

The Heiress He Threw Away Chapter 23 - Nine Months Later

Chapter 23: Nine Months Later

The call came at two in the morning.

I jerked awake to my phone buzzing insistently. Damien's name flashed on the screen.

"Hello?" I answered groggily, immediately alert. It was his night with Sofia. "Is she okay? What's wrong?"

"Sofia's fine," Damien said quickly. "She's sleeping. But Sophia—I need to tell you something. And I need to tell you now, before I lose my nerve."

I sat up, turning on the bedside lamp. "What happened?"

"I got a call tonight," Damien said, his voice shaking. "From Marcus Hart's lawyer. Marcus is dying. Cancer. He has maybe three months. And he wants to see me."

My blood ran cold. "Why?"

"He says he has information about other cases. Other people he manipulated. He wants to make a deathbed confession, and he'll only talk to me." Damien paused. "The FBI wants me to go. They think he might reveal evidence that could free more innocent people."

"Are you going to do it?" I asked.

"That's why I'm calling," Damien said. "Because three months ago—hell, three weeks ago—I would have just done it. I would have made the decision and told you after. But I promised you complete honesty. Complete transparency. So I'm asking: Do you think I should go?"

I was silent for a long moment, processing. This was a test. Not one I'd planned, but a test nonetheless.

"Do you want to go?" I asked finally.

"Part of me does," Damien admitted. "If Marcus knows about other victims, other manipulations, I need to hear it. But another part of me—" he paused, "—another part of me is terrified that seeing him will drag me back into that darkness. That I'll sit across from the man who manipulated me for fifteen years and I'll become that person again."

"You won't," I said firmly. "You're not that person anymore."

"How do you know?" Damien asked.

"Because that person wouldn't have called me at 2 AM to ask what he should do," I said. "That person would have made the decision alone. The fact that you're asking means you've already changed."

I heard him exhale shakily. "So you think I should go?"

"I think you should do what you need to do," I said carefully. "But Damien—if you go, I want to come with you."

"What?" Damien said, surprised. "Sophia, you don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to," I interrupted. "But Marcus Hart tried to kill me. He threatened our daughter. If he's going to confess to anything, I want to hear it. I want to look him in the eye one more time."

"Are you sure?" Damien asked. "It could be traumatic. You've been doing so well in therapy—"

"Which is exactly why I can handle this," I said. "I'm not the terrified woman he held hostage anymore. I'm stronger now. And if this helps free innocent people, if this brings closure—I want to be there."

There was a long silence. Then: "Okay. We'll go together. Tomorrow. The FBI is arranging transport to the facility."

"Tomorrow," I repeated. "I'll have Elena watch Sofia."

"Sophia?" Damien said quietly. "Thank you. For trusting me. For believing I won't fall back into old patterns."

"Don't make me regret it," I said, but my tone was gentle.

After hanging up, I lay awake for hours, thinking about Marcus Hart. The man who'd orchestrated so much destruction. The man who was now dying.

Part of me felt satisfied. Justice, in a way.

But mostly, I just felt tired.

The next day, Damien and I drove to the federal medical facility in silence.

Agent Chen met us in the parking lot. "Are you both sure about this? Marcus Hart is manipulative even on his deathbed. He might try to play mind games."

"We're sure," I said firmly.

"Alright," Chen said. "He's agreed to have his confession recorded. Anything he says can be used in ongoing investigations. But be warned—he's not doing this out of goodness. He's doing it because he wants to control his legacy."

Marcus Hart looked nothing like the man who'd held a syringe to my neck nine months ago.

He was skeletal, his skin gray, tubes and monitors attached to his failing body. But his eyes—his eyes were still sharp. Still calculating.

"Sophia," he said, his voice weak but unmistakable. "And Damien. How touching. The happy couple reunited."

"We're not here for your commentary," Agent Chen said sharply. "You said you had information."

"I do," Marcus said, turning his attention to Damien. "I manipulated you for fifteen years. But you weren't my only puppet. There were others. Seven other people I used the same way—feeding them information, pointing them at targets, letting them think they were the architects of their own revenge while I pulled the strings."

"Who?" Damien asked, his voice tight.

Marcus rattled off names—business associates, lawyers, even a federal prosecutor. Each one someone he'd manipulated into destroying his enemies while keeping his own hands clean.

"I have evidence," Marcus continued. "Documents, recordings, everything you need to prove these people were manipulated the same way Damien was. It's all in a storage unit in Virginia. The key and location are in my lawyer's possession. He'll give them to Agent Chen upon my death."

"Why wait until you're dead?" I asked. "Why not give them now?"

Marcus smiled—that same cold smile I remembered. "Because I want insurance that I'm treated with dignity until the end. The moment I give up that evidence, I become useless. This way, you have to wait."

"You're still manipulating people even as you die," I said, disgusted.

"I'm a practical man," Marcus said. "Even now." His eyes fixed on me. "You survived, Sophia. I'm impressed. Most people I've tried to kill stay dead."

