

Six

Zachary-May 2019

The home sat on the highest peak of Russian Hill, set back from the sidewalk, had a pure white façade, was trimmed with imported Italian marble, and was furnished in pure luxury. Anyone who happened to stroll by couldn't help but be taken by its beauty and elegance, nor could they help being fascinated by its allusion to the power and wealth of those that resided within.

In the foyer, just above the round, crystal table was a large Waterford Crystal chandelier, and just beyond was the grand marble staircase. For a guy from Santa Rosa, California, who had come from nothing, the home's magnificence, its superbly expensive exquisiteness that seemed to have been built for the sole purpose of intimidating the guests of its owner, served as the perfect metaphor of the man he fully intended to be: rich, powerful, intimidating, and absolutely unapologetic.

The event that introduced Zachary to unbound levels of wealth and power was a political fundraiser for a very powerful Congresswoman, Lila Duarte and he was attending as her *special* guest.

They entered the home, intentionally late, so that Ms. Duarte would walk into a full room of loving supporters. A Butler opened the front door seconds before they reached the front door's platform.

“Ms. Duarte.” The butler greeted her with a nod. He kept his gloved hands at his sides, palms on his legs, as he gave a polite nod. “Mr. Kuykendyke.” The Butler turned to Zachary who effortlessly exuded an heir of arrogance in his expensive, custom-tailored tuxedo that cost him two months of wages, and a pair of shoes that cost him the better portion of a month’s earnings. “Please follow me.”

As they crossed the foyer, a second Butler approached them holding a sterling silver tray with two chilled glasses of champagne.

“Sir.” Butler number two said, keeping his eyes to the floor as he held the tray out for Gary to take the glasses.

Gary did as was expected of him, taking both glasses and handing Lila hers, all the while marveling over how easily he could slip into this Fabergé world of butlers and wealth. Deep inside he’s always known he’d been born to the wrong parents.

Two butlers held the French doors open. They made a slow entrance, greeting people as they passed. Gary stood confidently at Lila’s side, enjoying the envious glances he was receiving from the other men in the room. As they moved through the room, the crowd parted for them, like the Red Sea for Moses. Feeling empowered off the residual fumes Lila’s power cast his way, he placed a confident hand on the small of her back.

The corners of Lila’s lips lifted with approval.

As the made their entrance, the conversation in the ballroom noticeably tempered. It felt like all eyes moved to them. They slowly made their way into the crowd with Lila leading the way. Guests began to approach, each looking for just a few minutes of her time, which she accommodated graciously; after all, they *had* each paid a quarter of a million dollars for the pleasure of being in her presence.

As every bit of Lila's time was sought after, Gary, the man with no wealth or power of his own, felt himself pushed aside as groups of people closed in around his date. Initially, he felt himself grow hot around the collar, but intuition told him to take a deep breath, fall back, and observe the game of power being played. As she worked the crowd, Lila's equanimity was steadfast. She looked each person in the eye as they spoke and was either an excellent pretender or she was actually truly intrigued by everything they had to say.

The merry-go-round of solicitors was dizzying and he found it difficult to maintain a mental record of the person speaking and the subject matter of their conversation. Lila would be in the middle of one conversation and someone would pull her away towards another. Like a dust sweeper, her aide followed close behind making a note of who she spoke to and the subject matter, so that someone, probably a handler, could later ascertain whether that person merited a one-on-one follow-up with Lila. The decision of which, he figured, would almost entirely be based on the individual's net worth in tandem with the likelihood of their future contributions to her campaign.

Standing just at the periphery, Zachary occasionally allowed himself to admire Lila, her beauty and strong confidence—God, she is gorgeous. But mostly, he focused his attention on those around her, picking up subtleties in the mannerisms, posture, and attire of the powerful. Privately he was enthralled by them, wishing he could pick their brain and learn the secrets to their success. Outwardly he portrayed himself as stoic and controlled, an equal to those around him.

Soon it will be me in the seat of power, pulling the strings of the politicians that whore themselves out to the highest bidder—I will be the highest bidder.

As the thought crossed his mind he reminded himself that getting there would be difficult for someone like him, someone with no wealth to buy the power, if he didn't have someone like Lila advocating for him. As he watched her now, he knew that Lila would be his how. She would be his roadblock remover, his powerful advocate. She would be his gateway to those that had the power to give him those lucrative government contracts.

