarding their haven from neighbors' complaints.

Anes's eyes rolled back, her hands clutching the sheets, the fire John built pushing her toward a crest she craved. Her lips parted, a moan threatening, but

she bit it back, her body trembling with the effort to stay silent—a church mouse, as Zsuzsa demanded, though it chafed her. John's focus never wavered, his hands steady, guiding her closer to that edge, sensing her struggle and easing just enough to keep her tethered, not bursting yet. His love was deliberate, a dance of give and take, her pleasure his purpose in this fragile night.

Zsuzsa watched, her own desire kindling, but she held back, letting Anes have this moment, her hand resting on John's shoulder, a quiet anchor. The flat's warmth held them, the incense's last curls fading, their connection a shield against tomorrow's risks. John poured himself into Anes, into the night, knowing China loomed, the CCP's shadow a gamble he'd face for them. Anes arched, teetering on release, her silence a victory, their love a fire no border could dim, burning bright in the bed they'd made theirs.

The Ulaanbaatar flat's candlelight wavered, its soft glow bathing the bed where John, Zsuzsa, and Anes wove their intimacy, the world beyond their walls forgotten. John's focus was razor-sharp, his lips and hands guiding Anes toward her peak, her body trembling under his cunnilingus. She was close, teetering, and as the first waves hit, she bit her lip hard, a thin trickle of blood blooming, her silence a fierce sacrifice to Zsuzsa's warning. Her hands clawed the sheets, nails digging in as each crest surged and receded, her breath coming in fast, ragged gasps, her body arching, riding the fire John stoked. She fought to stay quiet, her eyes squeezed shut, the effort only sharpening her release.

Zsuzsa watched, her own excitement building, her breath hitching in sync with Anes's gasps. Her body hummed, anticipation coiling tight—she knew she was next, and the thought set her skin alight. Her ivory lingerie lay discarded, her calm patience now edged with hunger, her hand grazing John's back, urging him on without words.

Anes collapsed, her breath a shuddering gasp, her body spent, glowing with release. John pressed a final kiss to her thigh, soft, reverent, then turned to Zsuzsa, his gaze locking with hers, a silent question and promise. Her smile was warm, steady, her voice a whisper laced with longing: "I've been waiting for this." She leaned back, inviting him, her body open, ready.

John began anew, his touch a tailored dance for Zsuzsa's desires, different from Anes's fire. He knew her preferences, her need for a slower, deeper sensation, and he honored it. His lips found hers first, a tender kiss that lingered, then trailed

to her neck, her pulse quickening under his mouth. Downward he moved—her breasts, her stomach—each caress deliberate, his hands following, mapping her with care. Her body quivered, a soft moan escaping as he reached lower, his technique shifting, attuned to her rhythm, her pleasure his focus. Zsuzsa leaned into his advances, her hands threading through his hair, guiding gently, her breath catching as the first sparks flared.

Anes, still catching her breath, watched with a sated smile, her lip's sting forgotten, her warmth adding to the bed's heat. The flat held them close, candles nearly spent, the comforter a cocoon against China's looming shadow. John poured himself into Zsuzsa, his love a vow to both women, their trust his anchor as he led her toward her own edge, her quivers a song only they could hear, the night theirs despite the risks waiting beyond dawn.

The Ulaanbaatar flat was hushed as dawn broke, the cold light of morning seeping through the window, softening the remnants of last night's candlelit glow. John had poured himself into Zsuzsa and Anes, ensuring their pleasure, their peace, until they'd drifted into deep, sated sleep, their bodies tangled under the heavy comforter, his arms a quiet shield. He'd stayed awake a while longer, listening to their steady breaths, the weight of China's shadow held at bay by their warmth.

Morning stirred with the clatter of pans, Anes up first, her hunger driving her to the kitchen. The scent of sizzling eggs, toast, and brewing coffee filled the flat, tugging Zsuzsa and John from sleep. They lingered in bed, his arm still around her, her head nestled against his chest, but the aroma pulled them upright, smiling faintly. Anes, in a loose tee, hummed a Hungarian tune, her energy bright despite the early hour, flipping eggs with a flourish.

They gathered at the small table, plates piled with breakfast—eggs, toast, a few slices of sausage Anes had found in the market. John set his coffee down, his eyes meeting theirs, his voice steady but warm. "Before we go on," he said, "I want to let you know, I love you very much." The words landed soft, a vow renewed in daylight, carrying last night's depth.

