

Stop Thanking Me

By Anton Ross

Chapter 01: His Side

"SO OTHERS MAY LIVE!" we plebs roared in unison to the instructors' favorite question, all except The Lawyer, who didn't bother trying. We ran side-by-side at the back of the pack that late morning, the smooth gravel crunching under our pounding feet in the Florida Panhandle swamps. The dense marshland muffled our shared agony and the thunderous roar of the Blue Angels overhead. By then, half our class had dropped out after the grueling first two weeks. Our relentless disciplinarians set a triple-time pace, pushing us to the breaking point to weed out the weak. Other instructors trailed meters behind, each handpicked from the Navy to cull the unfit and train the rest. Falling behind wasn't an option, and even The Lawyer's deep voice couldn't keep the rhythm. Soon, he'd break the silence between us.

The Lawyer, a former attorney at a firm before enlisting, charmed even the stoic instructors with his humor and unusual background. During chow, someone asked why he didn't pursue an officer's path with his advanced degree. His reply: "I'd rather make a real difference than just pretend to." That day, I stood taller, proud of my choice to pursue a naval career in the lower ranks, a non-officer's billet unlike other spec ops routes. He exuded the pedigree I aspired to.

We endured in silence, never fully bonding, but moved to the next stage together: Aviation Rescue Swimmer School. When my name was called after Aircrew School graduation to join the hopeful Search and Rescue Crewmen, I stood next to The Lawyer, assigned to the same class. His scoff and eye-roll seared into my memory. Like everyone else who'd belittled me, especially after my face was scarred, he seemed no different. I'd foolishly romanticized him as a potential friend, especially since he was a decade older. I felt naive for hoping.

That fateful day, panting shoulder-to-shoulder with me, he spoke directly for the first time, his voice humble. "You're strong," he sputtered, his face caked in sand and muck from earlier drills, staring at me awkwardly as he stumbled. "None of us thought you'd make it this far."

Stunned, I only nodded, shocked he spoke at all. Then he stopped, succumbing to his pain like others before him. I watched the broken man admit defeat, but not before confessing I was everyone's lowest expectation.

Shouts erupted from the instructors when The Lawyer halted. Uncharacteristically, our lead instructor stopped our depleted group to witness his withdrawal. As the berating continued, a few classmates cheered him on, urging him to catch up. Seconds later, an instructor barked the only question that mattered: "Why are you here?"

There's one acceptable answer, and he stayed silent, like others before him. The Lawyer was directed to trudge through the swamp to the paved road, awaiting the duty van.

"What do you know?" the lead instructor taunted, then shouted so The Lawyer could hear, "WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU ALL HERE?"

"SO OTHERS MAY LIVE!" I roared louder than anyone.

His words, his story. The Lawyer's identity carries this stain forever. Yet, he called me strong, out loud, as no one else had. Those words were sacred, earned only by those who persevered. Truth is rare in my memories, and his compliment, an apology of sorts, became my greatest motivator these past years, shaping me into the naval aviator I am today.

But this striving has created a hellish reality I no longer need to endure. Why keep proving everyone wrong? Would Jessica even care about this story? I've never shared it with anyone.

I should have told her about The Lawyer a couple of nights ago when she asked, "So what motivates you?" It was the perfect moment to be authentic, but I couldn't. I regret lashing out at a lonely housewife and new mother; her shocked vulnerability haunts me. I should have revealed my truth, shown her my motivations are ugly and nonsensical: to prove I'm stronger than a lawyer whose name I've forgotten.

Rage consumed me, leaving bitter regret and the weight of my emotional cowardice. I scorched Jessica with my opinions about our secret friendship, her marriage, her using me to sabotage it further, her trivial complaints—all fixable nonsense. "Is this a blonde thing?" I mocked, throwing her question back: "What motivates you?" She froze, astonished, as I stormed out of her car, infuriated, while she tried to justify herself. Embarrassment hit minutes later; it was all projection. I'm done with this life.

I thought I'd never see Jessica again, but I was wrong. After that night, with no contact since, I figured she'd avoid the gym—my refuge until she invited herself weeks ago. Yet, tonight, an hour ago, she showed up, hit her favorite treadmill, and ignored me. For good reason. Tomorrow, I'll be free from these burdens, including the "so others may live" mantra. I expect my choice to shed those who see me as a whipping boy—rescue swimmer, entrepreneur, uncle, son, whatever they think I haven't earned—will be met with silent cheers but to loud ridicule.

