

Love in the Season of Blossoms

Chapter 4

The club pulsed under dim, hypnotic lights. Willow threw back her third whiskey. It burned as it slid down her throat, but it was useless against the resentment coiled in her chest.

She moved with the music in stiletto heels, and her red dress swirled around her in the center of the dance floor. Then, from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Alden by the booth.

He was supposed to be her bodyguard. But there he was, hovering at Vivian's side, so close not even air could slip between them.

Vivian murmured something, leaning in until her lips nearly grazed Alden's ear. He had never shown Willow anything but icy detachment, yet now, his ears burned pink at the tips.

Willow sneered and turned, straight into a tightening ring of eager heirs.

"Ms. Willow, honor us with a drink?"

"How about adding me on Facebook?"

"Ms. Willow, I've been dying to meet you. All those stories about your beauty? They didn't even come close."

Pinned in the corner, she had no room to move or protest. More men closed in. One placed his hand on her waist.

"Alden!"

Willow had finally had enough.

Only then did Alden seem to notice her distress. He frowned, pushing through the crowd toward her. The defined muscles of his arms flexed beneath his black suit. A single icy glance from him sent the pack of spoiled heirs slinking away.

"Anyone would think you're her bodyguard."

Willow wiped the liquor from her collarbone, smirking.

Alden's gaze dropped. "My apologies. I didn't see you earlier."

"Didn't see me?" She stepped closer suddenly. Her lips were nearly brushing his chin. "Or you didn't want to?"

Her breath warmed his skin. His throat moved as he took half a step back. "Ms. Willow, you've had too much to drink."

"Don't worry. Once I'm married off, you can protect Vivian all you want—"

A sudden burst of cheering from the stage drowned out the rest of her words.

The staff wheeled out an iron cage with two adult Cane Corsos pacing restlessly inside.

"Tonight's special event!" the host bellowed in an excited voice. "Vortex versus Inferno! Betting is now open!"

Willow frowned.

Nightfall Club ran brutal betting matches like this all the time. She'd always despised them. She turned to leave when the iron cage groaned, straining against some unseen force.

The latch gave way. In a split second, the larger Cane Corso barreled through the open door and lunged straight for the crowd.

Screams erupted. Willow saw Alden turn without hesitation, instinct driving him as he rushed to Vivian. He wrapped her in his arms and shoved her toward the emergency exit.

Willow was the one standing closest to the Cane Corso. She was close enough to see strands of saliva hanging from its fangs.

She screamed. The searing pain came without warning.

The Cane Corso's fangs sank deep into her calf, and she barely registered the tear of fabric and flesh. A chunk of her leg came free. Blood gushed out, and she collapsed. Helpless, she could only watch the beast lunge again.

A deafening gunshot crackled through the air. The dog dropped mid-leap.

Through her fading vision, Willow saw Alden shield Vivian behind him. His gun was still raised. Then the ceiling tilted, whirled, and the light was swallowed.

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The scent of antiseptic clung to the air.

Willow clawed her way back to consciousness through a haze of searing pain. The sterile white ceiling swam into view first. Her calf burned as if pressed to a hot slab of iron. Every breath pulled at the wound like a hooked barb.

She turned her head with effort, and the scene at the doorway hit her like a second blow, cutting through the groggy fog of her mind.

Vivian buried herself in Alden's arms while sobbing. "Den, you're Willow's bodyguard. Why did you protect me instead? It's all my fault. I never should've come..."

Alden patted her back. His voice was impossibly gentle. "Ms. Vivian, don't blame yourself. Even if we lived this moment a hundred times—" His thumb brushed a tear from her cheek. "I'd still choose to save you first."

"Why?" Vivian looked up, her eyes glistening.

His gaze locked onto hers. The usual steel in his eyes was dissolving into something tender and unguarded. "Because I lo—"