"That's not funny," Damien said, his fists clenched.

"It wasn't meant to be," Marcus said. "I'm simply acknowledging that you're stronger than I gave you credit for. You and Damien both. I thought destroying your family would break you. Instead, you rebuilt. Irritating, really."

"Is that why you're confessing?" I asked. "Because we didn't break?"

"I'm confessing because I'm dying," Marcus said bluntly. "And because I'd rather be remembered as the genius who orchestrated dozens of manipulations than the failure who got caught. Legacy, Sophia. In the end, that's all any of us have."

"Your legacy is destruction," I said. "That's all you'll be remembered for."

"Perhaps," Marcus said. "But I'll be remembered. Will you? The heiress who was thrown away and spent her life trying to be good enough? Or will you finally become someone worth remembering?"

Before I could respond, Damien stood up. "We're done here. You've given your information. We'll wait for your death and retrieve the evidence. Goodbye, Marcus."

"Damien," Marcus called out as we turned to leave. "I did you a favor, you know. By manipulating you. By pointing you at Richard Hart. I gave your pathetic life purpose. Without me, you'd still be a nobody consumed by rage with nowhere to direct it."

Damien turned back slowly. "You're right. You did give my life direction. But I'm taking it back now. Every wrongful conviction I overturn, every life I help restore—that's me undoing your legacy. And when you're dead and buried, I'll still be here, still working to erase every trace of your manipulation. So thank you, Marcus. Thank you for showing me exactly the kind of man I never want to be."

We left Marcus Hart dying in his hospital bed, his empire crumbled, his manipulations exposed, his legacy nothing but pain and destruction.

In the car, Damien was quiet for a long time.

"Are you okay?" I asked finally.

"I thought I'd feel something," Damien said. "Satisfaction. Vindication. Closure. Something. But I just feel... empty. He's dying, and I don't care. Does that make me a bad person?"

"It makes you human," I said. "He tried to destroy you. Why should you care about his death?"

"Because he's still a person," Damien said. "A terrible person, but a person. And I spent so many years consumed by revenge, I'm afraid that not caring about his death means I'm still that person inside."

I reached over and took his hand. "You're not. Trust me. I'd know."

"How?" Damien asked.

"Because the man I married nine months ago wouldn't have called me before making a decision," I said. "Wouldn't have asked my opinion. Wouldn't have let me come with him. You've changed, Damien. I see it. Even if you don't yet."

That night, we picked up Sofia together from Elena's house.

"Mama! Dada!" Sofia shrieked when she saw us, holding out her arms.

We took her home—to my home, technically, though the lines were blurring—and put her to bed together.

"Can I stay tonight?" Damien asked as we stood in Sofia's nursery, watching her sleep. "Not—not in your room. Just in the guest room. I don't want to be alone after today."

"You can stay," I said.

We went downstairs and sat in the living room with tea, processing everything we'd witnessed.

"Three more months," Damien said. "Until the year is up. Until you decide."

"I know," I said.

"Have you decided?" he asked. "Are you going to give me another chance?"

I looked at this man who'd called me before making a decision. Who'd let me come with him to face his demons. Who'd stood up to Marcus Hart's manipulation even in his final moments.

"I think I already have," I said quietly.

Damien's eyes widened. "What?"

"I've been giving you chances for nine months," I said. "Every time you showed up for Sofia. Every time you went to therapy. Every time you chose honesty over convenience. Every wrongful conviction you overturned. Those were all chances. And you haven't wasted a single one."

"So we're—" Damien started.

"We're not rushing anything," I interrupted. "We're still taking it slow. We're still doing therapy. We're still building trust. But Damien—yes. I want to try. Really try. To rebuild what we had. To build something better."

Damien crossed the room and pulled me into his arms. I let myself relax against him, feeling safe in a way I hadn't in months.

"I love you," he whispered. "I never stopped loving you."

"I know," I said. "I never stopped either. Even when I hated you. Even when I was terrified of you. I never stopped loving you."

"Is that enough?" Damien asked. "Love?"

"No," I said honestly. "But it's a start. And with therapy, and honesty, and time—maybe we can build something strong enough to last."

We stood there holding each other while Sofia slept upstairs and the house settled into nighttime quiet.

We weren't fixed. We weren't healed. We weren't the perfect family we'd once pretended to be.

But we were real.

And maybe that was enough.

Two weeks later, Marcus Hart died in his sleep.

Agent Chen retrieved the evidence from the storage unit. Seven more people had been manipulated by Marcus, their revenges orchestrated to serve his purposes.

Three of them had already served their sentences. Four were still entangled in legal proceedings.

Damien immediately began working with their lawyers, using his own experience to help prove they'd been manipulated.

"This could take years," he told me. "Helping them all. Undoing everything Marcus did."

"Then it takes years," I said. "We have time."

"We do?" Damien asked hopefully.

"We do," I confirmed. "Because I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you."

Three months to the one-year mark.

But I'd already made my decision.

Damien had earned his second chance.

Now we just had to prove we could keep it.