A Marine's grunt from a heavy dumbbell set jolts me back to the present. I was lost, staring at my calloused hands, hunched in thought about my next move until Jessica stops her surprisingly long jog in her favorite spot.

I'll miss this sanctuary of Marines, dedicated to the iron, who keep to themselves. It doesn't matter if Jessica stays. The dominoes are set for my escape from responsibility, but with her here, I need to smooth things over, find peace in letting go. We'll likely both apologize for wasting each other's time, then I'll exit.

Next, I'll confront my crude family, the disrespectful ones who deserve their report card shoved in their faces. This is their last month of free rent at my villa; I'm done with them. I'm tired of tiptoeing around Asia, foolishly believing her meth addiction was over. She's stolen from me and everyone else, and I won't take her "no" anymore. I'm ready for her shouting and cursing, armed with only her child as leverage. Our mother enables her to avoid scrutiny herself, fostering an unacceptable pattern that won't change. They've harbored anti-male sentiments yet tricked me into thinking their chaotic past was gone, claiming "Jesus through God's grace" had purified them. Despite doubts, I gave in when they reappeared, needing a place for Asia's son, Kai. With my second deployment six weeks away at that time, I rented a spacious villa on Kaneohe Bay, hoping their newfound demeanor would last, especially for Kai, who has Down syndrome.

But after my seven-month, career-ending deployment, I returned to a trashed villa. They'd reverted to their old ways, embracing their "moke" street identities with more tattoos and less teeth, recounting outrageous stories to prove their credibility, treating the villa like garbage. Kai was the only reason they stayed; otherwise, I'd have kicked them to the streets they claimed to miss, as if those were "the good ol' days." Asia knows I adore Kai's sweet face; he wants nothing more than to sit beside me when I walk through the door. His smudged smile is my only company. I'll miss him on my lap, watching terrible cartoons, sharing our love for peanut butter pretzels. I hope Asia or Mom finds someone kind to provide him shelter, food, and love.

After serving their eviction notice tonight, with thirty days until they're unsheltered, it's all downhill. I'll drive back to base tonight, request a barracks room, and stay as long as I can while my family leaves my life forever. I'll sleep in late, already feeling free from my golden wings—my old dreams and aspirations—left on the Senior Chief's desk. He'll likely smile, thinking he's won, but I'll smile too, knowing true victory is mine. The Lawyer showed me those who doubted my strength were right about me. I've considered every variable: a win-win-win. I escape the squadron's awkward vibe as their longest-serving sacrificial lamb from an unfortunate event, and Senior doesn't have to see me.

Knowing Senior though, he'll spin my quitting into a hindrance deserving more brutality. Either way, I'm smiling. I look forward to this final domino falling, sculpting a future for myself alone, a memory worth keeping—caring for myself more than others, as seems normal.

Senior will likely exile me to a random ship in Pearl Harbor, but it'll be heavenly compared to being his whipping boy since my demotion six months ago. Any other duty station will do for my final year of service. I'll embrace mediocrity, buried in books I've meant to read. The less visible I am, the more I heal. A clean slate ensures others live happier without me.

But Jessica is the first domino. I can't leave her with my harsh words, and I'm sure she's here to apologize for dumping her life on me. Nausea pulses through me, a clammy tingle from sleepless nights, as I rise. I plead for adrenaline to get through this talk, then I'll deal with Asia and Mom. The next domino.

Grabbing a dumbbell to replace, I glance at Jessica's corner. She's sprinting, her face drenched and determined, a focus I never expected. The redhead beside her stares, fixated on Jessica's relentless pace, like she's fleeing a wolf. My attention shifts to the redhead—Diana?

My heart stops. Awestruck, I tilt my head, caught in delusion. Her stride, the certainty in her unique gait—it's Diana? It can't be her. I move like a bird, feet locked, angling to scope her out, setting the dumbbell down. I study every movement, gesture, her profile, her grin, still turned away. My skin dries, my heart retreats—it's surely Diana.

Panic washes over me. What's she doing on base? Is she married to someone stationed here? Is her man with her in this gym? Has she been on this island all along, our paths crossing now? I can't face this, not with Jessica beside her.