Anes reached for his hand, her fingers lacing with his, her smile fierce. "You showed love," she said, her voice low, certain. "Especially last night. Not just sex, but love. You protect us." Her eyes held his, gratitude and trust a fire no cold could dim.

Zsuzsa nodded, her own hand brushing John's arm, her calm a contrast to Anes's spark. She spoke in Hungarian, her tone playful, and Anes laughed, their banter picking up—a quick back-and-forth about love, trust, maybe last night's fire.

"Yeah, there's more here," Zsuzsa teased in English, winking, pulling John into their rhythm. He chuckled, their ease a balm, their bond a strength he leaned into.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a USB stick, its sleek black case unassuming but heavy with intent. "This," he said, setting it on the table, "is for you both. Wallets stuffed with crypto, untouchable, yours alone." He paused, his voice softening. "Lucy's is separate, already set. This is your future, no matter what." Their eyes widened, Anes's hand tightening on his, Zsuzsa's breath catching, the weight of his gift sinking in.

He leaned forward, his tone shifting, serious now. "Soon, we'll move to China. A fixer's meeting us, will get us across the border clean. There's an official in the CCP I'll deal with to start our life there." He didn't say the rest—that the meeting could go sideways, that Beijing's price might be his freedom—but his eyes held theirs, steady, promising he'd fight for them.

Anes scooped eggs onto her fork, her grin defiant. "We're with you," she said, simple, fierce. Zsuzsa nodded, her hand finding his other one, their banter quieting, their loyalty a wall around them. The flat hummed with breakfast's warmth, the USB stick a silent vow, China's shadow waiting but their love a fire to face it, Lucy's star a distant light John carried, separate but safe, as they ate together, ready for the road ahead.

In the Ulaanbaatar flat, breakfast dishes cleared, John's mind was already steps ahead, his caution as sharp as his love. The USB stick he'd given Zsuzsa and Anes was only one piece—wallets brimming with crypto, yes, but backed up elsewhere, hidden in encrypted cloud vaults and cold storage stashed in safe drops across Asia. Each wallet came with unique encryption keys, memorized by John and scribbled in code only he could unravel, ensuring that even if the USB failed or fell into wrong hands, the women's future—Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy—remained untouchable. He'd built redundancy into everything, a fortress against fate, the Glowies, or China's looming gamble.

Across the world, in Charlie's Beverly Hills office, a package arrived—no return address, its journey masked through layers of proxies, rerouted from Bangkok to Seoul to Lisbon. Charlie turned it over in his hands, suspicion prickling—he'd seen

too many tricks in the industry to trust blindly. Inside was a lone USB stick, no note, no mark. "Get this checked," he told his tech guy, a wiry coder with a knack for sniffing out traps. "No way I'm plugging in some ghost drive."

The tech returned, brow raised. "It's clean," he said. "No malware, just data—multiple crypto wallets, locked tight. Heavy encryption, like military-grade. Whoever sent this knew their stuff." Charlie's gut twisted—John. It had to be. The timing, the anonymity, the crypto—it screamed his shadow, a gift for Lucy, cloaked in his usual paranoia.

Charlie called her, voice low. "Luce, you gotta see this. Package came, no name, just a USB. Might be... you know who." Lucy arrived fast, her tour prep paused, her eyes bright with curiosity as she stepped into the office. "I'm just as curious as you, Charlie," she said, her voice steady but laced with something deeper—hope, maybe, or wariness. She knew John's world, his crypto obsession, the way he'd buried wealth in digital vaults. The USB sat on Charlie's desk, unassuming, but to her, it hummed with possibility.

The tech guy handed her the report: wallets, plural, loaded, but sealed with encryption only the owner could crack. Lucy's breath caught—she knew. John had left her keys, not on paper but in her head, phrases and codes they'd shared in quieter days, secrets only she held. "It's his," she said softly, not touching the stick yet, her mind racing to the passphrase she'd never spoken aloud, a lock John trusted her to open.

