

## Chapter Five

Pulling up to Anna Silver Regina parked and gave Savannah a quick hug before releasing her. The nine-year-old smiled at her siblings in the back seat.

"See you later. Remember don't give mom a hard time and help take care of Gaby."

"We will!" the boys chorused.

"Gaby, don't push yourself especially if mom takes you to a playground."

"I promise!" the little one chirped.

"Bye mom. See you after school."

"Bye, sweetie," Regina smiled watching as Savannah hopped out, gathered her backpack and lunch box before joining the stream of children headed inside.

Regina put the car back into gear and pulled away so the next parent in line could make the drop-off. The triplets chatted happily amongst themselves as she drove across town to her sister's home. Like Regina, her sister lived in a two-bedroom apartment although it was in a nicer neighborhood and also had a working elevator which Regina gratefully utilized.

Renata let them in with a smile eagerly offering home-baked coyotas lled with jamoncillo for a snack. The triplets hunkered down in the living room with their cookies and milk while their mother and aunt chatted in the kitchen. Trying not to attract the kids' attention Renata quietly made out Regina's payroll check.

Regina accepted it with a grimace. She hated having to take money from her sister. It shouldn't be this way. At least that was what she kept telling herself.

Looking across the table it was like looking in a mirror: the same silky black hair, dark brown eyes and honey-tanned skin; the same pert nose, full lips and round cheeks. On the outside they were identical in every way but that was where the similarities stopped.

Renata started and maintained a successful business. She had a ancée that cared about her and was supportive. She still had their father's love and consideration. Regina was the disappointment. She was the one who became a teen mother. She was the one who had her head in the clouds and couldn't maintain a steady job. She was the one who struggled to take care of four children without a husband, ancée or even a boyfriend in sight. Though her mother tried to shield her from it Regina knew all about her aunts' complaints.

"Regina, are you okay?" Renata asked sensing her sister's disquiet.

"Yeah, I'm ne," Regina forced a smile folding the check and putting it into her wallet. "Just ne."

"If it's not enough..."

"It's ne. I told you before. No special treatment. I'm just another employee."

Renata frowned. No matter how many times her sister said those words it just wasn't so. Regina could never be just another employee. They were sisters. Growing up they were always together. They knew each others' wishes, dreams and secrets but somewhere along the way it changed.

Though they looked identical their personalities were very different. Renata was introverted preferring to stay home, read and cook. Regina was extroverted always looking for her audience. But they still loved each other and conded everything to each other. At every family gathering their father happily bragged about their accomplishments no matter how small.

Then Regina got pregnant and was abandoned by her boyfriend. From then on their father practically ignored Regina's very existence. He didn't care about her grades and never attended any of her plays or dance recitals. No matter how hard she tried Regina never again received recognition from him.

Worse than that, his disappointment extended to little Savannah. He never held his granddaughter or acknowledged her presence. Savannah didn't say anything but it was clear she felt her grandfather's detachment. Renata couldn't recall the last time Savannah even asked about her grandfather though she often inquired about her grandmother. It seemed the triplets had already picked up on that fact as well. Carlos and Anthony always rushed to their grandmother but didn't even look in their grandfather's direction.

Only Gabriella still tried to talk to their grandfather though he had yet to say a single word to her in return. Renata wondered just how much rejection her little niece could stand before she too gave up on a lost cause. She hated to think about it. The four-year-old had such a soft heart and wanted everyone to get along and love each other. It would be devastating if she realized her grandfather wanted no part of her life.

Glancing at her sister Renata couldn't help but wonder the same thing about Regina. Though her twin didn't want to admit it, Renata knew she longed for that close connection to their father she used to have as well.

"So...our high school reunion is coming up," Renata decided to change the subject. "I got my invitation so I know you got yours."

Regina groaned. The last thing she wanted to think about was high school, especially a reunion. She could only imagine the looks and snickers everyone would give her.

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun."

"I'm not sure my idea of fun is the same as yours," Regina grimaced.

"Anyway I have a big job coming up this weekend," Renata sighed dropping the subject though she intended to return to it later. A high school reunion wouldn't be fun without her sister. There was still plenty of time.

"Oh? Some rich a—hole celebrating an anniversary?"

"Close. Marcus Avery is coming back and his family is throwing a welcome home party."

Regina stiffened at the name. Mechanically she sipped her coffee trying to appear nonchalant but inside she was panicking. Several years ago Miles Avery nally had enough of his grandson's carefree lifestyle and sent him to Europe to intern with a company and learn business so he would be ready to take over.

Regina hadn't cared much about the news except that it meant she was safe. With Marcus Avery in Europe there was no way for them to meet again even by accident. The triplets were born safely and she raised them without fear of discovery. But now he was coming back and her safety net was gone.

"Oh, sorry. I won't be able to make it," Regina shook her head.

Renata raised a brow. It wasn't like Regina to turn down a job even if she hated working for her sister Regina wasted no opportunity to make extra money, "Do you have another audition?"

"My other job. I sort of already promised them I'd be there."

"Oh," Renata nodded.

That made sense. Two years ago Regina announced she nally found another steady job. Though she wouldn't go into details she told them it was a new restaurant that offered live entertainment to its guests. Working there nally allowed Regina to exercise her natural talent though it was a far cry from her Broadway dream.

As far back as Renata could remember her sister dreamed of being on stage. Singing in a restaurant was hardly equal to Broadway but it was a paying job. So far Renata had not been invited to see her perform. No doubt her sister was embarrassed by such a small stage but with Gabriella's extensive medical bills every little bit she earned was worth it.

"Well, we'll miss the extra hands but no worries," Renata said. "I'm glad this job is working out for you."

"Yeah...me too," Regina muttered staring down into her coffee mug.

"Let me rell that."

Regina breathed a weary sigh as her sister collected their cups. She cast a fugitive glance into the living room. Her babies were laughing easily at the cartoons on the screen unaware of their mother's inner turmoil.

Ironically the Avery family had become Renata's biggest client, booking her catering service for every event they sponsored. To accommodate them she even created a fourth menu with hors d'oeuvres and exclusive offerings like lobster and caviar for upscale palates. As long as Marcus was gone Regina had little fear of being discovered so she hadn't thought much about the family.

She gave Elizabeth Quenn and Cybil Avery a wide berth simply because both women were insufferable and demanding. The ruling patriarch, Miles Avery, however, was nice enough and good-natured. Several times he coaxed Regina into telling him about her family and listened as she bragged about Savannah's incredible academic prowess as well as Carlos and Tony's budding soccer skills.

Since the Avery patriarch had no idea about the night she spent with his grandson Regina had no reason to fear him. As long as she continued to keep the truth to herself her family and, most importantly, her babies would be safe.

All was changed now that Marcus had returned. Given his inebriated state it was unlikely he would be able to recognize her, if he remembered that night at all. But she didn't want to take any chances. It was unfortunate she wouldn't be able to help her sister but her children's safety came rst. She would not let the Avery family anywhere near her children.