

# The Heiress He Threw Away Chapter 21 - Three Months Later

## Chapter 21: Three Months Later

Sofia said "mama" for the first time on a Tuesday morning.

I was in my home office reviewing restructuring proposals for the Hart Empire when I heard it through the baby monitor—that unmistakable sound, clear as a bell.

"Mama."

I dropped everything and ran to the nursery, where Elena was changing Sofia's diaper.

"Did she just—" I started.

"Say mama? Yes!" Elena laughed. "She's been babbling it for the last few minutes."

I scooped up Sofia and spun her around, tears streaming down my face. "Say it again, baby. Say mama."

"Mama," Sofia repeated, grabbing my face with her tiny hands.

My heart felt like it would burst.

"We have to tell Damien," I said, reaching for my phone.

The thought came automatically now. For three months, we'd been co-parenting—awkward at first, but gradually finding a rhythm. Monday through Wednesday were my days. Thursday through Saturday were his. Sundays we traded off.

It wasn't perfect. But it was working.

Damien answered on the second ring. "Sophia? Is everything okay?"

"She said mama," I blurted out. "Sofia said mama."

There was silence on the other end, then I heard him sigh. "That's amazing. I wish I'd been there."

"I'm sorry," I said, meaning it. "I know you wanted to be there for all her firsts."

"It's okay," Damien said, though I could hear the sadness in his voice. "Can you record her saying it? I'd love to hear it."

"Of course," I said. "How's the Moreno case going?"

"We got the conviction overturned yesterday," Damien said, and I could hear the emotion in his voice. "Carlos Moreno walked out of prison after eight years for a crime he didn't commit. Eight years, Sophia. Eight years I stole from him."

This was Damien's reality now. Every day, he worked with lawyers and the FBI to identify and overturn the wrongful convictions he'd caused. Nine cases overturned so far, with at least fifteen more pending.

"You're giving him his life back," I said. "That matters."

"It doesn't give him back those eight years," Damien said. "It doesn't undo the damage. But you're right—it's something."

We talked for a few more minutes about Sofia, about schedules, about mundane parenting details that felt both normal and surreal.

"How's therapy going?" Damien asked before we hung up.

"Hard," I admitted. "Dr. Morrison thinks I have trust issues."

"You do have trust issues," Damien said gently. "I gave you those trust issues."

"I know," I said. "How's your therapy?"

"Also hard," Damien said. "Turns out acknowledging you've destroyed innocent lives and trying to become a better person is emotionally difficult. Who knew?"

Despite everything, I smiled. "We're a mess."

"We are," Damien agreed. "But we're trying. That counts for something."

After hanging up, I looked at Sofia, who was now attempting to eat her own foot.

"Your parents are complicated," I told her. "But we love you. That's the one thing we got right."

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The Hart Empire restructuring was brutal.

I'd spent three months conducting full audits, implementing ethics oversight, and compensating victims. The company had lost forty percent of its value. Half the board had resigned. Business partners had fled.

But we were clean now. Legal. Ethical.

My father, who attended board meetings as an advisor (he couldn't officially serve due to his probation), watched me present the quarterly report with something like awe.

"You're doing what I never had the courage to do," he said after the meeting. "Building something legitimate."

"We'll see if it survives," I said. "We're hemorrhaging money paying restitution."

"Then let it fail," my father said. "Better to fail honestly than succeed through corruption."

It was strange hearing those words from him—the man who'd built everything on corruption. But he meant them. Prison had genuinely changed him.

My mother's trial was scheduled for next month. Her lawyers had negotiated a plea deal—three years in minimum security in exchange for full cooperation and testimony against remaining co-conspirators. She'd taken it.

"I deserve more," she'd told me when she signed the papers. "But I'm grateful for mercy I don't deserve."

She and my father were living separately—my father in the mansion's guest wing, my mother in a small apartment downtown. They were civil when they saw each other, but the romance was gone. Decades of lies and manipulation had killed whatever love they'd once had.

"We're just two old people trying to make amends," my mother said when I asked if they'd reconcile. "That's enough."

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On Thursday evening, I dropped Sofia off at Damien's apartment for his three-day custody period.

His place was modest—a two-bedroom near the mansion, filled with baby equipment and Sofia's favorite toys. He'd painted the nursery himself in soft yellows and greens.

"Mama!" Sofia squealed when she saw him, and Damien's face lit up.

"Hey, bug," he said, scooping her up. "Did you miss me?"

"She said mama this morning," I told him. "Real words. Multiple times."

"I heard the recording," Damien said, his smile bittersweet. "It's amazing. Thank you for sending it."

We did the handoff—diaper bag, bottles, her favorite stuffed elephant. A routine we'd perfected over three months.

