

The rain didn't just fall outside the tinted windows of the armored SUV. It slammed against the glass like a warning, smearing the neon lights of the city into bleeding streaks of crimson and gold.

Inside, the air was suffocatingly thick.

It smelled expensive. It smelled of dark leather, rain, and the rich, woodsy bite of sandalwood cologne that had haunted my worst nightmares for three years.

My chest rose and fell in ragged, shallow gasps.

My knuckles were white where I gripped the edge of the leather seat, my mind still reeling from the chaos at the gallery twenty minutes ago. The shattered glass. The shadow bursting through the back door. The violent, sudden intrusion that had made my heart plummet into my throat.

And then *him*.

"Let me out of this car, Damien."

My voice trembled, but I hated the sound of it, so I dragged a rasp of acid over the words to sharpen them into a blade.

Damien Vance didn't even turn his head.

He sat beside me in the dim interior, an imposing silhouette cut from pure obsidian. His tailored suit jacket was buttoned tightly across broad, unrelenting shoulders. His long legs were casually crossed, a silver signet ring gleaming on his hand as his fingers rested on his knee.

He was the absolute center of gravity in the vehicle, radiating a heavy, dangerous heat that made the skin on my arms prickle.

"No," he said.

His voice was a low, smooth gravel—a quiet command that left zero room for negotiation.

"You don't get to say 'no' to me!" I snapped, twisting around in my seat to face him fully. "I have a life. I have an art gallery with three broken display cases and a police report to file. Pull this car over right now!"

Damien slowly turned his head.

His eyes were pitch black in the passing streetlights, cold and utterly unreadable. His jawline was sharp enough to slice marble, framed by dark hair pushed back from his forehead.

He looked at me the way an apex predator looks at a rabbit making noise in its jaw.

"The police are already handled, Clara," he said softly, his voice cutting through my rising hysteria like a velvet cloak over steel. "And your gallery is currently being boarded up by my men."

"Your men?" My blood boiled, hot and volatile. "I didn't ask for your men! I didn't ask for *you*!"

"You didn't have a choice."

He leaned in slightly, just an inch, but the sudden shift in proximity blew through my defenses like a hurricane.

The warmth radiating off his massive frame hit me all at once. I caught the faint, metallic tang of rain clinging to his jacket, mixed with the dark scent that was entirely his own.

"Someone tried to take you tonight," Damien murmured, his dark eyes locking onto mine with absolute, suffocating intensity. "If my team hadn't been watching your block, you wouldn't be yelling at me right now. You'd be in the back of a unmarked van with a rag over your mouth."

A icy shudder ran down my spine, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing me flinch.

I clamped my jaw shut, glaring at him through the shadows.

"I don't need a savior, Vance," I whispered, spite dripping from every syllable.

"Especially not a criminal masquerading as a billionaire."

A ghost of a smirk touched the corner of his sculpted lips, sharp and devoid of warmth.

"You don't need a savior," he agreed quiet smoothly. "You need a monster that's bigger than the ones coming after you. And luckily for you, sweetheart... I'm the biggest one in this city."

Before I could hurl another insult at his arrogant head, the SUV slowed to a smooth stop.

The dark glass panels outside shifted as we rolled into a subterranean private garage. Steel security gates groaned closed behind us, cutting off the sound of the rain completely.

The vehicle parked. The silence inside the cabin instantly stretched as thin as piano wire.

The driver's door opened, and a towering guard in a black tactical suit opened my door, stepping back with his head bowed slightly.

Damien uncrossed his legs and stepped out into the chilly concrete bay, holding his hand out to me.

I looked at his open palm—strong, calloused hands that had ordered the downfall of dozens of men—and sneered.

I pushed past him without taking it, my feet hitting the slick concrete floor.

"Where are we?" I demanded, turning around, my eyes darting across the high-tech garage. Exotic cars sat wrapped in dark shadows, surrounded by sleek silver pillars and heavily armed guards stationed at every elevator bank.

"Home," Damien said behind me.

His hand caught the small of my back, his palm so warm it burned right through the thin fabric of my silk blouse.

I gasped, jumping at the contact, and spun to shove his chest.

"Don't touch me!" I hissed.

My palms hit the wall of his chest. It was like striking solid oak. He didn't budge an inch.

Instead, he stood his ground, looking down at me with a lazy, possessive dominance that made my stomach do a dangerous, unwanted flip.

"Walk, Clara," he commanded quietly. "Or I pick you up and carry you. Choose quickly. I have very little patience left tonight."

My jaw worked uselessly. The fiery rage inside me wanted to strike him, to tear at that smooth, unbothered composure until he bled. But the raw, unyielding promise in his obsidian eyes told me he wasn't bluffing.

He would toss me over his broad shoulder without a second thought.

I ground my teeth together so hard my jaw ached, turned on my heel, and marched toward the private elevator.

Damien stepped in right behind me, his towering presence instantly filling the small metal box. The doors slid shut with a silent, heavy hiss, locking us inside.

The elevator shot upward, the floor pressing against the soles of my shoes.

I stared intently at the glowing floor numbers ticking upward, trying to focus on anything other than the oppressive heat radiating off the man standing an arm's length away.

I could hear his steady, measured breathing.

I could feel his eyes on me, trailing down the side of my neck, mapping the quick, frantic pulse fluttering at the base of my throat.

"Why are you doing this?" I murmured to the doors, my voice barely louder than a breath. "We hate each other, Damien. You've spent three years trying to buy out my gallery's block, and I've spent three years telling you to go to hell."

"That was business," Damien replied, his tone chillingly smooth.

