

## 6. dancing the ball

Azrael Carmen

It turned out my life was an absolute cluster fuck. I glared at the red lines on my computer screen and gripped my phone against my ear. Stocks were dropping and the damn arrow on the graph was pointing so far down I could feel it stabbing into my fucking chest. Everything was happening so fast and so terribly wrong.

Barbara paced back and forth in my living room with her phone between her ear and shoulder as she furiously typed on the laptop cradled on her left arm. My sweet assistant looked ready to kill. If I wasn't in my bad mood myself, I would be amused.

The sound of my television grumbled from the living room, reporting news about the explosion of the queen's castle and the horrible treason two weeks ago. I felt my stomach churched, having not been able to check on my friend yet. Adalina had told me to leave, promising she would be fine. She knew it was going to happen. And, I did leave with the help of her brother in law whom suspiciously had gone radio silence.

I would say he had taken a hint but his cocky grin flashed in front of my eyes in an instant. Something was bound to happen and I was dreading it.

I clenched my hand and went for the liquor cabinet. I wanted to stab something but right now I could settle for a ernoon vodka.

I clicked on my own computer, waiting for the emergency conference call. My father was telling me to handle the situation calmly from the phone and prepping me for the meeting while I drank my sorrow straight from the bottle. We both were aware of the fact that they wanted me on the board.

"How bad?" my father finally asked the dreaded question. Vaughn Carmen would raise hell before he let his company crumbled to the ground. Fuck, I hated disappointing him.

I took a deep breath before answering. "Critical. Sales are dropping drastically and the investors are trying to pull away." I listened to the silent pause. My heart pounding inside my chest. I swallowed and blinked the burnt away from my eyes.

"I should close Carmen Couture for awhile and focus on Carmen Corp until we're stable again." I said silently. "I thought I was juggling it well, Dad. I'm sorry."

"You're not closing anything. You're my daughter. You conquer the world not bow down to it. Find the problem and erase it. I know you can do anything, my sweet." the man behind my sole existence said calmly.

I hesitantly nodded my head like he could somehow see me. "I will see you at the Tucker's gala tonight?"

"You and me, dancing the ball and plotting schemes. Always, Rory." He answered immediately, bringing a ghost smile to my face.

"Safe flight, Dad."

The next few hours consisted of me yelling at my computer screen. My fax machine had never been used so aggressively. Barbara gritted her teeth from her seat on the stool beside me at my kitchen island, watching more papers shu led through the machine. We rushed through the hundred pages of documents and glared at the men on my board every once in awhile. They secretly grinned through the screen and I just fucking knew about their cheap attempt to kick me on my chair. Internally screaming bloody murder, I tried not to think about how my own people wanting me out so badly they were willing to drive their hard work to the ground.

I listened as they blamed me for chasing on important partners with my bitch attitude. So, I disrespectfully told them to fuck on which didn't exactly help our situation but I wasn't going to let their egos ruined my company.

"You threw a folder at a client's face last month. Why are you surprised he wants to stop working with us?" Jameson's smug face expanded across the screen as he talked.

I clutched the hem my sun dress, gritting my teeth. "He called me an incapable bitch who probably fucked my way up to the position. I am my father's heiress and even then I did a fucking intern during college like everyone else. You were there when I fucked up in my first year and my father claimed it as a first strike. I did not have any favoritism. The fucking tool was lucky I didn't stab him."

"I always do my job right. I have been handling and providing supplies for his stupid architecture firm since before I took over. I might bitch about it in my head but I tend to all my client needs. So, do not tell me it's my fault because you can't get your heads out of your asses and work with a woman."

Barbara was smiling to herself as she sorted a new stack of paperwork. I turned my body away from the camera and gulped down more vodka, feeling the burn in my throat and stomach. Jameson shut up for a good one minute before opening his bloody mouth again.

"Explain how Carmen Corp's furniture hasn't been selling," he asked, pretending to jot down something on his folder.