My heart hammers as I grab my towel and water canister, abandoning my weights. Every fiber screams to stay calm, to seem nonchalant, as I head for the exit. I need to escape before Diana's eyes find me, before I lose it and yell at her for everything she's done.

I slip out of the gym without incident, a small victory. The confrontation is avoided, for now. My heart won't slow as I step into the parking lot and dive into my car. I sit, engine off, the air thick with questions. I try to process what I saw, to reconcile that a random redhead in my gym might be the ghost I thought I'd buried.

"Is this real," I whisper to the empty car, "or a cruel, sleep-deprived hallucination?" Shaking my head, a dry laugh escapes at the absurdity. My headache, dulled by pills, must be fading. My gaze drifts to the car's ceiling, a plea forming. "Please, God," I mutter, barely audible, "help me out for once. Can you manage that?" The question hangs, unanswered, as I grip the steering wheel, knuckles white, Diana's new look seared into my mind.

A moth flaps into a parking lot light to my left, throwing itself against the barrier, heedless of its safety in pursuit of the glow. If the glass were gone, it'd be consumed by the bulb's heat—a tragic metaphor for my condition.

A slight calm settles over me. I've been here before; déjà vu hits. I know what's next. My body moves autonomously, eyes fixed on the steering wheel. The gym door opens behind me. In the rearview mirror, Jessica emerges, as I've seen before. I'm supposed to signal with a double tap on the brakes. She sees it, takes a step, but her face shows her decision.

The déjà vu fades. Jessica turns, darting to her SUV, away from me, showing my worth—like she lacks the time or courage to make things right or let me apologize in person. I feel... better? Am I giggling?

An ease I haven't felt in ages washes over me, like everything will resolve without effort. Our parting was inevitable anyways, and I'm grateful for her cowardly exit. I'm not worth her effort to explain. She gave me the quick closure I needed; she doesn't want my apology, and I don't need to give one.

She rushed away, and I wish everyone would. We were never meant to be friends, especially not in scandalous secrecy. Watching her drive off, I wonder if I'll ever make a friend or make a difference in a world I want to abandon. As her car's sound fades, it hits me: this could be the sign I asked God for, to make my life easier.

Ha! Nonsense.

"God, can you make my life easier again? Maybe get rid of all the women in my life without my effort. I'll wait here all night," I call out to a God who might finally listen, begging for another rare win. I know there's no creator, but I'm tired and crave peace.

With a deep breath, I find comfort in solitude, content. My gaze locks on the gym doors through the rearview mirror, ready to catch any details about Diana when she emerges.

Chapter 2: Her Side

For Faye! There's no turning back. My mind's made up, and I won't be swayed by Chad's tantrums anymore. He'll understand why he's failing as a husband and father. "I knew this was a phase," he snarked when I mentioned quitting the gym. I'll make him eat those words.

Chad's duplicity torments me. His grunting silence was one thing, but he's not the man I married. Alone, his moods swing wildly, and lately, he attacks my self-worth with cutting remarks about my weight and unattractiveness, pushing me to my breaking point. I started running to reclaim control over the weight I gained eight months after giving birth. His deployment changed him; his silence suffocates me, driving me to prove him wrong. I dread becoming gossip fodder, our family torn apart, our normalcy shattered, but he leaves me no choice. His rage, tempered only around his coworkers—his only friends—is the only time he seems normal. This civil war, with Chad always on the offense, has brewed for a year from unanswered questions. Until now, I didn't know how to demand answers, letting his rudeness and childish riddles fill the silence. Now, I act for Faye.

Faye deserves the best, watching a father who barely touches her, let alone shares her first moments. I can't share her milestones with him; he doesn't care about her little personality. He's missing out on her, and he'll miss out on me if he doesn't change.

I dragged Fenix into our melodrama, thinking he had a beef with Chad. Ugh.

The treadmill's hum and my feet's steady thump fill my ears as I remove my earphones. Now's the time to stop; I'm exhausted, ready to smash Chad's barriers. I'm done with his coldness reserved for me. I'm hungry, desperate, armed with proof he is and should be more than just a breadwinner. I'm beyond done.

I need to apologize to Fenix before my anger spills over. I grab my towel that shields the judgemental digital numbers that reveal my pathetic stamina, wiping my face. I've barely lasted forty minutes up until now, but the timer shows a full hour is within reach. "59:01" flashes. .02. .03. I stride as tall as my 5'2" frame allows, head high, savoring my reflection in the gym mirror for the first time. I'm vindicated, having poured sweat, tears, and snot into this treadmill these past weeks. Tonight marks my last time on this torture device. My fate's set, and I'm not even breathing hard.