"How was your week?" I asked.

"Exhausting," Damien admitted. "I testified in the Patterson case on Monday. The defense attorney tore into me for three hours about every crime I've ever committed. It was brutal but necessary."

"Did it help?" I asked.

"The conviction was overturned," Damien said. "So yes. But Sophia—" he paused, "—sitting in that courtroom, having every terrible thing I've done read into public record, knowing that my testimony was only credible because I'd confessed to everything—it was humbling in a way I can't describe."

"Good," I said. "You needed humbling."

"I did," Damien agreed. "I needed a lot of things. Therapy. Consequences. Accountability." He looked at me carefully. "How are we doing? The one-year timeline? Are we making progress?"

It was the first time he'd asked directly in months.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "Some days, I think maybe we can rebuild trust. Other days, I remember everything you've done and I can't imagine ever trusting you again."

"What about today?" Damien asked. "What do you think today?"

I looked at him—this man who'd destroyed so much but was genuinely trying to rebuild. Who was being a good father to Sofia. Who was overturning wrongful convictions. Who was in therapy and working and trying.

"Today, I think you're doing the work," I said. "And that matters."

"Is it enough?" he asked.

"Ask me in nine months," I said.

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That evening, I had dinner with Maya at our favorite restaurant.

"So," Maya said, sipping her wine. "Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?"

"What elephant?" I asked.

"The fact that you're not dating," Maya said bluntly. "You've been separated from Damien for three months. You're young, beautiful, successful—"

"And traumatized," I interrupted. "And dealing with PTSD. And running a company. And raising a baby."

"Okay, fair," Maya conceded. "But Sophia, at some point you're going to have to decide: Are you waiting for Damien? Or are you moving on?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Part of me wants to believe we can rebuild what we had. But another part of me thinks it's insane to even consider it. He lied to me about everything. He built our entire relationship on revenge."

"But he's changed," Maya pointed out.

"Has he?" I asked. "Or is he just performing change because he wants me back?"

"I think you know the answer to that," Maya said gently.

I did know. Damien's redemption wasn't performance—it was genuine. He was destroying himself daily to make amends for what he'd done. He was giving up wealth and status and freedom to overturn wrongful convictions. He was choosing the hard path when the easy one would have been to just disappear.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "What if I let him back in and he hurts me again? What if I'm too damaged to ever trust anyone? What if—"

"What if you spend the rest of your life playing it safe and never taking a risk?" Maya interrupted. "Sophia, I'm not saying you should forgive him. I'm just saying—don't decide based on fear. Decide based on what you actually want."

"I don't know what I want," I said.

"Then keep going to therapy until you figure it out," Maya said. "But don't punish Damien forever just because you're afraid. And don't punish yourself by staying in limbo."

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At my therapy session the next day, Dr. Morrison asked the same question.

"What do you want, Sophia?"

"I want to feel safe," I said immediately.

"From Damien?" she asked.

"From everyone," I said. "From my family, from Marcus, from the possibility that anyone I love might destroy me."

"And has Damien tried to destroy you recently?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"No," I admitted. "He's been—good. Reliable. Present. He shows up for Sofia. He's doing the work. He's exactly who he should have been from the beginning."

"So why can't you forgive him?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"Because what if this is temporary?" I said, tears forming. "What if in a year or five years or ten years, he falls back into old patterns? What if he decides revenge is more important than us again?"

"That's a risk with anyone," Dr. Morrison said gently. "Any partner could hurt you. Any relationship could fail. You can't eliminate risk. You can only decide if someone is worth the risk."

"Is he?" I asked. "Is Damien worth the risk?"

"I can't answer that," Dr. Morrison said. "Only you can."

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That night, I stood in Sofia's nursery watching her sleep in her crib, thinking about risk and trust and the possibility of rebuilding something from ruins.

My phone buzzed with a text from Damien: "Sofia fell asleep in my arms tonight. She was holding my finger. I've never felt more honored or more terrified. Being her father is the most important thing I'll ever do. Thank you for giving me the chance to do it right."

I stared at the message for a long time.

Then I typed back: "You're a good father. She's lucky to have you."

A pause. Then: "Am I still in the running to be your husband again?"

I looked at Sofia, peaceful and innocent, the product of a relationship built on lies that had somehow become real.

"Ask me in nine months," I typed. "But Damien—yes. You're still in the running."

Three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then reappeared.

Finally: \*"I won't let you down. I promise."\*

I wanted to believe him.

Maybe, with time, I would.

For now, I had a company to rebuild, a daughter to raise, and a life to figure out.

The rest would come.

Or it wouldn't.

Either way, I would survive.

Because that's what I did now.

I survived.

And slowly—so slowly—I healed.