

The Heiress He Threw Away Chapter 24 - One Year

Chapter 24: One Year

The day marked one year since everything fell apart.

One year since Marcus Hart had held a syringe to my neck. One year since I'd nearly died. One year since the FBI arrested the man who'd orchestrated so much destruction.

But it also marked one year of healing.

I stood in front of my closet, staring at the simple white dress hanging there. Not a wedding dress—I wasn't ready for that level of symbolism—but something new. Something that represented starting over.

"You look nervous," Maya observed from my bed, where she was helping me get ready.

"I am nervous," I admitted. "What if this is a mistake? What if I'm making the same choice I made a year ago—trusting someone who'll hurt me?"

"It's not the same choice," Maya said firmly. "A year ago, you married a man you barely knew who was using you for revenge. Today, you're choosing a man who's spent twelve months proving he's changed. That's completely different."

"Is it?" I asked.

"Yes," Maya said. "Because this time, you're choosing him with your eyes open. You know his worst qualities. You know what he's capable of. And you're still choosing him. That's not naivety, Sophia. That's courage."

I took a deep breath and put on the dress.

Damien had planned everything.

Not a big ceremony—we'd done that once, and it had been built on lies. This time, it was small. Intimate. Real.

Just me, Damien, Sofia, Elena, Maya, Victoria, my father, and Dr. Morrison, who'd agreed to officiate.

We gathered in the mansion gardens at sunset, the same gardens where I'd once stood broken and alone, planning my escape from a life of betrayal.

Now those gardens represented something different: the possibility of rebuilding. Of choosing hope over fear.

Damien stood waiting for me, wearing a simple gray suit, holding Sofia in his arms. Our daughter was wearing a white dress that matched mine, her dark hair tied up with a ribbon.

"Mama!" she called out when she saw me, reaching for me with chubby arms.

I walked to them—to my family—and took Sofia, holding her between us.

"We're gathered here today," Dr. Morrison began, "not for a wedding, but for a renewal. A commitment. A choice to move forward together, knowing the past but not being defined by it."

I looked at Damien, this man I'd hated and loved and feared and forgiven.

"A year ago," Dr. Morrison continued, "you were both broken people who'd hurt each other deeply. You could have chosen to stay broken. To let your pain define your future. Instead, you chose healing. You chose therapy. You chose honesty. And you chose each other, again and again, day after day."

"Damien," Dr. Morrison said, "do you have something you'd like to say?"

Damien took a deep breath. "Sophia, a year ago, I told you I loved you, and you didn't believe me. You had every reason not to. I'd lied about everything else. Why would love be different?"

He pulled out a folded piece of paper. "So I wrote down everything I did this year to prove it. Every wrongful conviction I helped overturn. Every therapy session I attended. Every time I chose honesty over convenience. Every moment I showed up for Sofia. Every—"

His voice broke, and he crumpled the paper. "But that's still just a list. It's still me trying to prove something. So instead, I'll just say this: I love you. I've always loved you. And I will spend the rest of my life being worthy of that love. Not because I have to. Because I want to."

Tears streamed down my face.

"Sophia," Dr. Morrison prompted gently. "Your turn."

I looked at Damien, then down at Sofia in my arms, then back at him.

"I don't have a list," I said. "I don't have a prepared speech. I just have the truth: loving you has been the hardest thing I've ever done. Harder than running a company. Harder than facing Marcus. Harder than surviving betrayal and manipulation and near-death."

"But it's also been worth it," I continued. "Because you gave me Sofia. You gave me the push to reclaim my life. And you showed me that people can change. That mistakes don't have to be permanent. That choosing to be better matters."

I took his hand. "So yes. I choose you. I choose us. I choose this messy, complicated, beautiful life we're building. For however long we have."

Damien pulled a ring from his pocket—not the wedding ring I'd thrown at him a year ago, but something new. A simple band with three small stones: one for me, one for him, one for Sofia.

"We're a family," he said, sliding it onto my finger. "No matter what. Even if this doesn't work. Even if we can't make it. We'll always be Sofia's parents. We'll always be connected. But I hope—I really hope—that we can be more than that."

"We can," I said. "We will."

I pulled out my own ring for him—a matching band. "You're not the man you were. I'm not the woman I was. We're different now. Better. And I want to see who we become next."

Dr. Morrison smiled. "Then by the power vested in me by two people who've done twelve months of intensive therapy, I pronounce you... trying. You're trying to be better. You're trying to build something real. And that's enough."

It wasn't a traditional ceremony. There was no "I do." No pronouncement of husband and wife. No kiss to seal the deal.

Just two broken people choosing to heal together.

And somehow, that felt more meaningful than any traditional wedding could have been.

We celebrated with dinner in the garden—nothing fancy, just good food and family and laughter.