The gym's double doors open, and it's her—my redheaded critic, Ms Red, her faded dyed hair still bright. This night isn't just fate; it's my moment to show conviction. She won't see the pitiful spectacle from my first day on this intimidating machine.

Frantically tapping the button, I crank the speed to my limit, teetering on collapse. I feel her eyes as I surge forward. Like before, she picks the treadmill beside mine, despite plenty of others free. Oh, she wants a show? I'll give her one.

My heart races, her presence invading my space, but I won't falter. I'm fierce, delivering a performance of a lifetime. My body surges, chasing transcendence in these final seconds, ignoring my lungs and legs begging for mercy. The clock crawls; thirty seconds to nirvana. My legs threaten rebellion, but I focus on the tempo. The agony's unbearable, so I release my controlled breathing.

Each forceful inhale and exhale reclaims my space, tapping unknown strength. I feign indifference to the time as adrenaline drowns the pain. A smile tugs at my lips through the final seconds. 57...58...59. Victory!

Feigning poise, I hit the stop button, the machine slowing. Each inhale is sweet relief. I stand erect, gripping the chest bar, on the brink of collapse but vowing not to show weakness. I'll collapse in my car. I glance at the mirror, catching her astonished face—exactly what I wanted.

This triumph is my mic drop to haughty critics like her who mocked me that first day. I showed up and crushed it. She can choke on her assumptions. I needed this win in a year of losses. Miss Red's bested, a sign my redemption is near.

Feigning nonchalance, I walk away, breath steadying with effort. My gym journey began with Miss Red watching me struggle with an audible snark; now it ends with her silent, likely envious gaze.

Fenix pranked me that first day. I'd never jogged on a treadmill before then, expecting a light pace, but he had other ideas. He cranked the speed, taunting, "Why come to the gym just to walk? Break a sweat." He blocked the controls, forcing me to keep up. I forced a smile, legs desperate, pretending to be unfazed. "There you go—try that for a few miles," he said, stepping away, smug. Maybe I irritated him, as he headed to the weight section to grunt with the macho men.

When his gaze left, I reached to slow the machine, but Miss Red appeared beside me. Despite never sprinting, I felt compelled to seem capable. Within seconds, I was breathless, heaving, nauseated, barely hitting the stop button, nearly flung off. I fled the gym, spending the rest of my allotted gym time in my car, consumed by my failure to run. That night, I swore to surpass every low expectation, to become strong by showing up, to crush my depression for Faye.

My breathing eases as I step off the treadmill, triumphant, showing Miss Red she misjudged me. “Well, I’ll be,” she says with a southern drawl. “I’m inspired!” Her sincerity pierces me; self-loathing floods in. “Thanks,” I stammer, ashamed for vilifying her. I grab my water bottle, pretending to drink to avoid speaking, looking anywhere but her eyes. Hobbling, I reach for my gym bag. My legs buckle, and I groan, collapsing to my knees, demanding no more movement.

“Hi! I’m Rose,” she says, her name fitting her vibrancy. She struts around her treadmill, perky. “I saw you before.” She forces me to face her, taller and more beautiful now. I shake her outstretched hand, avoiding her gaze with my low eye bow. “Are you a regular now?” she asks. I shake my head. “I know I’ve seen you. I was there when you were embarrassed.”

“Oh, I don’t recall—um, embarrassed?” I say, wishing I’d stop talking. Her candor about that moment bests me again; I can’t dislike her. I scan for Fenix.

“Looking for your husband? I saw him leave,” she says.

“What? Chad—do you know my—” My heart sinks; I’ve said too much. Her glance at my ring clarifies—she means Fenix.

“Yeah, the big brown guy with the shoulders? The one who pranked you,” she says, referencing that mortifying moment.

“Oh, yeah. Him. Fenix. A friend. A work friend.”

“Do you work on base?” she asks, genuinely curious, keeping me hunched in place.

“No, no. He’s my husband’s friend—a work friend,” I explain, the words sounding false. “Do you work with the grey helicopters on base?” I ask, praying she doesn’t know Chad.

