

The Heiress He Threw Away Chapter 22 - Six Months Later

Chapter 22: Six Months Later

My mother was sentenced on a cold morning in November.

I sat in the courtroom with my father on one side and Victoria on the other, watching as the judge read the terms of her plea agreement. Three years in minimum security federal prison, followed by five years of supervised probation.

"Mrs. Hart," the judge said, looking at my mother over her reading glasses, "you have cooperated fully with federal investigators. You've shown genuine remorse. You've begun making restitution to victims. These factors have been considered in your sentencing."

My mother stood with her lawyer, her head bowed. She looked smaller than I remembered—older, frailer, stripped of the commanding presence she'd once had.

"However," the judge continued, "your crimes enabled significant harm. People lost their businesses, their livelihoods, their faith in the justice system. You chose comfort over conscience for many years. Three years is lenient, Mrs. Hart. I hope you use this time wisely."

"I will, Your Honor," my mother said, her voice barely audible.

After the sentencing, I was allowed a brief meeting with her before she was transferred to the facility.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," my mother said, her hands shaking.

"I needed to see it," I said. "We all did. It's part of accountability."

"Will you bring Sofia to visit me?" my mother asked. "Once I'm settled?"

I thought about it carefully. "When she's older. When she can understand. I won't lie to her about where you are or why. But I also won't expose her to prison while she's still a baby."

"That's fair," my mother said, tears streaming down her face. "You're a better mother than I ever was."

"I'm trying to be," I said. "That's all any of us can do."

The Hart Empire turned its first ethical profit in month six.

It was small—barely enough to cover operating costs—but it was real. Legal. Clean.

I stood in front of the board presenting quarterly results, watching their skeptical faces gradually shift to surprised approval.

"We've lost forty-two percent of our previous revenue," I said. "But we've gained something more valuable: legitimacy. Three major investors have approached us about partnerships specifically because of our ethical restructuring. We're being featured in business journals as a model for corporate redemption."

"That doesn't pay our employees," one board member pointed out.

"No," I agreed. "But profitability does. And we're projected to be fully profitable within eighteen months. We're rebuilding slowly, but we're rebuilding sustainably."

My father, sitting in the advisory corner, smiled with genuine pride.

After the meeting, he pulled me aside. "Your grandmother would have been proud of you. She always believed business could be both profitable and ethical. I forgot that lesson. You're reminding me."

"I'm trying," I said. "Some days I wonder if it's worth it. If we should just liquidate everything and start over."

"But you don't," my father observed. "Because you're stubborn. Like your grandmother. Like me, for better or worse."

"Stubborn enough to rebuild a corrupt empire into something decent," I said.

"That's not stubbornness," my father said. "That's courage."

Damien called me on a Wednesday night, his voice tight with emotion.

"We hit fifteen," he said without preamble.

"Fifteen wrongful convictions overturned?" I asked.

"Fifteen innocent people free because I finally told the truth," Damien confirmed. "Fifteen lives I destroyed that I'm slowly giving back. The FBI thinks there might be twenty more cases."

"Twenty more," I repeated, the number hitting me like a weight.

"I know," Damien said quietly. "Twenty more innocent people in prison because of me. Twenty more families destroyed. Sometimes I lie awake at night thinking about them all—the people still locked up because I fabricated evidence. The lives I ruined for revenge."

"But you're fixing it," I said. "That has to count for something."

"Does it?" Damien asked. "If I destroy a hundred lives and manage to save thirty, am I a good person? Or just less terrible than I was?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But you're asking the right questions. That matters."

There was a long pause. Then: "How are we doing? The timeline? Six months down, six months to go."

"We're doing okay," I said carefully. "You're being a good father. You're doing the work. You're not pressuring me."

"But?" Damien prompted.

"But I'm still scared," I admitted. "Scared to trust you. Scared to let you back in. Scared that if I do, you'll hurt me again."

"I won't," Damien said immediately.

"You can't promise that," I said. "No one can promise that. That's what Dr. Morrison keeps telling me—relationships are risks. The question is whether you're worth the risk."

"And?" Damien asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "Am I?"

I thought about the last six months. The consistent co-parenting. The therapy. The wrongful convictions overturned. The man who showed up for Sofia every single time without fail.

"I think so," I said finally. "But Damien, if we try this again—if I let you back in—it has to be different. Complete honesty. Complete transparency. The moment you lie to me about anything, we're done. Forever."

"I understand," Damien said. "And Sophia? I won't lie to you. Ever again. I'd rather lose you with the truth than keep you with a lie."

"We'll see," I said. "Six more months. Then we decide."

Sofia turned eight months old on a Saturday.

I threw a small gathering—not a party, just family. My father. Elena. Maya. Victoria. And Damien, who arrived with a stuffed giraffe almost as big as Sofia herself.

"Dada!" Sofia squealed when she saw him, and everyone froze.

"Did she just—" Damien started, his eyes wide.

"Say dada?" I finished, smiling despite the pang in my chest. "Yes. She learned it yesterday. I was going to tell you, but I guess she wanted to surprise you herself."

