

## Chapter One

"Send out the enchiladas! Wait! Let me see that. Okay. Good. Go."

Renata Torres ran her staff with a cool, level head despite the rush. By now they were an efficient, well-oiled machine. Mi Vida Catering had started small, little more than a food truck. However, after catering the Worthington and Stanton weddings, it had suddenly gained notoriety and patronage from New York's most prominent families.

At first she had been nervous about the demands such people would make but surprisingly it hadn't been what she feared. For the Worthington wedding the bride had requested a couple Creole dishes added to the general menu. The bride's aunt and sister-in-law handled actually making the dishes and Renata's staff served them. The Stanton's had even fewer demands. The couple loved spicy food so requested that they increase the spicy options available. Renata had been hesitant to go too hot but her mother assured her when it came to the Stantons she wouldn't be able to go spicy enough.

Since then she catered events for both the DaLairs and Prescotts as well as continued patronage from the Worthingtons and Stantons. Now even other families like the Rodericks, Hudds and Averys were requesting her business. In fact she was receiving so much business that her little operation, once run out of a single van, now employed nearly two hundred people and had a small fleet of vehicles. The larger staff allowed her to cater multiple events while also ensuring no one was worked to exhaustion.

"Damn it!" a voice suddenly shouted over the din of the kitchen.

Renata spun around ready to admonish the speaker for such language on the job to see her twin sister collapse in a chair holding her head in her hands. Glancing at the clock Renata bit her lip noting her sister was over an hour late but that was expected as she had a prior commitment.

"Regina, are you all right?" Renata stepped toward her. "Did the audition not go well?"

"Of course not. Why did I expect different?" Regina shook her head. "You know what they told me? I was too ethnic. The audience wouldn't be able to relate to me. Too ethnic for West Side Story! Imagine that!"

Renata grimaced in sympathy. Since they were children Regina had been a performer. She loved to sing and dance. Growing up she organized her own little plays to entertain their cousins and family members. Their parents nurtured her talents with ballet and tap dance lessons. She was the star in their high school choir and drama club. It had been her dream to eventually perform on Broadway but that dream quickly turned sour.

This wasn't the first time Regina missed out on a role because of her Hispanic heritage. In a world where talent should come first that just wasn't always the case. If the women who were cast over her at least possessed talent equal to her own the sting of defeat wouldn't hurt as much. Yet despite living in the era post Me Too there were still directors willing to indulge in their actor's offstage talents. And in a world so competitive there were always people willing to sell just about anything to secure their big break. But Regina already had plenty of experience of the dangers of that road.

Noah Olson.

He was the star quarterback and her high school boyfriend. It was good in the beginning until he started pressuring her to go all the way claiming it would strengthen their relationship. She had naively succumbed to his entreats and lost her virginity in the back of his parent's sedan. A month later she had been overcome with nausea so acute her mother rushed her to the hospital only to find out she wasn't sick at all. She was pregnant.

Her mother was disappointed but took the news in stride. Ulma had long looked forward to becoming a grandmother and though it was sooner than expected she wasted no time in digging out an old crib and changing table stored in the attic. The news was not so welcomed by Regina's father. While her mother and sister got caught up in baby planning he would only scowl.

As if her father's complete disinterest was not hard enough to endure, more bad news was waiting for her when she told her boyfriend about the pregnancy. He laughed in her face absconding himself of all responsibility with a simple announcement: It sucks to be you. As her stomach grew so did rumors and speculation of who the father was as Noah declared it was not his. When the baby was born his family refused to acknowledge it.

A simple paternity should have been enough to clear the matter up but his family protested claiming such legal matters would ruin their son's chances at an athletic scholarship. He had a bright future, unlike a conniving little slut like her. The judge was in agreement legally absolving him any connection to his child. Though he claimed it was in everyone's best interest Regina couldn't help but believe it would have been a much different story if she was Caucasian and her boyfriend was Hispanic.

Regardless she was left without financial aid or support for her baby girl. Not only that but she also had to endure the stigma of being a teen mother alone. Regina was certain she would have crumpled under the pressure if not for her mother.

Ulma insisted both of her girls would graduate high school on time and took on the majority of the baby's care during the day so Regina could continue her classes. But her mother couldn't do anything about how her classmates treated her. Regina endured the teasing and ostracizing of her classmates while school administration tried to convince her it was in everyone's best interest if she simply dropped out.

Faced with mounting opposition from the school Regina chose defiance. She would not let them dictate her future. She would prove them all wrong and force them to watch her do it. Every time she saw her ex-boyfriend and his latest girlfriend on his arm she scowled and her anger only fueled her determination.

Renata graduated valedictorian but Regina was only a few points behind. She walked across the stage with the self-assurance of one who conquered. And waiting in the audience was her beautiful baby, Savannah. Reaching her mother she immediately cuddled her happy baby. So consumed with her daughter Regina didn't even think about looking for her ex and never saw the convicted look he gave her.

After leaving her school a champion she had thought the world would soon fall as well. But it hadn't turned out that way. Conquering the world took a lot more effort and she wasn't sure she had it in her anymore.

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"Look," Renata said, "take the night off."

"But..."

"Go home. Hold Savannah and get your mind right," Renata advised knowing if there was one thing that could be a balm to Regina's nerves it was the baby she had brought into the world. "You'll do no good here and with that attitude you'll make things worse."

Regina bit her lip fighting back tears of frustration. She hated to admit it but her sister was right. Renata worked hard for her success and Regina didn't want to disrupt that. As much as she wanted to help it was probably best if she made a quick exit for tonight. Silently she nodded. Giving her a pat Renata turned her attention to the rest of the staff carrying out the trays. Renata grabbed the last one herself and joined the line out the door.

With a sigh Regina leaned back her gaze falling on the forest of wine bottles set aside for the night's festivities. It was all provided by Renata's clients and meant for the guests. Without a word she stood, grabbed a bottle by the neck and walked out of the kitchen. If the cooks noticed they said nothing.