

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jack's Mea Culpa

Jack sat in his dimly lit cabin, the air thick with melancholy and the scent of bloodied gauze. The curtains were drawn, but sunlight begged to creep in, casting jagged lines of light against the floor and walls. They looked like cracks—fractures in what was, but for one day, a happy place for three. *Fitting*, he thought as he reached for his phone with a wince.

It felt heavier in his palm than it should have; the cursor blinking on the screen, waiting for his thoughts.

Sienna, I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I need you to know I'm sorry. For all of it. And especially for the night I scared you.

The words looked foreign—clinical, detached. But they were the most honest twenty-six words he had ever said to her.

His thumb hovered over the send button as his chest joined the rest of his body—aching from the fight with Beck, as if every cell in him knew what his mind hadn't yet fully accepted—this was it.

He pressed send and then dropped his phone on the coffee table, not bothering to see if she'd read it. It landed

next to a half-empty whiskey glass. He hadn't touched alcohol in a while, but a good reckoning required a good drink.

Jack fell back into the couch as if wishing it would swallow him whole and suffocate him. Staring at the wooden beams above, the room felt smaller than usual, like it was folding in on itself, trapping him inside. He couldn't tell if it felt like the world was coming for him or if it was wishful thinking. His chest tightened. His breaths came faster.

A fresh wave of panic seized him, the kind that made his vision blur and his throat tighten. He closed his eyes against the sudden dread, realizing he was on the brink of losing himself.

And then, without warning, the dam broke. A tear escaped him, then another. His tears turned to raw, unfiltered sobbing. Jack's entire body shook. His hands covered his face, as if trying to hide from the truth clawing its way out—he had been faking it.

Faking his happiness with Sienna.

Faking his importance, his success, his worth.

Faking his so-called growth, hoping that if he looked like a better man, he would become one.

But Beck had seen through it. That smug bastard had said the one thing Jack didn't want to admit:

"You haven't changed. You've just figured out how to hide it better."

Jack let out a bitter laugh through his tears until he was red in the face. He hated that Beck had been right. He hated he had to hear it from a man he wanted to punch through a wall.

But mostly, he hated himself.

For the first time in his life, Jack wasn't pretending. He wasn't putting on a mask or twisting the narrative in his favour—not even in his own mind. He was just a broken man who had become a broken record, realizing he had broken everything.

The truth cut through him and he realized he could either let it eat him alive or finally allow himself to heal. On his laptop, he booked a session with his therapist for the next morning.

Jack lay awake, staring at the ceiling, running through the conversation he was about to have. Dr. Delaware had called him out before for keeping her at arm's length; for performing in therapy instead of participating.

He wasn't even sure why he laid on that couch all night as he showered and got dressed in the morning. He felt paralyzed but knew it was just a feeling. Still, all he did was lay and stare.

Perhaps it was the lack of sleep or the gravity of the

moment, but everything felt like a performance to him just like his therapist had said in an extremely accusatory tone but ultimately... correct.

His hope for the day—to finally stop trying to win anyone over, including himself.

Dr. Delaware's waiting room felt like a mirage. He couldn't feel the chair he sat in or the magazine he thumbed through. The air smelled like eucalyptus, which was in direct conflict with the environment. Jack's leg bounced restlessly as he stared at the clock; the sensation not matching the movement. All he could think to himself was, this is what Revelation feels like.

11:00 AM.

The door to Dr. Carol Delaware's office opened.

"You can come in, Jack."

Jack pushed himself up and walked inside, but instead of sitting, he stood near the bookshelf, his hands shoved into his pockets.

Silence settled between them, and Dr. Delaware didn't fill it. Jack didn't either.

It dragged. Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock and the steady whoosh of the air unit.

His fingers twitched. His jaw clenched. He could feel the therapist watching him, waiting, studying his every

hesitation. He knew why he was there, but not how to start.

As Jack shifted in place, he exhaled sharply. But before he could force himself to speak, a sharp pain shot through his ribs and face, and he winced.

Dr. Delaware's head tilted slightly. There it was—her opening.

"What happened to your face?" she asked casually, though her tone was anything but.

Jack scoffed, rubbing his jaw. "I played my latest role of tough guy and took a beating."

