

Love in the Season of Blossoms

Chapter 6

Three days later, Willow went alone to try on her wedding dress.

The night hung thick and heavy as she stepped out of the boutique. Without warning, a hand clamped over her mouth and nose from behind, and the sharp sting of chemicals flooded her senses.

She thrashed—once, twice—before the world dissolved into nothing.

When Willow woke, there was only darkness. A blindfold smothered her sight. Her wrists were bound to the chair. She couldn't move.

The first lash cracked through the silence. Pain arched her spine. The coarse fibers tore into her wrists, and the blindfold made the blackness suffocating.

She bit down on her lip hard until the taste of copper filled her mouth. She swallowed her scream before it could escape.

"You pissed off the wrong people."

The torturer's voice drifted over from somewhere distant.

The whip fell like a storm, each lash splitting the air with a sharp crack. Her skin split with it. Willow clenched her teeth, biting back every scream.

Who? Who would do this to her?

The flogging dragged on until her consciousness wavered. Only then did it stop. A moment later, the sound of a phone call reached her.

"Sir, I've done as you ordered," the man said. His voice was deferential.

The voice on the other end of the line was unmistakable. "Good. Send her back."

It was only a few words, but in that moment, Willow's blood turned to ice.

Alden.

This was his doing. She'd struck Vivian with a whip by accident, and for that, he'd given her 99 lashes?

Agony and dread surged through her, and at last, her body gave out, plunging her into darkness.

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Willow lay on the hospital bed. Her back was burning. It felt like she was being lashed with fire. Nurses murmured outside the door.

"That man is so handsome and gentle with his girlfriend."

"Yeah, it's just whiplash, but he's acting like it's the end of the world. Meanwhile, the patient in 304 is covered in lashes, and nobody even bothers to check on her..."

Willow yanked out her IV needle and steadied herself against the wall. She shuffled step by step into the hallway. As expected, she found Alden inside a VIP room.

He cradled a glass of water, tilting it carefully to Vivian's lips. She mumbled something soft and sweet, and Alden brushed a stray droplet from her mouth with his thumb. His gaze was so tender it could have melted ice.

Willow sagged against the wall, and her vision blurred. She didn't understand. She'd made the choice to let go, so why did her heart still ache like this?

The pain gnawed at her, like an invisible hand dragging a dull blade across her flesh. She told herself not to cry. No one would care anyway.

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The day Willow was discharged from the hospital, she had barely stepped inside her home when familiar footsteps sounded behind her.

Alden had returned.

Their eyes locked, and each saw something unfamiliar in the other's gaze. They stood there, the silence stretching between them, until Willow's phone buzzed. Walter's name flashed on the screen.

"Tomorrow is Vivi's birthday party." His voice brooked no argument. "She's been crying to me, saying she wants to make things right. You're coming."

Willow scoffed. "No."

“What’s the point of holding a grudge? This might be the last chance.” His tone sharpened. “The Scott family has already set the date. Once you’re married—”

She hung up before he could finish. When she looked up, she found Alden standing in the shadows. “Do you think I should go?”

The dim lamplight carved harsh lines into his profile. A beat passed before he answered in a quiet voice. “You should.”

“Fine.” Willow’s lips curled into a bitter smile. “If that’s what you want.”

The birthday party was held in Rooney Manor’s glass conservatory. By the time Willow arrived in her emerald-green velvet gown, the guests had already clustered together.

Beneath the crystal chandelier, Vivian stood surrounded by admirers. Her frothy pink gown made her look every inch the princess.

“Willow!” she exclaimed, bright and eager, stepping forward as if to slip an arm through hers.

Willow sidestepped her. Her eyes caught on the mountain of gifts from Walter—the limited-edition Hermès, the robin’s egg blue Tiffany boxes, and the Porsche key fob.

“Vivi’s always been such a good girl. She’s my favorite.”

Walter stood beside Vivian. His face was alight with fondness, just as it had been when he had stood beside Willow and Camille all those years ago.

The memory burned clear in Willow’s mind—herself in a white dress, laughing as Walter hoisted her high, while Camille watched from the sidelines with a soft smile.

Now, everything had changed.

After the cake was cut, the guests drifted apart in small clusters.

Maisie Gardner—Vivian’s best friend—pulled her aside, leaning in with a conspiratorial whisper. “Vivi, with all these high-society bachelors here tonight, is Mr. Rooney trying to set you up? But I thought you were already engaged to that guy from the Scotts?”

Vivian smirked, and her gaze flicked toward Willow. “That fell through ages ago.”

“Good riddance. Rumor is the guy’s in a vegetative state. Marrying him would be like widowhood with the guy still breathing, wouldn’t it?” Maisie waggled her eyebrows. “Anyway, with all these men hanging around, tell me—what do you look for in a partner?”

With everyone egging her on, Vivian flushed. She counted it off on her fingers. “First, he has to adore me. He has to get my name tattooed over his heart. I’m looking for that kind of adoration. Second, he’s got to be brave.

“They say that there’s a rose on Mooncrest Cliff that blooms only once every century. He’d have to pick it for me. And third—”

Before she could finish, the conservatory doors swung open. “Mr. Wilder’s gifts have arrived. We wish Ms. Vivian a joyous birthday and a life free from sorrow!”