Damien picked up Sofia and spun her around, both of them laughing. "Say it again, bug. Say dada."

"Dada!" Sofia repeated obligingly, grabbing his face.

I watched them together and felt something shift inside me. This man—this complicated, broken, trying man—was a good father. Whatever else he was, whatever he'd done, he loved our daughter completely.

Maybe that was enough to build on.

After cake (which Sofia mostly wore rather than ate), people started leaving. Damien stayed to help clean up.

"You don't have to do that," I said as he loaded the dishwasher.

"I want to," he said. "Besides, this is what family does, right? Shows up. Helps out. Stays."

"Is that what we are?" I asked. "Family?"

Damien paused, his hands in the soapy water. "I hope so. Maybe not the traditional kind. But Sofia's family. And you and I—we're figuring out what we are."

"Six more months," I reminded him.

"Six more months," he agreed. "And then?"

"And then we decide if we're brave enough to try again," I said.

That night, after everyone left and Sofia was asleep, I sat in my office reviewing reports when I heard a knock.

Damien stood in the doorway. "I'm heading out, but I wanted to ask—would you have dinner with me? Next week, not as co-parents, but as—as two people figuring things out?"

"Like a date?" I asked.

"Like a date," Damien confirmed. "Nothing fancy. Just dinner and conversation. A chance to be Sophia and Damien instead of Sofia's parents."

I should have said no. We had six months to go. We were supposed to be taking it slow.

But I was tired of being cautious. Tired of protecting myself from possibilities.

"Yes," I said. "Dinner. Next Thursday."

Damien's face lit up with the first genuine smile I'd seen from him in months. "Really?"

"Really," I confirmed. "But Damien—this is a test. If it goes badly, if I feel pressured or uncomfortable, we go back to just co-parenting. Understood?"

"Understood," Damien said. "Thank you. For giving me a chance."

After he left, I sat alone in my office, wondering if I was making a terrible mistake or finally taking a step toward healing.

Dr. Morrison's words echoed in my mind: *You can't eliminate risk. You can only decide if someone is worth the risk.*

Maybe Damien was worth it.

Maybe I was strong enough now to risk being hurt again.

Maybe we could build something new from the ashes of what we'd destroyed.

Or maybe this dinner would prove that some things were too broken to fix.

Only one way to find out.

Thursday arrived faster than I expected.

I stood in front of my closet, paralyzed by indecision. What did you wear to dinner with your separated husband who you might be falling in love with again?

"The blue dress," Maya said from my doorway, holding up a simple navy sheath.
"Classic, elegant, not trying too hard."

"I'm terrified," I admitted.

"Good," Maya said. "That means it matters. If you weren't scared, I'd be worried you didn't care."

She helped me get ready, and at seven sharp, Damien arrived at the door wearing a suit I'd never seen before.

"You look beautiful," he said.

"You look nervous," I replied.

"I am nervous," Damien admitted. "I'm terrified I'll say the wrong thing and ruin this."

"Then don't say the wrong thing," I suggested.

He laughed—genuinely laughed—and some of the tension dissipated.

We drove to a small Italian restaurant I'd never been to. Nothing fancy, nothing that carried memories of our previous life.

Over pasta and wine, we talked.

Not about Sofia. Not about wrongful convictions or corporate restructuring or therapy.

We talked about books we'd read, movies we'd seen, stupid things that made us laugh. We talked like two people getting to know each other, not like two people with a complicated, painful history.

"I forgot how funny you are," I said at one point.

"I forgot how to be funny," Damien admitted. "Revenge consumed everything. Even my personality. I became this single-minded, obsessed person who couldn't see beyond destroying your father."

"And now?" I asked.

"Now I'm trying to remember who I was before all of that," Damien said. "The man my father wanted me to be. Someone who believes in justice, not revenge. Someone who builds instead of destroys."

"Are you finding him?" I asked. "That person?"

"Some days," Damien said. "Other days I just feel like I'm pretending. Going through the motions of being a good person while still feeling like a monster inside."

"You're not a monster," I said.

"How do you know?" Damien asked.

"Because monsters don't question whether they're monsters," I said. "They don't spend years overturning wrongful convictions. They don't cry when their daughter says dada. You're a man who did monstrous things and is trying to be better. That's different."

Damien's eyes were wet. "Do you think you could love that person? The one I'm trying to become?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I think I could try."

We talked until the restaurant closed. Until the waiter gently suggested we might want to leave. Until the street lights came on and the city settled into its nighttime rhythm.

At my door, Damien walked me up the steps but didn't try to come inside.

"Thank you," he said. "For tonight. For giving me a chance."

"Thank you for being patient," I said. "For not pushing. For doing the work."

"Can we do this again?" Damien asked. "Next week?"

I should have said we should wait. Should have said we were moving too fast.

Instead, I said, "Yes. Next Thursday. Same time."

Damien smiled, and for the first time in six months, I felt something like hope.

Maybe we were broken. Maybe we'd always be broken.

But maybe—just maybe—we could be broken together.

And maybe that was enough.