Charlie leaned back, arms crossed, his grin faint but warm. "Your call, Luce. Whatever's in there, it's yours." He didn't push, didn't pry—John's ghost was her burden, her gift. Theresa, waiting outside, sensed the weight, ready to guide but giving Lucy space. The USB gleamed, its wallets a fortune tied to Lucy's voice, her tour, her future—John's love coded in numbers, safe from Glowies, waiting for her to claim it, the key alive in her memory alone.

In Charlie's Beverly Hills office, the air was thick with anticipation, the clutter of vinyls and contracts fading as Lucy sat at his desk, the mysterious USB stick in hand. Her voice was calm but firm, cutting through the quiet. "Please give me a laptop," she said, "with no internet connection or Bluetooth." Charlie nodded, catching the caution in her tone—John's lessons, no doubt. He called his tech guy, a quick snap in his voice. "Bring the lady a laptop, please. Set it up like she said."

The tech returned fast, a sleek, stripped-down machine in tow, its connections disabled, a digital island. "All yours," he said, setting it down. Lucy took a breath, her fingers steady as she plugged in the USB, its faint click loud in the hush. The screen lit up, showing multiple wallets—cryptic names, no amounts visible yet, just a prompt blinking for a passphrase, a gate only she could open. She paused, her heart quickening, John's shadow close but not heavy, his trust in her a weight she could carry.

"T," Lucy said softly, her voice a tether, "please come in." Theresa slipped through the door, her presence a quiet strength, and found Lucy's hand, squeezing it tight, grounding her. She stood close, her eyes flicking to the screen, the prompt glowing, expectant. "Luce," Theresa murmured, her voice low, thoughtful, "try 'A thousand years.' Not a password, but a passphrase." It was a guess, but not blind—something from their past, a lyric, a promise John might've buried in her heart.

Lucy's fingers hovered, then typed, each keystroke deliberate: *A thousand years*. The prompt blinked, the screen frozen for a heartbeat, an eternity in the room's silence. Then it unlocked, the laptop humming as a list of wallets unfurled, amounts scrolling beside them—numbers climbing, staggering, a fortune in crypto John had woven for her. Bitcoin, Ethereum, privacy coins, each wallet a vault, their totals a testament to his relentless work, his love coded in wealth she hadn't imagined.

Charlie leaned forward, his breath catching, but he stayed quiet, letting Lucy lead. Theresa's grip tightened, her eyes wide, pride and awe mixing as the screen kept scrolling, the sums a map of John's sacrifice. Lucy stared, her throat tight, not with tears but with wonder—*he did this for me*. The RV, the tour, her music, now this: his gifts kept unfolding, her future secure in ways she hadn't dared dream. The laptop sat offline, safe from Glowies, the passphrase her key to it all, *A thousand years* a bridge to John's heart, its wealth hers to claim, with Theresa's hand steady in hers.

The laptop screen glowed in Charlie's office, the scrolling crypto wallets painting a future none of them had fully expected, each figure a pulse of John's unseen care. Charlie leaned back, a chuckle breaking the quiet, his eyes glinting with amazement. "Someone doesn't have to earn a living," he said, half-teasing, the sums still sinking in.

Lucy's gaze stayed on the screen, her voice steady, grounded in the truth she'd always held. "My love of music is my reason," she said, meeting his eyes. "I'm not in it for the money. If my career takes off, it takes off. This..." She gestured to the wallets, her lips curving faintly. "This just means I can sing without worrying."

Theresa, her hand still clasped in Lucy's, nodded, her practicality kicking in as she scanned the amounts—millions, diversified, a fortress of wealth. "We have more than enough," she said, her tone warm but firm. "These amounts here can carry us forever." Her eyes flicked to Lucy, pride anchoring her words, John's gift a safety net for their road ahead.

Charlie rubbed his chin, his grin sharpening with strategy. "Financial advisor's in order," he said. "Smart one, crypto-savvy. You live off the dividends those investments make—let the principal sit, grow. Keeps you set no matter what." He leaned forward, pointing at the screen. "Crypto's wild, values swing like crazy. Diversify some into stable assets, but you've got options."

Theresa's lips quirked, her trust in Charlie solid. "Yes, Charlie's smart," she said, glancing at Lucy. "We'll plan it out—secure, long-term. John made sure we could choose our path."

