

Love in the Season of Blossoms 1

Chapter 1

"I've made up my mind. I'll marry that guy from the Scott family who's in a vegetative state."

Willow Rooney lounged against the doorframe of Rooney Manor. Her lips twisted into something too sharp to be a smile.

Walter Rooney's cigar nearly tumbled onto the imported rug beneath him. He jerked upright in his leather chair. The creases at his eyes vanished in a surge of triumph.

"Willow, you've come around? Wonderful! The Scotts are pushing hard. You'll be sent to Nythera as the bride in two weeks. What kind of wedding dress do you want? I'll have it made—"

"That's it?" Willow scoffed. "I'm marrying in place of your precious illegitimate daughter, and all you're offering me is a dress?"

The air in the living room grew thin. It was brittle with tension.

Walter's face hardened. "Watch your mouth. She's not illegitimate. She's your younger sister."

"Sisters share a mother." A hollow laugh slipped from Willow's lips. Her eyes were as cold as winter. "She's the fruit of your betrayal. I'll never call her family."

A vein throbbed at Walter's temple, but he suppressed his fury before it could erupt. He drew a deep breath. Cigar ash landed on the desk.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Ten billion dollars." The number slipped from Willow's lips. "And once I'm married, transfer Alden to guard your precious illegitimate daughter."

Walter's face went rigid. He stared at her like she'd sprouted a second head. "You're insane. Ten billion would bleed me dry! And Alden? Wasn't he your favorite? You used to beg to marry him. Aren't you taking him with you?"

"Are you agreeing to it or not?"

Willow's patience ran out. She turned toward the door.

"Fine!" Walter slammed his palm on the desk and got to his feet. "It'll be done the day you leave for Nythera."

He didn't bother questioning her motives. All that mattered was locking the deal before she changed her mind.

Back then, the Scotts' only son had been the envy of everyone. Walter had rushed to secure the engagement between the families, eager to marry Vivian Rooney off to him someday.

A good match for his youngest daughter—or so he'd thought.

Then the accident happened, leaving the Scotts' heir in a vegetative state. Unwilling to condemn Vivian to such a fate, Walter finally remembered that Willow, too, was his daughter.

Willow waved him off with a flick of her hand. Her back was turned to him. The sharp click of her heels echoed across the marble floor.

Just as her fingers closed around the door handle, Walter's voice broke the silence behind her. "I get why you'd want the money. But I thought Alden meant everything to you. How could you just hand him over to Vivi?"

Willow's hand froze. She didn't turn around, but her eyes suddenly stung. That name was a thorn that twisted in the softest part of her heart.

Without a word, she pushed through the door and closed it, leaving Walter and his question behind.

Willow returned to the villa well past midnight. Her heels clicked on the stairs as she climbed them.

A low, restrained sound drifted out from Alden's room as she walked past it. The door hung slightly ajar. She looked up, and the scene inside came into focus.

Alden leaned against the headboard with a photograph pinched between his fingers. His eyes were closed, and his Adam's apple bobbed. A husky murmur slipped from his throat. "Vivi... babe... you're so sweet..."

It was a snapshot of Vivian from last year's birthday party. She wore a white dress. Her smile was radiant with warmth and innocence.

Willow's nails dug into the strap of her Hermès bag, leaving angry crescents in it. Finally, she answered Walter's question in her head.

Because Alden was just like him. He only cared about Vivian.

The answer coiled inside Willow, white-hot, until her ribs ached with it.

Three years ago, she first saw Alden while choosing a bodyguard. Amid a crowd of towering men, her gaze locked onto him instantly.

The reason was simple—he was impossibly handsome. At 6 feet and 2 inches, with broad shoulders, a lean waist, and sharp, sculpted features, he looked like something out of a fantasy. But it was his eyes—cold as ice—that undid her.

In their circle, Willow was the mischievous temptress everyone knew. She'd flirted with Alden just for fun, but three years had slipped by, and nothing ever came of it.

She'd pretend to be drunk and collapse into his arms. He'd grip the back of her neck like he was scruffing a cat and deposit her onto the couch.

She'd knock at his door past midnight, wearing a slinky nightgown. He'd wrap her in his suit jacket and escort her back to her room like a gentleman returning lost property.

Once, she even faked drowning. He plunged in after her and dragged her to safety. His hands never touched her waist.

No matter how much Willow flirted, Alden remained unmoved. He treated her with nothing but cool formality. And yet, she fell for him anyway.

She didn't know why. Maybe it was the loneliness that had gnawed at her since her mother, Camille Aldinger, had died.

At seven years old, Willow watched Walter bring home his illegitimate daughter, Vivian, a girl who was only three months younger than her.

The truth was, in the ten years he'd been married to Camille, he'd spent nine of them unfaithful. That day, the illusion of the happy, secure family Willow had held onto fell apart completely.

At the time, Camille was nine months pregnant with Walter's second child. She was only days away from giving birth. She had loved him desperately.

She confronted him in hysterics, sobbing so violently she nearly choked on her own tears. The distress sent her into premature labor that same night.

By the time she reached the hospital, it was too late. She never made it to the operating room. They lost her. And the baby with her.

From then on, Willow hated Walter. She hated Vivian, too.

She left Rooney Manor behind and grew up alone until the day the harassment became unbearable. She was too beautiful, and the spoiled, entitled heirs circled her like vultures.

That was when she decided she needed a bodyguard.

Alden had been Willow's first bodyguard. From that day forward, she was never alone. Wherever she went, he followed.

At first, she admired him. Then she flirted with him, and eventually, she fell for him. But after three years, his heart never once wavered for her.

She'd thought him cold by nature until the day she caught him pleasuring himself to a photo of Vivian. Once he was finished, he answered a call.

"Mr. Wilder, how long are you planning to keep up this bodyguard charade? You're Blythera's scion. You could have any woman you want. If Vivian caught your eye at first sight, why not just take her?"

"Since when do you play the sentimental fool, wasting your time guarding Willow just to steal glances at Vivian?"

Alden's expression didn't flicker. "I did my research. Vivi's an illegitimate daughter. She's had a tough life and trusts no one. I'd lose her if I pushed too hard. So I'm taking it slow."

"Damn, since when do the Wilders breed lovesick idiots? And here I thought Willow's constant flirting would've worn you down. That woman's a temptress. She's got suitors lined up halfway across the globe."

Alden's mouth twitched into something like a smile. His words plunged Willow into an icy abyss. "Oh? I'm not interested. She's not even half the woman Vivi is."

Each syllable cut into Willow, sharp as a blade. And just like that, her feelings for him were gone.

No one could say how long Alden had kept going in his room. Somehow, it stretched longer than usual, and still, he couldn't find release.

Willow watched. Her lips curled into a cold smirk. Then, with one sharp thrust, she shoved the door open.