

# Love in the Season of Blossoms

## Chapter 2

Willow stared into the void of Alden's gaze. He was, after all, a man who commanded authority. Even now, when caught in this compromising moment, his face gave nothing away.

Unhurried, he slid the photograph beneath the pillow and zipped his fly. A breath, and his mask was back—cool and untouchable. The man who had surrendered to desire might as well have been a ghost.

Willow's lips curled into a thin smile. "Must be agony, stopping midstream. Need a hand?"

Alden didn't so much as blink. He leaned back slightly, putting space between them. "Ms. Rooney, do you need anything?"

He was always like this. A mere photograph of Vivian could set him ablaze, yet around Willow, he turned to stone.

Willow's nails dug into her palms as she pictured Vivian's plain, forgettable face. Vivian couldn't hold a candle to Willow's beauty or figure. Yet men fell for her anyway, tripping over themselves for that simpering act of innocence.

It didn't matter anymore. Willow had beauty, money, and a body that turned heads. From now on, she'd waste no time on anyone who didn't want her.

"There's an auction tomorrow. You're coming with me," she said flatly, not bothering to wait for a response as she turned to leave.

Alden frowned. "I requested two days off—"

"Vivian will be there, too."

She didn't look back.

A brief silence lingered before Alden's voice, low and deep, came from behind her. "Understood, Ms. Rooney."

Willow's heart stung as if a needle had jabbed into it. True to form, the mention of Vivian's name was enough to erase all his principles.

Alden did not need to worry, Willow thought. Soon enough, she'd be the one to send him right to Vivian herself.

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The next morning, Willow stepped outside the villa to find Alden by the car. His black suit fit like a second skin, emphasizing his broad shoulders and narrow waist. The early light cast golden highlights across his sharp profile.

Once, she would've flirted with him—maybe faked a twisted ankle to fall into his arms, or leaned in just so her breath tickled his ear. But today, she climbed into the car with a blank expression without even sparing him a glance.

Surprised, Alden glanced at her before quickly averting his eyes. Without a word, he slid into the passenger seat.

The car coasted toward the auction venue. Willow kept her face turned to the window the whole way. She didn't try to come up with excuses to start a conversation with him like usual.

The silence in the car was so heavy that their breaths seemed to echo too loudly.

The auction was being held at the city's most exclusive hotel. Crystal chandeliers bathed the grand hall in light as people from elite circles mingled below.

The moment Willow stepped inside, she saw Vivian up ahead. She was dressed in white, and her long, straight hair cascaded over her shoulders. She was chatting happily with a cluster of socialites, looking every bit the picture of innocence.

Something in Alden's gaze shifted in an instant. Though he still stood behind Willow, dutifully playing the role of her bodyguard, she could feel his attention lock fully onto Vivian.

"Willow!" Vivian spotted them and rushed over, slipping her arm affectionately through Willow's. "What a coincidence! You're here for the auction too?"

Willow wrenched her hand free. "Don't touch me."

Vivian's eyes welled up instantly. Her gaze darted to Alden, and her expression was wounded. "Den, I just wanted to be closer to her..."

Alden's brow furrowed. His gaze lingered on Willow with barely concealed disdain.

Seizing the moment, Vivian tugged at his sleeve. "Den, I heard that when I had a fever and wanted cherry pie, you went out in the middle of the night—in that downpour—just to bring it to Rooney Manor.

"It's a shame I was so out of it. And then, with all the recovery, I never got to thank you properly."

Alden's expression softened instantly. "No need for thanks, Ms. Vivian. It was on my way."

On his way? Willow scoffed.

Five hours. That was how long he'd been gone that night. And when he finally returned, he was drenched to the bone. That was his idea of "on his way"?

"I still owe you a meal!" Vivian chirped, sweetness dripping from every word.

This time, Alden didn't refuse. "Whatever you arrange, Ms. Vivian."

"We should invite Willow too!" Vivian turned, then gasped. "Willow, why do you look so awful? I'm the one who was sick—"

Willow cut her off. Her voice was icy. "Since when are we close? Worry about yourself, homewrecker's daughter."

Vivian's face went pale, while Alden's frown deepened.

The auctioneer's voice cut through the hall, announcing the start of the bidding. It finally put an end to the awkward conversation.

Willow didn't bother with another word. She simply took her seat.

She was about to marry into the Scott family. Expecting Walter to provide her wedding gift would've been delusional. These were things she'd have to secure herself. That was the real reason she'd come today.

After she sat down, the first item was unveiled—a pigeon blood ruby necklace. Its starting bid was set at one million dollars.

Without hesitation, Willow raised her paddle. "Two million."

Surprisingly, Vivian's paddle flicked up too. "Three million."

Willow turned.

Vivian met her with a thin smile. "I like this one too, Willow. You don't mind letting me have it, do you? After all, Dad's never been quite as generous with your allowance as he is with mine."

Willow smirked. "Generous" was putting it mildly.

Growing up, Vivian had gotten five million dollars a month in spending money. Willow? Five hundred. If it hadn't been for Camille's inheritance, Willow might've actually starved to death.

But the game had changed. Ten billion dollars sat in her accounts now.

"Four million."

Willow raised her paddle again.

Vivian stiffened.

"Four and a half million," she forced out through clenched teeth.

"Five million."

"Five and a half."

With each exchange, Vivian's expression darkened. "Willow, where the hell are you getting this kind of money? Aren't you afraid you won't be able to pay?"

"Ten million!" The bid rang out, bold and unflinching. Willow tilted her head and smirked at Vivian. "Funny. I was just thinking the same about you."

Vivian's face flushed, then drained of color. Around them, murmurs rippled through the crowd.

The auctioneer, ever polite, turned to her. "Ms. Vivian, do you wish to continue?"

"Wait." She fumbled for her phone, fingers stabbing at the screen as she fired off a message to Walter.

A moment later, her face soured. Clearly, she'd been rejected.

Willow watched. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile. Of course, he had refused. A billion had already bled into her hands. What scraps were left for Vivian to flaunt?

As the tension crested, a man in a sharp suit stepped forward. His voice cut through the silence like a blade. "We'll cover every raise!"