She squinted, the only hint that she was fazed by the comment. "Someone beat you up?"

Jack sucked in a breath, looking away and pacing. His pride was crawling up his throat. But he was here. He was doing this. "Sienna's new boyfriend... or whatever."

Dr. Delaware's face remained neutral. "I didn't know she had a new boyfriend... or whatever. Why did the assault occur?"

Under his breath, Jack pushed out the words, "Because I went to his place and tried to get him to leave Sienna alone."

"And why did you feel the need to do that when we discussed you weren't ready to be with her?"

"Because with someone new, time was running out,"

Jack admitted, his voice remaining low.

Dr. Delaware blinked. “Was it really? Or did you just let your fears get the best of you?”

“There was something about their messages,” he muttered. “They seemed so—committed.”

They paused, squaring each other up like two cowboys in a duel.

“There’s more,” Jack continued.

“Oh?”

“I told him Sienna and I slept together.”

“And did you?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No.” The weight of the admission nearly knocked him over.

Jack dropped into the leather chair opposite Dr. Delaware, his head falling into his hands. “God, I don’t even know why I did that. I mean, yeah, I know. I wanted to win. I wanted her back.” His voice was hoarse, strained. “But it was more than that. It was like... like I couldn’t let go of the idea that I was entitled to her. Like, if I just worked hard enough, if I changed enough, she’d come back.”

“And now?”

Jack swallowed. “Now, I know that’s not how it works.”

Silence. Then—

“I cheated on her.” The words felt like glass in his throat.

Dr. Delaware didn’t react. “When you were married?”

He nodded.

“How many times?”

Jack clenched his jaw. “Twice.” He forced himself to look at her steely expression. “Life just kept spinning out of control and I was sick of how morally superior she felt to me. A better parent. A better person. And instead of trying to rise to her level, I guess I wanted to drag her down.” He leaned forward, gripping his knees. “And it didn’t even make me feel better. In fact, it’s what probably ended us.”

They spoke at length about all that had taken place since he last visited her office—the date, that night in the cabin, looking through her texts, and of course, the fight. He even came clean about the night Sienna kicked him. Prior to today, he’d given Dr. Delaware a contorted version of the events.

“I apologized to her last night.”

“That’s a good step to take. Why did you do that?”

“Beck told me I should.”

“And you listened? That’s not like you.”

Jack rolled his eyes and let out a husky laugh. “Gee, thanks, doc.”

“What I mean by that is, why would you listen to this guy you barely know about apologizing to Sienna?”

“I guess you had to be there.”

Dr. Delaware observed him carefully. “So, what now, Jack?”

Jack sat there, silent for a long moment, his shoulders sagging under an invisible weight. Finally, he exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “I... I don’t know.”

A frown creased Dr. Delaware’s brow. “Let me be direct with you. In my view, you have three options. One—keep indulging these destructive impulses, undoing every bit of progress you’ve made. Two—try to keep moving forward here, but from everything you’ve said, your environment is fuelling your obsession. And three—create space between you and the life that’s consuming you. Space can be literal or figurative... but in your case, literal distance might be best.”

Jack’s expression shifted like a deer in headlights. “Space... like leaving town?”

She inclined her head. “A clean break, if only for a time. You’re wrestling with guilt, envy, anger—it’s all tied up in Sienna, and the space here that you shared with her and your son. Getting away might help you see yourself more clearly.”

Jack flinched, shaking his head in protest. “I don’t know if I can do that. Spencer is only twelve. What kind of father just leaves his kid because things get hard?”

Dr. Delaware studied him with calm intensity. “You wouldn’t be abandoning him, Jack. You’d be creating the space necessary to ensure you can be a better father in the long run.”

Jack’s jaw tightened. “But he’s been through so much already. The divorce, my drinking, all the fights...” His voice broke for a moment, revealing the guilt he fought to hide. “What if I make it worse by leaving?”

A gentle empathy shone in her eyes. “You’re not running away from him; you’re stepping away from a situation you’ve recognized as toxic—for both of you. If you stay in an environment where you keep repeating the same destructive patterns, what does that teach Spencer?”

Jack’s gaze dropped. “That... that I’m too weak to change,” he said quietly.