He continued talking before I could even blink. "Do you know who love furnish houses? The most important customers on the target market? Women. Trophy wives. Especially the one with the check to a ord our high ends product. Customers that have been buying from us for years had turned their back and took on to another brands. Can you tell me why?"

I heard my assistant swallowed hard, her left eye twitching. I felt my only pulse raising incredibly. Fuck me. It was not exactly a favorite amongst the women in my world. It was bad enough that I had to deal with the men. To sum it up, they all hated me here. Always had and always would. We didn't get along because while they were horrendously sweet, I was stuck up and bitchy. It wasn't my fault that we were different people. I didn't care much. I only needed one friend, Riley Preston, and my sometimes friend, the queen of England, Adalina Salvatore.

Except my hatred for arrogant men, their whiny trophy wives and trust fund daughters, was now a fucking problem. Talk about pettiness.

"What are we going to do?" Barbara stared at me the moment the conference call ended with me yelling at Jameson to suck it and declaring I would fix this or die trying.

I took another swigs out of the vodka bottle. "I fucking hate this society. I'm gonna fucking kill them."

Her eyes widened and I held under my breath. "How do you think it happened? Can I fix it? Be brutally honest. You know I need it."

I watched her carefully as she took a deep breath. "Being brutal is your special trait, ma'am. I don't think they hate you. They loathe you," she said.

I gave her a "Thank you, Barbara." looks.

"A nice lady once asked if you liked her dress and you told her it was hideous. I was there." Barbara continued, chuckling at the looks on my face.

"I was doing her a favor. I don't want her to go around looking like a waddling penguin. The theme was cocktail for fuck's sake." I raked my hand through my hair. I was this close to pulling it right out.

She shook her head at me. "Not everyone like honest opinion. People soak up on compliments. They eat the good words."

"That's stupid. I would love for someone to tell me if I have a lipstick stain on my teeth." I muttered in disbelief.

"Anyways. I don't know how you forget this but women talk. They love to gossip and spread rumors especially the one in your world. I have gathered a survey when you first hired me. Due to my data, everyone think you're a stuck up bitch who think everyone else was beneath you."

That wasn't entire false. I understood that my sense of humor was all fucked up and they usually took offense to it. But, I still wanted to cut a bitch.

"And, the ones with penis?" I grumbled.

"How many female run the board and manage a billion pound business?" she asked, grabbing my dress from the hanger and draped it over the couch.

"Not many. But, there should be more. If we united, I have no doubts about us taking over the world." I said and scrolled through my unread emails from investors.

"Exactly. You're one of the few and you're young. They don't take you seriously enough to work side by side, let alone respect or fear you."

I lifted my eyes and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Are you suggesting I suck up and charm them? Make friends with their wives? Do you know me at all, Barb? I could accidentally be a bitch to someone and don't even notice it."

"Then, find another way. Usually when I'm pointing out problems, you're the one eliminating them. That's why we work well together," she grinned at my hopeless face. "Time to get ready for the party."

My brain was fried and scrambled by the time I got my ass out of my vanity and headed for the dress for tonight. I ran my fingers on the sear fabric and smiled to myself. I had made this with my hands. Barbara helped me step into it and then twirled me to the mirror.

I slid on a pair of black gloves to match the midnight starless sky wrapped around my body. The dress hung on my shoulders and the gentle sweetheart neckline dipped low into my chest showing almost nothing to imagine. So satin stuck like a second skin, syncing my torso and waist under the rules of sear black fabric that I knew would sparkle under the light. It flowed all the way to the floor, leaving a decent trail behind. Underneath the dress, I chose a knee high white leather boots. A dirty little secret for myself as for no one would see it.

I was clicking a gold Cartier around my wrist when a grey fuzzy ball strolled into my closet, probably to say goodbye. I looked at the pair of huge black eyes on the mirror and watched in amusement as he sat next to my feet, running a paw on my dress and staring me up and down. He gave me the same looks two years ago at the adoption center as if deciding if I was good enough for him and he had been doing it ever since.