As his thoughts moved beyond the present, into the future of his imminent success, he became excited and let his eyes peruse the woman that held the key to his future: attractive, tall, slim, fit, great legs, simply incredible in that blue formfitting dress.

She was the most powerful woman in the room... until Elizabeth made her entrance.

To Zachary, a man who spends a large portion of his time scheming to contrive financially beneficial relationships, it seemed as if the air itself had stopped circulating when a homely, yet exquisitely dressed, woman walked into the room. There was nothing spectacular or striking about her; in fact, she had an impoverished bosom, no real waistline that could be discerned from where he stood, and her skin seemed pasty and pale. Her best features were her shock blue eyes and her lush, golden curls that cascaded down from her up do.

Like a missile trained on a target, Zachary's eyes latched on to her, not because of her beauty, she had none, but because of the aura of power that emanated from her. As she approached, he noted that everything about her screamed wealth and power. Heaping amounts of it. She was the magnet in a

room full of ferromagnetic scraps. With the wealth and power of such a woman he could leapfrog over his current expectations of himself. She was Lila, but with a multiplier.

“That’s Elizabeth walking towards us. She is the sole heiress to the Gray multi-billion dollar fortune. Try not to fall in love with her.” Lila said, half-joking.

He felt Lila’s warm breath on his neck as she whispered over his shoulder and goosebumps formed. Later he would ask himself whether the goosebumps were caused by Lila’s warm breath or by the power Elizabeth’s wealth so easily commanded.

“Well aren’t you the handsome couple.” Elizabeth said, allowing her eyes to linger over Zachary long enough to cause Lila displeasure.

“Done?” Lila passively sneered.

“Oh, Lila. Really. I was just having a little fun.” She said, as she walked them over to a special group of people that had paid a premium for a photo-op with the Congresswoman. “Besides, don’t I get something for my trouble?”

Zachary mused at the confidence of such an unattractive woman and marveled at the incredible misperceptions the wealthy had of themselves. *Money doesn’t buy you love, but it sure as hell buys you everything else*, he snickered to himself.

“Don’t you always?” Lila replied to Elizabeth with more firmness than she intended. A glance at Zachary told her that he was enjoying the cat fight over him.

“It’s a two-way street, Lila. Don’t forget that. We are both here because we both want something.”

“I *never* forget.” Again, firmer than she’d intended. “Just get me re-elected.”

“Don’t I always?” They walked into a large study with dark wood trimmed walls and bookshelves filled with leather bound books from floor to ceiling. On a table sat an exquisite bottle of Scotch whisky, along with a few crystal tumblers on a silver platter. Next to the table stood what Zachary surmised was a couple still climbing the power ladder, and judging from a few exteriorities of their appearance, he pegged them at about just over the halfway mark—wealthy enough to afford the cost of attending the fundraiser, a Tesla, and perhaps a second home in Cape Cod, but not much more than that.

“Jonathan and Mira,” Elizabeth was clearly in control of the evening’s introductions. “Let me introduce you to Congresswoman Lila Duarte.” As if an automatic switch were popped on, their perfect white smiles appeared in tandem with a false genuineness that neither side was buying.

There were only a handful of people who paid the premium for the photo op with Lila. Later that night she would explain that it was usually those that were still trying to establish themselves in their social circles that opted for the photo. New money. She likened it to the concept of proof of life, but that it instead served as proof of power that they could display on their mantle or office for others to witness.

Throughout the evening Zachary stood aside, absorbing the dynamic of the power seekers and the powerful. Elizabeth was clearly *the* powerful. Lila, he realized, had lost some of her shine.

In the car on the ride home, Lila closed the privacy glass separating them and the driver, then turned to face Zachary.

“Did I sense something between you and Elizabeth?”

For a split second, he froze, but only for that split second. Lila never noticed.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Lila wasn’t being ridiculous, she was facing the facts. Zachary was a power chaser, she knew that about him the second he “bumped” into her at the café near her home. She was the most powerful person in the Congress, which she knew was the reason he had so fiercely pursued her. Not to mention, they had a worrisome age gap. He just turned twenty-nine and she was thirty-nine. They had a full ten year difference between them.

“Really, you think that I’m being ridiculous? She’s your age, single, and probably one of the most powerful women you now know, if not *the* most powerful *person*, period.” When he didn’t answer, she warned, “Be careful, Elizabeth is not as easy to handle as you might think. She comes with all of the psychological insecurities and disorders that that much wealth can inspire. She wouldn’t take to being used as kindly as I do.” And just like that she knew that their relationship would never be the same.