

## Chapter Four

Five Years Later

A small hand gripped her shoulder giving it a shake. Regina moaned. The hand shook her shoulder again. She slowly stirred blinking awake. Rolling onto her back she looked to see her nine-year-old miniature standing over her.

“Savannah? What is it, sweetie?”

“I got up because Carlos and Tony wanted breakfast but I couldn't find Gaby,” Savannah said. “Is she here?”

Regina sighed looking beside her where the four-year-old slept soundly. Five years ago Regina thought she had made the biggest mistake of her life and narrowly avoided the dire consequences of being discovered. Two months later she realized she hadn't escaped all the consequences. She was pregnant.

For weeks she agonized over the decision of whether to keep the baby or not. In the end she couldn't go through with an abortion especially with Savannah declaring her the best mommy in the world.

Naturally when she finally had the courage to tell her mother and sister they demanded answers but Regina couldn't admit the truth. The less they knew the safer they would be. She told them she had been so upset by her latest audition failure she got a little drunk and had a one-night-stand with a bartender. This brought a fresh wave of disappointed ire from them but anymore information would place them in danger. She had already endured her father's scowls for years. What was a few more as long as her family remained safe?

Seven months later she gave birth...to triplets. Her doctor warned her that they would have to be born via c-section which honestly had been a relief. Savannah's labor had been long and painful and Regina had not looked forward to it being repeated. Carlos and Anthony were born rather quickly. Her sons were perfect little copies of each other and, if she was being honest, bore striking resemblances to their father. However no one else made the connection and for that she was grateful.

Their sister had a more difficult entrance into the world. She was smaller than her siblings and comparatively underdeveloped. Gabriella spent several weeks in NICU and even now her growth lagged behind her brothers who grew like weeds. Breathing problems plagued her. Asthma and shortness of breath were daily issues. Humidity and New York's low air quality exasperated Gabriella's struggles. Air purifiers ran constantly in almost every room of the two-bedroom apartment but even Regina wasn't sure if they helped.

Her father's continued disapproving stare had finally driven Regina out of her parents' home much to her mother's disappointment. When she was little Regina enjoyed a close relationship with her father who always looked at her and her sister with pride. That had changed after Savannah's birth and it had only gotten worse once the triplets were brought home. He hadn't so much as looked at any of his grandkids, let alone held them. Regina refused to allow her children to grow up in a household where they weren't welcome. She would protect her children with her life.

“She slept here again?” Savannah asked.

“Yeah,” Regina sighed.

The kids shared the larger of the two bedrooms with matching bunk beds. Regina wished she could give Savannah a room of her own but a three-bedroom apartment was not in the cards even with the new job she found two years ago. Most of the money she earned went to Gabriella's ever-growing medical bills.

Whether it was because she was the youngest or because her medical issues made her insecure Gabriella often clung to her mother for comfort. More often than not if her breathing issues caused her to wake up in the middle of the night she would make her way to her mother's room and spend the rest of the night there. This certainly wasn't the first time such a scene played out in the morning.

“I'll be up to make breakfast in a few minutes.”

“It's all right. I gave them cereal and they're watching cartoons,” Savannah said with a shrug before stepping out of the room.

Regina smiled watching her go. It just wasn't fair Savannah had to bear so many responsibilities but Regina knew she wouldn't have been able to handle the triplets without her help. Filled with mixed emotions Regina shifted and studied the four-year-old still sound asleep beside her. Her breathing came out in labored wheezes. Regina struggled to hold back a sense of helplessness as she listened to her sweet, little girl's troubled breathing.

If only she could afford proper tests perhaps they could diagnose Gabriella's condition and maybe even treat the underlying cause so she could be a normal little girl for a change. She would finally be able to run around with her brothers without running out of breath and play on the playground without stopping every few minutes to reach for her inhaler.

With a sigh Regina gently shook the little one's shoulder and was rewarded with a mumble. Smiling she said, “Time to wake up, baby.”

Gabriella mumbled hesitantly opening her eyes. Giggling she smiled, “Morning mommy.”

“Morning. Sleep okay?”

“Ah-huh.”

“Good. Let's get up and I'll make you breakfast before we take Savannah to school.”

“Okay.” Gabriella yawned but obediently crawled out from under the covers.

Unlike her brothers who liked to argue Gabriella was much more amicable and rarely complained. By rights the four-year-old had every reason to whine with the medical issues that constantly loomed over her. Yet she started every day with a smile and quietly endured her troubles. If Regina thought about it too much it would bring tears to her own eyes. She just wanted her little angel to have a good, trouble-free life.

Gabriella padded out to the kitchen while Regina took a moment to dress and compose herself pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt before ducking into the bathroom to splash water on her face and tie up her hair.

She found Carlos and Anthony camped in front of the television watching Victor and Valentino while they giggled with mouths full of cereal. In the kitchen Regina found Savannah helping Gabriella into a chair where she had prepared another bowl of cereal for the four-year-old. Once Gabriella was situated Savannah returned to her project of sandwich making and bagging carrots for her school lunch, adding a fruit cup from the pantry.

Though they qualified for reduced lunches there wasn't always enough to cover the expense so Savannah usually brought lunches from home. It was just one more regret Regina had but her daughter never complained. Regina sipped her coffee while she watched them eat. When it seemed the boys were done she hurried them to change and brush their teeth giving Gabriella a little more time to nosh before the little one was also dressed and made ready.

After helping them with their shoes and jackets Savannah herded her little siblings out of the apartment and down the hall. Regina quickly locked the door and caught up to them in time to pick up Gabriella as they headed down the stairs. Even with her inhaler in hand the stairs often proved too much for the little one to take without several breaks though her brothers didn't suffer from any such difficulty. It was times like this Regina wished the building's elevator worked.

Reaching the street they hurried to the turquoise Geo Metro. The small hatchback had four doors despite its compact design. It was the main reason Regina had bought it when Savannah was only a baby and it certainly came in handy now. Savannah nestled her buckle the triplets into their car seats before climbing into the passenger seat beside her mother. The little car had seen better days but still started up with only a mild complaint. Each day Regina sighed, grateful for small blessings.