“Nah, I’m just a Corpsman—bandaids, pills, injections, drawing blood. I send these boys back to pretend they’re tough. You’d laugh at how many faint when I draw blood! But most are dolls at heart,” she teases, jabbing at the brutes in tight brown shirts around us. “I rarely see sailors, though. So, your friend’s a flyboy too?” Her interest shifts, and I can’t engage.

I need to leave. “Yes, he is. Sorry, you said he left?” I gesture to the exit, relieved by Fenix’s absence.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rose smirks, catching my awkwardness. “You earned your sleep tonight. You’re on the right path, and you crushed it. I’m glad I said hi. Wait, hun, what’s your name?”

“Oh, sorry. Jessica. Nice to meet you,” I say, genuinely touched. She remembers me and encourages my resilience.

“It’s been a privilege, Mrs. Jessica,” Rose says, emphasizing “Mrs.” as if reminding me I’m taken. Her sweet drawl leaves me unsure if she’s catty or just fun. I lean toward the latter.

“See you again,” I lie, knowing I can’t return. Rose’s realness highlights my flaws, despite her encouragement. Her confidence reflects what I wanted to be. A surprise pregnancy from a barracks hookup turned into a marriage, spurred by Chad’s assurances and joy at our pregnancy months after we met. He promised love, stability, peace, safety, finances, and care—none delivered. The military provides my medical care, not him.

I came to Hawaii for college and independence, encouraged by my supportive family to explore beyond their comfort. My passion for art has faded; motherhood shifted my purpose beyond expectation. The gym was my escape from Faye, but even this burdens me, relying on Chad to watch her without passing out from his sleeping pills and beer.

Defeated, I sulk toward the exit. I’m Mrs. Jessica Marshall, ruled by this ring. I’ve become a spineless pushover, longing for Chad to divorce me. I don’t measure up to Rose, who’d never tolerate a partner like him. Every thrill of success, like tonight, reminds me of my vulnerabilities. How can I demand terms from Chad?

I’m unprepared to face Fenix, but I must confess my flaws and how unfair it is to burden him with my complaints. Tonight, I’ll vanish from his life.

Opening the door, Fenix’s brake lights flash, signaling he’s seen me. My apology, heavy with humiliation, stops me. Last time, he tore into me, mocking my words, exposing my delusion. I’m no ally against Chad—just a disloyal, useless wife.

My skin crawls. I scurry to my car, unable to face him.

...

Pumping gas at the Marine Base Exchange, I’m a shadow, trapped, not owning my soul. I do what I don’t want and avoid what I do. A husk, shackled to Faye’s needs, defying my desire to grow on my own, to dream I can care for her and thrive. I’ve never felt lower. My defiance is gone, dissolved as I stare at the yellow pump handle.

Tears well up, emotions threatening to spill. I force composure, knowing smiles may be far off. First, I’ll call Fenix to apologize for dragging him into this mess, certain he’ll agree a phone call is best, which is why I fled like a scared rabbit.

My fingers steady, I dial Fenix. He answers, “I love you. I do. It’s okay, don’t cry,” his tone soft, unfamiliar. “I love you, really. Don’t worry.”

“Fenix? Are you talking to me?” I reply, stunned.

“Yeah?” he coos. “What? No way! Jessica?” His frantic laughter grows, laced with disbelief.

“Are you okay?” I ask, curiosity piqued.

“No, no,” he says, calming his laughter. “Sorry, Jessica. Let’s start over. Hey, aloha. Did you forget to tell me something?”

“I didn’t know you were with your girlfriend, or on the phone with her? It’s worse than I thought—”

“No! It’s not what it sounds like,” he protests. “No girl’s here, I was just—oh God!” He bellows abruptly.

“Are you okay?” I hear him murmur to someone—a girl’s voice. I stay silent, catching only fragments. “It’s fine, I’ll get it to her,” he says clearer. “Yeah, thanks, have a good one.” His voice returns to me. “Sorry, what were we talking about?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt. You were talking to someone?” I press.

“No, unrelated. I don’t know her, but she said she knows you and gave me your towel from the treadmill.”

“Rose?” I ask, certain it’s her.

“Rose, huh,” he repeats, giggling with relief. “Can we talk in person? This is a huge misunderstanding. I have things to say before we, you know, stop seeing each other. Get it out of the way. Are you nearby?”