"And what is this?" I spat, turning my head to glare at him. "A hobby?"

Damien didn't answer right away.

He stepped closer, closing the tiny distance between us until the front of his expensive suit brushed against my shoulder.

He towered over me, forcing me to tilt my chin up just to keep eye contact.

"This is personal," he said softly.

The elevator chimed, a soft, polite sound that shattered the breathless stillness between us.

The doors slid open, revealing the grand entryway of his penthouse.

My breath caught in my throat despite myself.

The space was breathtaking, an imposing masterpiece of dark glass, matte-black steel, and minimalist luxury. Modern art hung on textured slate walls, lit by soft, amber accent lights.

Framed by two-story glass windows overlooking the storm-swept skyline of the metropolis, the city looked like a scattering of fallen diamonds in the dark.

It was gorgeous.

It was a fortress.

It was a golden cage.

"Welcome to the glass house," Damien murmured, stepping past me into the wide foyer.

He unbuttoned his suit jacket, pulling it off his shoulders to reveal the broad span of his back and the tight white dress shirt clinging to his muscles beneath. He tossed the jacket onto a dark leather sofa like it meant nothing.

A guard standing near the hallway bowed his head quietly before stepping into the shadows, leaving us entirely alone in the massive space.

"You can't keep me here," I said, walking slowly into the center of the living room, my heels clicking sharply on the polished dark floors. "I am a private citizen. You are kidnapping me."

"I am saving your life," Damien corrected, walking over to a sleek bar made of dark mahogany. He poured two fingers of amber liquid into a crystal glass. "There is a difference."

"Not from where I'm standing!" I raised my voice, the exhaustion and adrenaline finally catching up to me, threatening to burst through my composure. "You don't get to decide where I sleep! You don't get to decide who protects me!"

Damien took a slow sip of his drink, his eyes watching me over the rim of the glass.

"The man who attacked your gallery tonight wasn't an amateur, Clara," he said, his voice dropping into a register that made the hairs on my arms stand up. "He bypassed three layer-two security systems before he broke your display glass. He was sent by people who do not negotiate. People who take what they want and burn the rest."

He set the glass down with a heavy *clink* on the marble counter.

"If you walk out that front door tonight, you won't make it three blocks before someone slides a blade between your ribs."

I swallowed hard, the cold reality of his words settling like lead in my stomach.

I remembered the heavy footsteps behind me in the dark gallery. The cold shadow rising over me. The terrifying moment before Damien's men had shattered the side doors and pulled me away.

I was terrified.

But looking at Damien Vance—looking at the dark, possessive hunger lurking just beneath his polished exterior—I knew the threat outside was only half the danger.

"I want to go to sleep," I said flatly, my voice dropping into a hard, defensive shell. "I'm tired, I'm wet from the rain, and I refuse to stand here and listen to your dramatic lectures."

Damien stared at me for a long beat, his dark eyes searching my face, reading every hidden tremor of fear I tried so desperately to mask behind my anger.

"Follow me," he said quietly.

He turned and led the way down a wide, dimly lit hallway clad in dark timber panels.

I followed two paces behind, my mind racing, desperately scanning the layout of the penthouse for exits, fire escapes, anything that could offer me a way out when he wasn't looking.

Damien stopped at the end of the hall, pushing open a massive dark-oak door.

"Your quarters," he said, stepping aside.

I paused at the threshold, peeking inside.

The room was vast, dominated by a massive king-sized bed wrapped in plush charcoal linens. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a terrifyingly beautiful view of the rain-slicked city below. A private bathroom was visible through a frosted glass door to the left.

It was luxury fit for royalty, but to me, it looked like a cell.

"Where are you sleeping?" I asked sharply, turning to face him in the doorway.

Damien rested one hand on the heavy doorframe above my head, leaning in slightly. The dark scent of his sandalwood cologne enveloped me once more, heavy and intoxicating.

"My suite is down the hall," he murmured, his thumb lightly brushing against the edge of the wooden doorframe, inches from my hair. "Don't worry, Clara. I won't be invading your bed tonight."

"Good," I shot back, taking a protective step back into the bedroom to put space between us. "Because if you try, I'll use whatever heavy object I can find to break your jaw."

Damien's lips twitched upward into a slow, dangerous smile that sent a shiver straight down my spine.

"Sleep tight, Clara," he whispered.

He took a step back into the hallway, catching the edge of the heavy oak door.

"Damien," I called out, my voice cracking slightly despite my best efforts.

He paused, looking at me through the narrowing gap.

"This isn't over," I told him, holding his dark gaze with everything I had left. "You can't keep me forever."

"We'll see," he said simply.

He pulled the door shut.

The heavy wood swung into the frame with a solid, muffled thud.

I stood in the center of the luxurious room, breathing a heavy sigh of relief as his presence finally receded. I turned toward the bed, my shoulders sagging as the exhaustion finally pulled at my bones.

Then, a sharp, mechanical chime echoed through the quiet room.

*CLICK.*

A loud, heavy electronic deadbolt engaged inside the door frame.

My heart instantly slammed into my ribs.

I whipped back around and lunged for the door, grabbing the heavy brass handle.

I pulled. I yanked with all my strength.

It didn't budge.

The handle was completely locked from the outside.

"Damien!" I screamed, pounding my fist against the thick wood. "Damien, open this door!"

Silence was my only answer.

I pressed my ear against the heavy wood, my breathing ragged, my hands shaking uncontrollably as the reality of my situation crushed down upon me.

I was trapped.

And the lock on the door wasn't there to keep the world out.

It was there to keep me in.