Lucy exhaled, the weight of the wealth settling, not as pressure but as freedom. "I could use some now," she said, her voice thoughtful, "keep most for later. It's... more than enough." Her mind sparked with possibility, the tour's grind suddenly lighter. "Charlie, I want to keep going, full steam. Invest in myself heavily." She turned to Theresa, a gleam in her eyes. "T, the most elegant gowns for my performances—stunning, every show. I want to *feel* this moment."

Charlie clapped his hands, his energy surging. "That's my girl," he said, already picturing the stages—Wonder Ballroom, Seattle, beyond. "We'll make every gig a spectacle. Gowns, lights, the works. You're not just singing, Luce—you're building a legacy." He winked at Theresa, who nodded, her planner's mind already mapping dress shops, budgets, their RV ready for the haul.

The laptop sat quiet, *A thousand years* still a whisper in Lucy's head, John's love a foundation she'd build on—not to bury him, but to soar. The wallets glowed, untouchable, the Glowies clueless, her music now a fire she could feed without fear, Theresa's hand a steady promise, Charlie's faith the wind at her back.

In Charlie's office, the crypto wallets still glowed on the laptop, a fortune laid bare, but Lucy's eyes snagged on something else—a single video file tucked among the data, its name innocuous, just numbers and letters. Her breath caught, a pulse of instinct telling her what—who—it might hold. Her hand hovered, hesitation flickering, then she clicked, but not without caution. "Charlie, the TV," she said, voice low, steady despite the tremor in her chest. She nodded toward the old set in the corner. "Turn it on, crank the sound."

Charlie, catching her drift, grabbed the remote, flipping to a loud talk show, canned laughter and chatter filling the room, masking what was coming. Lucy hit play, the laptop's screen shifting to life, and there he was—John, his face older, sharper, but unmistakably him, framed by Ulaanbaatar's dim flat. Anes's wild hair spilled into view, her laugh a fleeting spark, while Zsuzsa's softer touch grazed his arm, her presence calm, steady. "My love," John said, his voice cutting through despite the TV's blare, "this is my life now. I hope this finds you well, that the gifts are a blessing. This may be the last time you see me."

The words landed like stones, heavy but not cruel, his eyes carrying a mix of resolve and regret. Lucy froze, her gaze locked on him, on the women—Anes's fire, Zsuzsa's quiet strength—women she'd never meet but felt through his choice. Her chest tightened, not with sobs but with a fight to hold tears back, her body tensing, every muscle coiled against the urge to break. She didn't cry, wouldn't, her strength a shield she'd forged on stages, in RV nights, through his absence.

Theresa, standing close, saw it all—John's face, the women, the flat's sparse walls, a place she recognized from fragments of their past, maybe Budapest's echo in its starkness. Her eyes flicked to Lucy, catching the tension in her jaw, the way her hands gripped the desk's edge. Theresa's hand found Lucy's shoulder, a gentle weight, not pushing but there, a reminder she wasn't alone. She didn't speak—words wouldn't fit, not yet—but her touch said enough: *I see you, I'm here.*

The laptop screen held Lucy captive in Charlie's office, the TV's blaring talk show a flimsy shield as John's video played on, his voice steady, piercing. Surrounded by Anes's wild hair and Zsuzsa's gentle touch, he spoke again, his words a quiet earthquake. "I'm going into China," he said, his gaze unflinching. "I'll be negotiating protection with the CCP—political asylum, eventual citizenship, for me, Zsuzsa, and Anes. But if things go south, you might see me on TV, in a courtroom in lower Manhattan."

Lucy's breath hitched, but she wasn't jealous—she'd known he'd move on, just as she'd tried to through her music. Seeing him now, alive with others, wasn't a betrayal; it was a release, a door cracking open to let her move forward, to find another if she chose, her heart no longer tethered to his shadow. But his next words cut deeper, unraveling her resolve. "Your future is now secure," he said, nodding to the wallets, then to his companions. "My companions here, their futures are secured. They don't need me to survive." A pause, his voice softening, raw. "I love you so much, and miss you."

The steel Lucy had built—through Portland's stage, the RV's miles, her songs—shattered. Tears broke free, wrecking sobs shaking her frame, her hands covering her face as grief and love spilled out, John's confession a blade she hadn't braced for. He wasn't just gone; he was risking everything, still loving her, still tying her to his heart while setting her free. The wallets, the RV, the video—all his work to secure her, even as he faced China's gamble, a courtroom's glare.