Dr. Delaware nodded. “Exactly. But if you remove yourself from what triggers your worst impulses, keep in touch with Spencer in healthy ways, and commit to ongoing therapy, you’re showing him it’s possible to break a cycle before it breaks you. Think of the lesson you can pass onto him when he’s older.”

Jack rubbed his eyes, exhaustion layering over him.

“Every time I’m in the cabin we all used to share, or I pass Spencer off to Sienna, it just... gnaws at me. Feels like I can’t look forward because my past is right in my face.” He glanced up, eyes clouded. “I have to go—somewhere I can breathe.” For a long beat, Jack was silent yet again. His face hardened, then softened, as though he were wrestling a storm inside. Finally, he exhaled. “It still feels like betrayal.”

“Growth often does,” Dr. Delaware said softly. “But this time, you’re choosing something constructive—for you and for Spencer.”

Jack swallowed. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I need to get out of here... for me and for my boy.” The true revelation started to hit him with fury. “Go. Build back as a better man. Come back and show Spencer that anything is possible.” Jack’s eyes lit up. “Doc, this actually feels right.”

“Well then... where might you go, Jack?”

He hesitated long enough for the idea to take hold and feel natural. “I don’t know. Maybe... Chicago. I’ve always wanted to see Millennium Park and that big bean thing.” He exhaled a small laugh. “Maybe Miami. I hear the boat culture’s cool. I’ve always heard that you don’t have real Mexican food until you actually go to Mexico. There is Dallas—I’ve been obsessed with the JFK assassination forever. I could maybe do a loop of North America and

spend some time in Vancouver with family I've ignored and should really try again with. Or the Vegas Strip, though I probably shouldn't go there if I'm trying to escape temptation."

A ghost of a smile touched Dr. Delaware's lips. "Going somewhere new can be cathartic. You did mention your firm has offices around the country."

"Yeah," Jack said, "I can do most of my work from a laptop, and if I need to show up in person, there's probably a satellite office nearby anywhere I'd go." He shrugged, but the motion didn't hide the flicker of excitement in his eyes. "I don't have the money I used to, but I've got enough for an extended road trip."

She clasped her hands together. "I see you, Jack. For the first time since we started our sessions, I feel as if I know who you are."

"And who am I?"

"A good man who let the world take hold of him. A good man who lost his way."

"That sounds about right."

"That's who walked in here. But the man that is leaving... he found his compass." Dr. Delaware said, standing up. "Remember, no matter where you go, we continue therapy. Regular calls, Zoom sessions—whatever it takes. Distance alone can't fix everything. You'll need to

keep doing the work.”

Jack rose, meeting her gaze with a new steadiness. “I will. I don’t want to let this chance slip away.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The darkness in his eyes hadn’t vanished, but it had receded enough to let a glimmer of hope shine through. He might not have all the answers, but he finally felt like he was asking the right questions.

Jack stepped outside, the crisp air hitting his face. The world looked different—sharper, clearer.

As he neared the bottom of the stairs, he saw a woman ascending. Her confidence was obvious, her spunkiness carried like a force field. Their eyes met. She smiled, small but knowing. “You look a little less broken,” she said as they passed.

Jack furrowed his brow and turned. “I’ve never seen you before. Why would you say that?”

She turned to look at him with that same polite smile and shrugged. “Because I looked like that after my first breakthrough with Dr. Delaware.”

Jack stammered out a short laugh. “And yet you still see her.”

“Because I’m still broken, just less so.”

“So she didn’t fix you?”

Her smile turned into a mischievous smirk. “She fixed

the past, but I keep finding new ways to break things. Although... now, my lapses in judgement are more like hair fractures than full breaks.”

“I guess that’s something.”

She nodded, then continued up the stairs, disappearing into the office he had just left.

Jack paused on the sidewalk, letting the sun hit his face. The warmth felt deeper than simple heat—it felt like the first hint of genuine hope he’d had in years. He closed his eyes, imagining every harmful memory unraveling in the bright light. The air smelled of fresh beginnings, and he finally allowed himself to believe he was worthy of one.

With each step, the tension in his shoulders eased a little more, and a flicker of genuine peace lit inside him. He didn’t know exactly where he was headed, but for the first time in a long time, the world seemed big and inviting rather than small and dark.

And that, he realized, was a start.