“The Exchange gas station,” I reply.

“Not far,” he hums, thinking. “I know a quiet place nearby. Wait for me? Follow when I get there, okay.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, heart heavy with dread. Our parting should’ve been face-to-face, but my anxiety could only muster a call. Now it’s a face-off where I’ll fumble my apology.

“I’m so lame,” I mutter until his car pulls up.

He lowers his window, waving me to follow. We head toward the landing strip and bay, then veer onto a gravel path I'd never noticed, cutting through a deserted meadow with bunkered hills. The unlit road sparks with overgrown grass leave me with questions about why Fenix would choose such a seemingly desolate area, winding up a mound. Atop the hill, a small lot appears, a fenced tower pulsing red every three seconds. Fenix drives to a clearing, and I follow. The island's beaches and bays light up below. He turns off his car; I do the same, parking behind him. He waits for me, and my anxiety surges. I pray he leads, knowing I'll mess this up.

The ocean breeze sweeps past as I approach. His strong Hawaiian features flicker in the red light. "Please, have a seat," he gestures to the hood. I settle beside him. "So," he starts, and I brace myself. "I'm sorry I blasted you. I've been dealing with a lot. I don't know why I attacked you. I couldn't answer your question, but that's not your fault. It wasn't cool. Sorry."

"Thanks, but I forgot about it," I say playfully.

"Cool. I prefer that. I don't explode like that—ever." He looks around. "When I joined this squadron and flew over this runway, this hill caught my eye. I knew it had a stunning view. I daydreamed of sharing it with someone special, like a girl. But deep down, I knew it was a fantasy. No one's coming up here with me, not for a date. No girl wants to make memories with me. If one did, she'd be waiting for someone else to sweep her away. I'm always plan B. You're the closest I've had to a friend in years, a married woman whose husband works with me, and he knows nothing about us hanging out. That says a lot about me. Since our time's ending, let's keep it chill, agree this is a great spot, say a few more things, and be done. Cool?"

"Cool." I nod, letting silence linger before sharing my feelings. "I wish we'd met differently. We could've been real friends." He shrugs, unconvinced in the dark. "Thanks for thinking I'm special enough to bring here, but I'm not. 'Imbecile' fits me better. I'm sorry for burdening you with my life." It seems enough for both of us.

A plane's light catches my eye, and I picture this view from his perspective. "This view is breathtaking. You've got a great eye. Don't sell yourself short. You'll find someone to share this with, someone who'll love it more than I do. She's out there, I promise." He snorts sarcastically, dismissing my words, but I know he craves romance. "Can I ask, though—you don't have to answer. The girl you love, is she—"

"Love?" Fenix sighs. "She was the only one who got me to say that word. But what you heard was a dream. I fell asleep in my car, and in the dream, I was on the phone. Tonight, she came back to my mind. I thought I saw her at the gym, but it wasn't her." Rose? I wonder, since she was the only other woman there. "In the dream, I was in my car before

I blacked out. She called, saying she was back on the island, looking for me. She was in pain, tears streaming as she begged forgiveness on the other side, claiming she never meant to hurt me. I visually saw her too over the phone. I felt pity, and that stupid word I'd banished slipped out. I hate her, but I couldn't stand her crying. I wanted to comfort her, but the call cut off. I waited for her to call back, and then you called, waking me up." He hangs his head, ashamed. "I was drowsy, fumbling my phone, thinking I'd soothe her if we got cut off again. I'm so exhausted; I can't believe this is happening."

"I see," I say, feeling his vulnerability mirror mine. "This could be a good sign. You might not hate her or the word love as much as you think. You've got potential for growth, not with her, but in your future."

"I wouldn't bet on that. I haven't spoken to her in years and want to forget her," he says, hinting at her infidelity. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I had a grand plan once, and she was central to all of it. Everyone knew her because I never stopped talking about her. They thought she was too good for me—too gorgeous, too kind. In high school, my accomplishments came because of her. I made her my greatest achievement, bragging to everyone, showing her pictures to everyone and anyone, ignoring their doubts. They called me a liar, said she was just a friend, that I couldn't score someone like her. At my smaller graduations she attended, they'd all laugh still, saying I was delusional, that she'd leave me for someone else. That while I was away, she was warming another dude's bed." His tone shifts. "They were right. They knew."