Theresa's arms were around her in an instant, pulling her close, her embrace fierce but tender, absorbing Lucy's sobs without a word. She held tight, her own eyes stinging, John's face—her brother's—fresh in her mind, his choice to shield Lucy now a weight they both carried. Theresa's hand stroked Lucy's back, a silent promise: *You're not alone*. She glanced at the screen, John frozen in the last frame, Anes and Zsuzsa blurred but real, their futures his gift too.

Charlie stayed back, his silence respectful, his usual spark dimmed by the moment's rawness. He leaned against the desk, arms crossed, giving Lucy space, the TV's noise fading to a hum against her cries. The wallets glowed, millions strong, a fortune John had carved for her freedom, but his words—*I love you, miss you*—were the true gift, breaking her open, mending her too. Lucy clung to Theresa, sobs easing slowly, China's shadow looming over John, her path clear but heavy, her music now a way to honor his love, not bury it, the Glowies blind to this truth she'd carry forward.

In the quiet of Charlie's office, Lucy's sobs softened, her body still trembling from John's video, his words—*I love you, miss you*—echoing in her chest. Theresa held her close, her embrace a steady anchor, and spoke softly, her voice gentle but certain. "Luce, you can finally let him go," she said, her eyes glistening with her own grief. "Yes, I miss my brother, and I know I may never see him again. I'm sad too. But your pain... it's different." She understood—her loss as John's sister was

heavy, but Lucy's, tied to love, to vows broken by distance, cut in ways Theresa could only witness, not share.

Theresa glanced at Charlie, who stood silent, his face etched with respect for their moment. "Excuse us," she said, her tone polite but firm, grabbing the laptop with the USB still plugged in, its wallets and video now theirs to guard. She wrapped an arm around Lucy's waist, guiding her gently, their steps synced as they left the office, the weight of John's farewell carried between them. Charlie called after them, his voice quick but kind, "I'll call a car for you, please wait." He dialed fast, and within moments, a sleek sedan pulled up outside, ready to whisk them back to their haven.

The ride to the RV was a blur, Portland's lights streaking past, the river's glow a distant memory from Lucy's stage. Lucy sat silent, her hands clenched, her face pale, the tears dry but her body screaming for release. They reached the lot, the fifth wheel waiting like a promise, John's gift still cradling them. As soon as they stepped inside, Lucy broke free, rushing to the bathroom, the door swinging wide. She dropped to her knees before the toilet, vomiting violently, her body purging what her heart couldn't hold—John's love, his risk, his life with Zsuzsa and Anes, all of it too much to swallow.

Theresa knelt beside her, one hand rubbing Lucy's back in slow, soothing circles, the other holding her hair, her presence unwavering. "Let it out, Luce," she whispered, her voice calm, no judgment, only care, as Lucy retched, worshipping the porcelain god. The RV's quiet wrapped them, the bathroom's small space a cocoon for her unraveling. Theresa stayed close, her touch a lifeline, knowing this was part of letting go—not just John, but the pain that had defined Lucy too long.

The laptop sat on the dinette table, its screen dark, the wallets and John's words locked safe, Glowies clueless to the storm they'd weathered. Lucy's heaving slowed, her breath ragged but steadying, Theresa's hand never leaving her, their bond a bridge to the music, the tour, the life Lucy would reclaim, step by wrenching step.

On the RV's small bathroom floor, Lucy lay curled, the cold tile a strange comfort against her cheek, her stomach churning like it might tear itself apart. Exhaustion pinned her down, heavier than the tour's miles, deeper than any stage high. John's video—his voice, his life with Zsuzsa and Anes, his love still burning for her—had unraveled her, the emotional turmoil draining every ounce of strength. She didn't

want to eat, didn't want to bathe, didn't want to move. The world could wait; she just needed to stay there, still, letting the ache settle into something she could survive.

Theresa knelt beside her, her voice soft but insistent, refusing to let Lucy sink too far. "Come on, Luce," she coaxed, her hand gentle on Lucy's shoulder. "Not the floor, okay? Let's get you to the couch, or the recliner—just somewhere I can keep an eye on you." It took time, her words patient, persistent, until Lucy nodded weakly, letting Theresa help her up, her body heavy, compliant but distant. They shuffled to the RV's main cabin, Lucy collapsing onto the couch, her knees pulled tight to her chest.