My father gave a toast. "To Sophia and Damien. Who taught me that it's never too late to become the person you should have been all along."

Victoria raised her glass. "To second chances. And to the people brave enough to give them."

Elena, holding back tears, simply said, "To family. The one we're born into and the one we choose."

Maya, always the most emotional, couldn't even get words out. She just cried and hugged us both.

After dinner, Damien and I walked through the gardens alone, Sofia asleep in her stroller between us.

"So," Damien said. "What now?"

"Now we see if we can actually do this," I said. "Live together. Be partners. Build a life that doesn't fall apart when things get hard."

"I'm moving back in?" Damien asked carefully.

"Slowly," I said. "We'll start with weekends. See how it goes. Build up to full-time. No rushing."

"No rushing," Damien agreed. "And if it doesn't work—"

"Then we figure it out," I said. "We co-parent. We stay friends. We don't let our relationship ruin what we've built. But Damien—" I stopped walking and turned to face him, "—I think it will work. I really do."

"Why?" he asked. "What's different now?"

"Everything," I said simply. "A year ago, we were strangers playing at marriage. Now we know each other. Really know each other. The good, the bad, the terrible. And we're still here."

Damien pulled me close, and I let him. Let myself feel safe in his arms. Let myself believe that this time, it would be different.

"I have something to tell you," Damien said quietly.

My heart clenched. "What?"

"I've been talking to my therapist about it for weeks, trying to decide if I should say anything." He pulled back to look at me. "The FBI offered me a job. Working with their wrongful conviction unit. Helping them identify and overturn cases where evidence was tampered with."

"That's amazing," I said. "You should take it."

"It means I'd be busy," Damien said. "Traveling sometimes. Working long hours. Less time with Sofia."

"But doing something meaningful," I said. "Making amends. That's what you need. What we both need—to know you're actively making things better."

"You're sure?" Damien asked.

"I'm sure," I said. "Take the job. Build your career on redemption instead of destruction. Show Sofia that when you make mistakes, you spend your life fixing them."

Damien kissed me then—soft and careful, like he was afraid I might break.

"I love you," he whispered against my lips.

"I love you too," I said. "And this time, I actually believe it."

That night, after everyone left and Sofia was in bed, Damien and I sat on the terrace overlooking the city.

"One year," he said. "We did it."

"We survived," I corrected. "That's different from doing it."

"Is it?" Damien asked.

"Maybe not," I admitted. "Maybe surviving is enough."

We sat in comfortable silence, and I thought about everything that had led us here. The betrayal. The revenge. The manipulation. The near-death. The slow, painful healing.

"Do you think we'll make it?" Damien asked. "Long-term?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I know we'll try. And I know that whatever happens, Sofia will grow up seeing two parents who chose courage over fear. Who chose healing over bitterness. Who chose love even when it was hard."

"That's a good legacy," Damien said.

"Better than Marcus's," I agreed.

We stayed there until late into the night, planning our future, dreaming about what life could be, believing—for the first time in a long time—that happy endings might actually be possible.

Not perfect endings. Not fairy tale endings.

But real ones.

The kind built on honesty and hard work and choosing each other every single day.

And maybe that was better than perfect anyway.

Three Weeks Later

Damien moved back into the mansion on a Saturday morning.

Not into my bedroom—we were still taking it slow. But into the guest room next to Sofia's nursery. Close enough to be a family. Far enough to maintain boundaries.

"This feels right," he said as we unpacked his clothes.

"It does," I agreed. "Strange, but right."

Sofia toddled over—she was walking now, eleven months old and impossibly mobile—and grabbed both our hands.

"Mama. Dada. Home," she said clearly.

Damien and I looked at each other, tears in our eyes.

"Yeah, bug," Damien said, picking her up. "We're home."

And for the first time in over a year, it actually felt true.

We were home.

Not because the mansion was perfect or because our relationship was fixed or because all our problems had disappeared.

But because we were together, trying, healing, building something real from the ruins of what we'd destroyed.

The Hart Empire was thriving under ethical leadership.

Twenty-three wrongful convictions had been overturned.

My mother would be released in two years.

My father was rebuilding his life and his relationship with his granddaughter.

Victoria was running a non-profit for abuse survivors.

Elena was engaged to a kind man who treated her like she deserved.

Maya was planning her own wedding.

And Damien and I—we were trying.

Every day, we were trying.

And that, finally, felt like enough.

The heiress who'd been thrown away had found her way back.

Not to who she was before.

But to someone better.

Someone stronger.

Someone who knew that the only way to truly heal was to risk being hurt again.

And that the only way to truly love was to choose it, consciously, every single day.

So that's what we did.

We chose each other.

Every day.

And that made all the difference.