"I didn't care then when I should've seen it beforehand. But not one clue aside from one. I was naive though. It became the most embarrassing event of my life. Oh how I bragged, telling haters they didn't get us. We planned a small wedding, a house with a white picket fence, three kids with her last name, a dog named Dog, a cat named Cat. We'd help churches, visit orphanages, garden, have a room for books to read in silence together. That was our future; no one could change my mind. We built it on years of promises. I was the only one who saw it. One text proved them right. She betrayed me worse than they said, and love became the word I hated most."

A long pause. "I shunned everything. Couples hurt to see. I couldn't look at anyone. Those who warned me didn't rub it in—I was a dead horse. I was cold, alone, like my childhood. I never got to scream at her for what she did, especially since she knew my past. I wanted to curse her, make the world see her as the greatest deceiver. In the dream, I could've destroyed her, but I felt only sorrow. Her crying stirred an unknown mercy within me. I said those words instead of how I always envisioned it. For a moment, my pain vanished, and a peace I hadn't felt since she was my fiancée came. And it lasted a couple of seconds. That's when you woke me up, and it's been years since I've talked about this. It's a lot; I don't know how to open up. I get angry, resentful. I'm sorry."

“No need to be sorry,” I say, awed by his rawness. My life feels superficial compared to his years of isolation. His high school sweetheart’s betrayal left a wound that keeps him from love. Hidden in the dark, his scarred face breaks my heart. Like a dented bagel, discarded for a blemish, his wound holds him back more than I’ll know, but his broken heart truly traps him.

“If you have more to say, now’s the time,” he says, finality in his voice. “I’m deleting my online accounts tonight, and I’ll likely get new orders soon, so you might never see me again.” His voice trails off. “A P-3’s coming. We gotta be quiet—probably a touch-and-go.” The plane’s hum grows to a roar, drowning all sound as it lands, lifts off, and veers right.

Fenix turns to me, his gaze tense, inching away like I’m a spider. “Something on me?” I ask. He shakes his head. “You okay?” He shakes his head again, looking at his palms now, confusion and disbelief in his eyes. “Dude, what’s wrong? That look—something bad?”

“Something like that,” he whispers. “Believe it or not, I had a dream about you—a nightmare, really. You... kinda destroyed me.” His voice wavers.

“I’m not a murderer, so relax,” I tease, noting our exhaustion. “No need for the spooked look.”

“It’s just... it felt so real,” he says hesitantly. “I was drunk, saw you boarding a P-3, leaving the island forever. So I had to say goodbye, thinking we were cool. I rushed to grab your arm for a hug on the tarmac, but people in line yanked me back, calling me a drunken liar, saying I should leave you alone, that I didn’t know you. I pushed them off, insisting we were friends. They didn’t believe me. I tried again, you totally unaware of the chaos. I just wanted to wish you well.”

“When our eyes met, you looked disgusted by my face. You pushed me away, clawing, kicking, like I was a monster. I wasn’t holding you, but you fought to escape, trapping yourself in my space. I backed off as you flailed. Big hands, like cops, grabbed me, pulling me away. You fell, scraping the asphalt, running in fear, abandoning your flight, like I was the ugliest thing you’d seen. Your lie made me look foolish, proving them right—I didn’t know you, but I really did. I wanted to be mad, but I was just depressed.” He pauses, the memory vivid. “I stood frozen as they took me away from the snickering crowd. I accepted it—no one would claim me. Then I felt myself sinking, dragged into a cold, endless void. I almost called for you, but your rejection silenced me. I had no one else. Suspended in that void, I realized I was alone, forever. But that’s when I heard their voices, and it became a way too real reality for far too long. And that’s where I’ll stop this story. It’s too dark.”

He falls silent, and I absorb the nightmare's weight. "That's awful," I say, my psyche shaken by his trauma.

"All I've wanted is peace," he continues. "Since that dream, I've hated everyone. Truth be told, you're not helping. Being around people feels traumatic. I get a sick satisfaction hearing about your struggles, your husband's, your daughter's imperfect life. I'm angry, envious, even of the worst people. I never was that person until recently."

His head shakes as my eyes adjust to the night. "That look I gave you, with the P-3 and us here—I hope talking this out helps me forget what I don't want to remember. I'm taking this as a sign I'm on the right path, breaking free from that nightmare's grip. I want to change my life tonight and not be doomed to that void."