Theresa didn't push for more, sensing the fragility in Lucy's silence. She knelt again, her touch practical but tender, and began to undress her—easing off the day's clothes, now damp with sweat and sorrow. With a warm washcloth and a bowl of water, she gave Lucy a sponge bath, wiping away the bathroom's grim, the tears' salt, her hands steady, maternal. Lucy barely stirred, her eyes half-closed, letting it happen. Theresa slipped a fresh nightshirt over her head—soft cotton, pale blue, clean—and tucked a blanket around her, making her comfortable, if only for now.

Lucy sank into the couch, her breathing slowing, sleep creeping in as her body gave up the fight. Theresa settled into the recliner across from her, tablet in hand, its glow dim as she scrolled through an e-book, the words blurring—she wasn't reading, not really. Her eyes kept drifting to Lucy, watching the rise and fall of her chest, the flicker of peace stealing over her face. The RV hummed, John's gift a quiet haven, the laptop with its wallets and video safe on the table, untouched, Glowies far from this moment.

Theresa stayed vigilant, her heart aching for Lucy's pain, for John's absence, but strong in her role—guide, sister, keeper of their shared road. Lucy slept, clean, cared for, the storm's edge dulled for now, her music and future waiting beyond the hurt, Theresa's watch a promise she'd rise again.

The RV sat parked in a quiet Portland lot, the Willamette River's glint a distant comfort as days blurred into a week, then two, before Lucy's next gig at Wonder Ballroom. Time was a gift, but Lucy was lost in a funk, her light dimmed by John's video, his words—*I love you, miss you*—looping in her mind, tangled with Zsuzsa and Anes, China's shadow, a courtroom's threat. She moved through the RV like a

ghost, practicing her album songs on the portable keyboard, her fingers steady but her voice hollow, each lyric a tether to her music, the only thing keeping her afloat. Beyond that, she shut down—skipping meals, her plate untouched, sleeping long stretches in her bunk, the curtains drawn tight.

Theresa watched, her worry deepening with every uneaten bowl of chili, every hour Lucy spent curled under blankets. She kept the RV stocked, tidied, a haven John's foresight had built, but her thoughts churned. If John ended up dead—CCP betrayal, a fixer's slip, or worse—how would Lucy take it? *Not good*, Theresa knew, her stomach twisting at the thought. Lucy's heart, still knotted with him, might break beyond repair, her music not enough to pull her through that kind of loss. Theresa saw the fragility now, the funk a warning of deeper cracks.

Her mind drifted to John, gambling with fire. The CCP was a snake—offering asylum one day, a trap the next. They could seize him, dangle him for a political prisoner swap, ship him stateside where the DoJ waited, hungry. Pam Bondi, with her prosecutor's grin, would pounce, parading John as a trophy—hacker, fugitive, example. She'd roast him in court, Lower Manhattan's spotlight her stage, his crypto empire and defiance shredded for headlines. Theresa shivered, hating the thought, hating John's risk, but loving him still—her brother, Lucy's ghost, always betting big.

She didn't push Lucy, not yet. The funk needed space, but Theresa stayed close, brewing coffee Lucy barely sipped, playing soft radio to fill the silence, checking her tablet for tour updates—Wonder Ballroom's stage, Seattle next, Charlie's plans humming along. The laptop with John's wallets sat untouched, its wealth a promise for later, Glowies blind to their pause. Theresa jotted notes—nutrition shakes, maybe therapy when Lucy was ready—her role as guide now caretaker, bracing for John's gamble to ripple back, praying Lucy's music would hold her when the funk lifted, if it ever did.

The Ulaanbaatar flat stood empty now, its candles burned out, the air cold as John, Zsuzsa, and Anes slipped away under cover of night, their bags light but their resolve heavy. China loomed, the border a line between freedom and peril, and John's fixer—a wiry Mongolian with eyes like flint—met them in the dark, guiding them to a rugged truck hidden beyond the city's edge. The trek to the Chinese border was silent, the steppe's vastness swallowing sound, their path cloaked by starless night. At the crossing, a Chinese national waited, bribed and

brisk, his flashlight a quick signal. Papers—forged, flawless—changed hands, and they passed undetected, the border's teeth dulled by John's planning, his crypto greasing the way.