Oakley Carmen was the biggest asshole in puppy's world and my most favorite acquaintance. The fluffiest three years old Shih Tzu.

"What do you think, Oak?" I asked, bending down to pick him up.

He barked twice before trying to lick my cheek. I was wearing makeup so I held him out a bit but let him have at it on my collarbone.

"Can I trust you to protect my purses until I'm back?" I asked again, nuzzling my nose into his fur. "You wear Chanel, not eat it."

I could have sworn he scooped at me as he jumped out of my arms and walked away. "I love you too. Whatever," I shouted at her him.

I reminded Barbara to feed him before going out. My white brick townhouse stood in central London. A two stories tall with three bedroom with a little front yard and a black gate in front. I hugged my clutch under my arm and picked up my dress as I walked out, waiting beside the street for the car my father sent. I wasn't going to drive in this dress. The black Escalade arrived only a minute later with a white gloved chauffeur to help me inside. We drove in silent with classical music humming in the background.

London flashed through the tinted window. Pedestrians walked side by side in their thick coats talking amongst each other while city buses rode along. I turned my head away a moment later, lost in thoughts and impossible strategies. I had my nose shielded on my phone through out the rest of the drive. Answering emails and setting up new meetings that I couldn't attend without my assistant, just in case I was accidentally being a bitch to my clients and investors, again.

I felt their eyes on me as soon as I stepped into the building. My skin pricked under the heated gazes and I could feel it crawling in pain. Sweeping my gaze across the crowded room, I grabbed a flute of sparkling champagne. The will to gulp the entire thing down was strong but I knew better than doing it in the middle of these people.

Extravagant gala was a concept of kissing ass. You were always expected to be on your best behavior and class. I had watched businessmen showed up to these events with their trophy wives on their arms claiming to support charity since before I knew what a lipstick was. Truth was the rich didn't give a fuck about world's hunger. The men were here to close deals while their wives competed over who got to sign the biggest check to the poor little children and made the husbands looked good.

But, at least birthday boy, Sam Tucker seemed happy enough when they flashed him their checks to the charity of his choice. I spied the fifty something years old men standing in the center of the room. I had met him twice through my father. The man was the top ten on the richest man list with his hotel chain and real estates. Next to him, was his sole heir, Derek Tucker, twenty seven years old, hair as black as black coffee and a smile to charm his way through life.

Shining my gaze from the host, I spotted the only man that mattered. My father stood at the other end of the entrance in a fitted tuxedo and silver bow tie. His greying hair gelled back and a lazy smile settled on his wrinkled face. I hadn't seen my old man in months as for he was traveling the world on his yacht.

I strode across the room and sank into his arms, feeling a thousand times better. My father was my safest place and in his arms I was the most protected person on earth.

"Hi. I miss you." I breathed in his warmth cologne.

We pulled back from the hug and I let him took a good looks at me. "Did you get more beautiful since the last time I've seen you?"

He patted my head, smiling like I wasn't about to run his name to hell. I knew my father loved me more than life itself but his company was right up there with me.

I sank into my father's touch about to answer back when a solid body stepped smoothly between us, sending shivers down my spine with his presence. He smoothly slid his arm around my hip and tugged me to his side.

"She did, didn't she?" I could feel the cocky grin in his voice. I turned my head and glared at the rude intruder.

He dipped his head and whispered in my ear. "Azrael Carmen, pleasure to meet you again."

My whole body went rigid at the way he said my name. So, he had found out. I grounded my teeth in annoyance, just when I thought the day couldn't get any worse. If my father wasn't watching us with so much concern, I would have told him to fuck on. But, instead I surprised both of the men by leaning into him.

"Likewise." I looked at Elliot, smiling sweetly.

The bastard was my homicide waiting to happen.

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