"You're not headed there," I assure him. "It was just a dream."

"You don't know that," he says. "But if I find peace, that demonic void can't touch me. I can't shake the feeling that the nightmare's creatures let me go to show me the world never wanted me."

"No, Fenix!" I interrupt. "You're a good person, through and through. I see it now more than ever. That nightmare's not your fate. I'm sorry I stirred it up. I'm the shitty one here, putting you through this chaos. You don't deserve it. If I'd stayed quiet, maybe when I grow up, I'll be lucky to have a friend like you."

"You won't want to see me again, trust that," he says heavily. "My story's grim. I don't share my abandonment because it hurts people. To be clear, I hope we don't meet again, and you'll never really know me." He pauses, watching me. "My ex-fiancée, Diana, held me tight, crying for days when I told her just a few of my childhood stories. She was my first friend in high school, right after my sister scarred my face."

His sister's act shocks me. I want to ask more, but his warning stops me. I can't handle more of his pain. As a sister, I could never hurt my brother like that. I want to ease his memories but can only listen, grateful for his openness. "Your face never bothered me," I say. "Thanks for sharing such a delicate subject. My brother doesn't look typical either; I've heard cruel remarks about him too."

"Thanks," he says, a small smile lit by the red flash. "I noticed you weren't repulsed when we met. Most can't hide their reaction to my scar. I'm sure people warn others about it. Can I blame them? I've been told my smile looks sinister, like I'm plotting. Maybe if people weren't against me, I wouldn't seem that way. It's their projections," he laughs dryly.

“I’m glad you know I don’t judge you,” I say. “I’m too busy judging myself to judge others.” A lie—we all judge—but his words reveal his fragile identity, yearning to be more than a scar or a loner, despite his esteemed role.

Fenix bows his head, hopefully content. “Jessica, before I forget—your husband, Marshall, is a good man. His flaws can be fixed if you talk it out. Your issues are easier than most marital problems. Don’t let them become irreconcilable. Speak the truth about how you feel, ask why he’s changed, and he’ll yield. Think of Faye, and not yourself. She needs her dad more than you’ll admit. She deserves both parents being good to each other.”

“You’re right,” I say, grinding my teeth at the truth. “Chad knows Faye and I are on the line. I’ll talk to him honestly, find out what he’s thinking, not just guess.”

“Tomorrow’s a new day for us both then,” Fenix says, perking up. “I’ll likely get new orders this week, and I’m looking forward to it to be honest. The squadron won’t throw me the normal going-away party, I can promise you that.” he says with a pessimistic cheer.

Staring at Kaneohe’s twinkling lights, I say, expecting his cynicism, “You’re a wonderful person, Fenix. I know you’ll find good friends, and one will be the love of your life, your best friend forever. You’ll have kids, that white, picket-fence house, be a great dad, play with Dog and Cat, read to your kids—” I stop, seeing his tension. No interruption comes. I look at him—tear streaks glisten on his face.

I’ve done it again, bringing up love, which he hates, stirring his torment. I can’t win, living in his nightmares too, dragging up his worst memories until he cries silently.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, vowing to silence my heart. I offer my shaking hand near his, hoping it conveys my deep remorse. I never meant to hurt him and won’t again. I should leave, but his warm, trembling hand covers mine, saying he knows I didn’t mean it. We gaze at the coastal lights, his pain palpable. I intertwine our fingers lightly, feeling him steady his breath. I swear not to speak again.

He releases my hand after a thankful squeeze and shake, sliding off the hood. His slow breathing and movements signal our end. He wants to face his sadness alone, as always. I’m no different from those who hurt him, undeserving of his time.

I slide off, grass crunching as I walk to my SUV. I glance at Fenix’s back, the roar of another plane nearing. My heart screams louder than ever. “FENIX!” I yell, raw and desperate. He turns. “I LOVE YOU!” The plane drowns his response. I jump in my car, start it, and pull away. My headlights catch his confused, surprised

face—understandable. I'm exhilarated, mad with unfeigned love for Fenix as my symbolic release, free from calculation, giddy with authenticity.

Through Fenix, I realize my truth: I once loved people without needing a reason. I'm not lesser for who I've become. I'll say "I love you" a million times to Fenix and others who need it, not because I must. Driving down the hill, a new woman's monologue repeats in my head. For the first time in ages, I'm eager to see Chad.