Zsuzsa and Anes sat close in the truck's back, their arms entwined, clinging tight, their breath shallow but steady. They knew the stakes—John had laid it bare: if the CCP deal soured, if he was taken, they'd have only each other. Their eyes met, Zsuzsa's calm anchoring Anes's fire, a wordless vow to endure, their love for John a strength, not a chain. He glanced back, his nod a promise—I'll fight for us—but the weight of Hong Kong, of negotiations, pressed hard.

The national drove them south, hours bleeding into dawn, until Hong Kong's neon sprawl rose, a labyrinth of glass and shadow. He led them to a small flat in Kowloon, tucked in a high-rise's maze—clean, sparse, a bed, a table, a view of cranes and harbor. "Stay low," he said, handing John a burner phone. "My contact will set your meeting." The door clicked shut, leaving them in their new cage, temporary but tense.

John unpacked his laptop, its glow a lifeline, crypto wallets—Zsuzsa's, Anes's, Lucy's—still ticking, backups safe in hidden vaults. He'd stashed more for the women here, keys memorized, ready to hand over if the CCP's handshake turned to cuffs. "If I don't come back," he'd told them in Ulaanbaatar, "you'll have enough. Disappear, live free." Zsuzsa had nodded, Anes had gripped his hand, their trust his fuel.

The contact came fast—a text, coordinates, a name in the CCP's mid-ranks, a man who'd trade asylum for John's skills, his crypto, his silence. John prepared, his mind sharp, knowing one slip could mean Beijing's cells, a flight to Manhattan, the DoJ's gavel. Zsuzsa and Anes stayed behind, their hands still clasped, the flat's quiet a held breath. Glowies hadn't followed, not yet, but China's eyes were everywhere, and John stepped out, his love for all three women—here and across the sea—a fire he carried into the dragon's den, the deal his last bet for their future.

In a nondescript Hong Kong office, all concrete and smoked glass, John sat across from a CCP official—mid-level, sharp-eyed, his suit crisp but his demeanor cold, calculating. A translator, a thin man with quick glances, stood between them, relaying words in clipped tones under the hum of fluorescent lights. John leaned forward, his voice steady, cutting through the sterile air. "Yes, I know all about Volt

Typhoon and Salt Typhoon," he said, his eyes locked on the official. "Their infiltrations into the telecom sector, the hacks on Ivanti, the rattling of the Five Eyes. I know it all, and that's why I'm here." His knowledge was a blade, honed by years in the dark web's trenches, now laid bare as leverage.

The official's brow lifted, a flicker of interest breaking his mask. Through the translator, he asked, "Can you help train our hackers to be like you?" His tone was direct, hungry for the edge John represented—a ghost who'd outrun the Glowies, who'd cracked systems others only whispered about.

John nodded, his answer measured but firm. "Yes, it's possible." He saw the path—teaching their coders to weave through firewalls, to vanish like he had, his skills a currency stronger than crypto. But he wasn't here for nothing. "In return," he said, "I want political asylum and citizenship for me and my companions, Zsuzsa and Anes. Full protection, new lives, no extradition." His voice held no waver, the stakes clear—freedom for three, a future beyond the DoJ's reach.

The official leaned back, his fingers tapping the table, the translator's words carrying a warning like ice. "If you're a citizen, you must obey our laws. Disobey, and you'll be put to death—your companions too. Clear?" His eyes bored into John, testing, promising no mercy.

John met his gaze, unflinching. "Clear," he said, the weight of it settling—China's leash, a gamble he'd take to keep Zsuzsa and Anes safe, to bury his trail for good. Death was a risk he'd lived with since Budapest; it didn't scare him now.

The official nodded, a thin smile breaking through. "Great," he said, the translator's voice flat. "We'll meet again in one week, with the lead guy who runs our hacker elite groups. Be ready." He stood, signaling the end, the deal's first thread pulled tight.

John left the office, the burner phone heavy in his pocket, Hong Kong's neon pulse a blur outside. The flat waited, Zsuzsa and Anes inside, their trust his anchor. He'd train their hackers, trade his shadows for asylum, but he'd watch every move—the CCP wasn't loyal, and neither was he, not beyond his women. Crypto ticked in hidden wallets, Lucy's fortune safe, the Glowies blind for now. One week to prepare, to balance life and death, his love for Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy the fire driving him through China's maze.