

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# Reggie's Heart

Reggie woke up slower than usual.

No alarm. No music. No Val. Just the silence of his condo, the hum of the Strip minutes away, barely heard through the window, and the weight in his chest.

Today wasn't just any day. While Beck was about to go on his first date with Sienna, Reggie had a date with dark thoughts.

It was *the* day.

The anniversary of his mom's passing.

He didn't get out of bed right away. Instead, he just laid there staring at the ceiling, waiting for something to shift inside him; a prompt to *carpe diem*. Nothing came.

When he finally rose, it was with the drag of a man carrying something invisible but crushing. He stood around his condo, letting the stillness own him. Every year this day hit hard, but somehow it still caught him off guard.

His mom had been gone a few years now, but time hadn't made it easier. If anything, it made everything harder.

He spent most of the day simply being—doing nothing

in particular, trying to remember how she sounded. The way she said, "Hello, darling," to everyone she met like she'd just floated out of an old Hollywood film. The way she smelled. The way she glided through rooms like she owned them—and most of the time, she kinda did.

She wasn't famous, not in the conventional sense, but in Las Vegas, she was a matriarch. She led charity events and helped strangers with no need or even acceptance of *thanks*. She knew the maitre d's, the dancers, the casino pit bosses, the owners, the barbacks. And they all adored her.

Reggie spent more time with her than most grown men spend with their mothers because they understood each other. They both knew how to own a space. How to be seen. How to turn an ordinary Tuesday into a memory.

Yes, their styles were different—she was all elegance and grace, he was all swagger and charm—but their hearts beat the same.

As the day wore on, he smoked hookah, toasted to the sky, and forced memories out of a hazy mind ravaged by years gone by and late nights out. While in the shower, something unexpected happened. Alexa queued up a song they loved. One that rarely played. It hit him like a freight train.

Suddenly, he was back at a gala. Thousands in attendance. He in a tux, her in a ballgown. Boyz II Men

performed live and serenaded them on the dance floor with *A Song for Mama*. They had twirled, laughed, and soaked in the spotlight like they'd earned it—and they had. It was one of those core memories that defined a bond; one that would survive even Alzheimer's if that day ever came.

He stepped out of the shower and just sat. Wrapped in a towel, still dripping, eyes fixed on the wall. He felt like wallpaper—just a fixture now, still and silent.

He stared at the front door, willing the universe to grant him one last moment, one more minute, where she walked through that door and brought the room to life.

But it wouldn't come.

He knew people were texting. Calling. Trying to check on him. He ignored every one of them.

But one person knew his phone would be left at the bedside, so she just showed up.

Val let herself in and walked with purpose. Food, two bottles of wine, extra hookah, and a gift.

When she saw him—just sitting there, lost in time—she said nothing at first. Just set everything down and waited.

Reggie finally noticed her. "You broke into my condo. Again."

"I've just walked in here since the first night I had to carry you in the door after a night at Rhino. You should be

thankful. I'm doing you a favour by being here. And, I brought oysters."

He cracked a short, hoarse laugh.

She handed him the wrapped frame.

Inside was a restored photo. Him and his mom. He was young, maybe twenty-one. She was glowing. They were mid-laugh.

"You framed this?"

"Now you can stop staring at your front door and look at her whenever you want."

He hugged her. Long and full.

They sat and ate. Drank ... a lot. She listened while he told the same stories she'd heard before, like it was the first time. Stories about galas and dinner parties, about advice she gave about women and how to navigate growing up *Vegas*.

"I know I always say this, but I wish I could have met her," Val said between bites.

"Me too. She'd have loved you. Not so much your tattoo, but everything else."

"Obviously," said to the first point, rolling her eyes at the second.

Then Val leaned in and said, "You know what I think?"

"Oh boy."

"I think you spend so much time mourning what the

world lost ... you sometimes forget what she gave it. And what she gave you. Look at you—loud, inappropriate, wildly overconfident—”

“Please, keep flattering me.”

“—but you’ve got her heart. You remember people’s names. You help your friends. You show up. That’s not some accident, Reg. That’s her living through you.”

He let it land. Chewed it over like it had bones.

“You really think I’m all that?”

“Absolutely not. But she was. And you’re lucky enough to carry her blueprint.”

“I hate how good you are at this,” he muttered.

“Yeah well, somebody’s gotta keep you from turning into a full-time recluse. What would Poodle do without you?”

They turned on a movie, eventually. Some romantic comedy he’d usually clown. But tonight, he watched it silently.

At one point, he looked over at Val.

And in that quiet moment, he knew: whatever happened between them—on again, off again, chaotic or sweet—he’d always be thankful for this day.

For her showing up.

For her pulling him back.

Reggie and Val would go through their share of highs

and lows in the years to come. But their sarcasm, their banter, and their unspoken bond would remain.

Yes, Reggie was rough around the edges.

But then again, aren't we all?

He wondered for a moment how the date was going between Beck and Sienna, even contemplated texting, but let it be for now. He hoped it was going as Beck had wished it would. He hoped that the advice he gave helped make it easier for Beck because he meant it.

Some things are worth risking it all for—a lesson that came right from that shared heart beating in his chest who made him that man he was.

Always.