

Ready & Willing  
by Selena Blake

Part 18

Heaven help her, she didn't want to stop with a kiss. She'd told him as much last night. Only then, she hadn't known just how powerful, how...mind altering those kisses could be. Her insides tingled with anticipation and moisture gathered between her thighs...ready and willing.

"We can't." The mare needed help. They needed to sort out their issues because a reaction like that could easily make them forget about anything but each other. Reluctantly, she took a step backward, deeper into the darkness of the barn.

A horse sneezed and then there was a low whiny from the end stall.

He pulled his shoulders down and back, emphasizing each perfectly toned muscle in his chest. Somehow, seeing him half naked was far more sexy than seeing him in the buff.

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “The horse.”

His eyes told the story. He was fighting the wolf. Fighting his lust and what nature wanted. Needed. The battle was visible in the dark depths, the pinched brows, the way he dropped his gaze to the dirt beneath their feet.

Hand at the small of her back, he ushered her down the length of the barn. One by one, the horses backed away as Kaden passed. She didn’t blame them. He was all man right now, but beneath his skin lurked a predator. They could smell it. *Him*. Centuries of survival instinct couldn’t be ignored.

“You’re making them nervous,” she told him.

“What do you want me to do?” he bit out, but she knew that his terseness was caused by the ache in his pants. The unfulfilled desire coursing through his veins.

She nodded toward a pile of hay. “Feed them while I check on Chipper.” Ava could tell by the way his jaw tightened that he wasn’t used to being told what to do, no matter how gently. Because of everything they’d been through, everything they’d shared, she found herself wanting to sooth him.

She placed a hand on his arm. “They’ll learn to trust you. They’re just like men. Feed them and they’ll love you forever.” Where had that come from? She wanted to snatch the words back, but there were no take-backs in life. *No matter how intimate or embarrassing an outburst might be.* Straightening, she offered him her most carefree smile.

“Is that so?” he asked, his voice quiet. He was still as a fence post. Watching her. Staring at her lips.

His jaws flexed and his eyes closed for a full two seconds, then he took a measured step back, severing the connection. “You should take care of that horse.”

He was right of course. But as he continued to back away from her, she felt a chill replace the fire. A void. It was more than the cool morning air and a sweatshirt wouldn't have kept her from shivering.

Rubbing her hands up and down her arms, Ava crept into Chipper's stall. The big bay mare stood by the back wall making soft grunting noises, as if each breath hurt. Ava knew that feeling, felt it each time she shifted back from her wolf form. Chipper turned toward Ava, the white star in the center of her forehead bright in the darkness.

"It's okay, pretty girl," Ava soothed. She wondered what was going on in the poor creature's mind. "You're going to be all right."

She didn't know if that was true or not, but she had to believe that years of evolution were on their side. Ava took a slow step to the right and saw evidence that the mare's water had broken.

Several long minutes passed, Chipper grunting, Ava biting her lower lip. Where the hell was Wesley? Surely he had his cell phone on even if he'd turned it to vibrate. She'd ask Kaden to call him.

As if thinking about him had conjured his presence, she heard Kaden step up to the stall, his boots crunching the hay.

"How's she doing?" He asked softly from outside the stall.

Ava glanced over her shoulder and saw him through the bars. Steady, calm, his brow pinched in concern. Thank goodness for moonlight and excellent night vision.

She kept her voice soft and monotone. "I'm not sure. She's obviously in labor but I've never delivered a foal before." And she'd never felt so helpless.

"The vet's on her way."

Chipper turned, rubbing her muzzle against Ava's arm. She reached out and ran her hand over the white star between the mare's eyes. A soft nicker filled the air and then Chipper began pawing the straw lining the stall floor.

“Call the bunkhouse and see if any of the hands have ever delivered a foal,” Ava instructed, feeling out of her element. “And then call Wesley.”  
“On it.”

Ava watched the handsome wolf walk away and lift his cell phone to his ear. Heart pounding she turned back to the big horse and ran a hand down her neck.

“We’ll get through this pretty girl.”

For some reason, the horses didn’t seem to mind Ava’s appearance in the barn each day. They never appeared nervous. Not the way they were with Kaden.

Chipper had been eager for a treat since the moment Ava had walked down the aisle with a big bag of carrots on her first visit.

The mare lowered her head and then slowly, carefully sank to her knees. She settled onto the ground with a heavy sigh.

“I wish you could tell me what you need,” Ava whispered, unable to stop the anxiety seeping into her. Possible scenarios raced through her mind. Things going wrong. Chipper becoming too agitated. The foal getting hurt.

No. She wouldn’t go there. Nature would handle things and she’d do her best to help it along.

Chipper gave a shuddering sigh, her big belly tensing.

“It sucks being a girl, doesn’t it, sweetheart.” She ached to pet the mare’s neck. To offer some form of comfort, but didn’t dare get in the way. “Men think with their penises and we have to suffer the consequences. If childbirth were easy, men could do it too.”

The mare nickered softly, as if agreeing. Then she tossed her head, black mane flying. Another contraction tightened the mare’s belly and Ava felt a sympathetic ache.

She was surprised how quiet her inner wolf was. If she had to put a name to it, she’d have to say peaceful. Unlike wild wolves, Ava never had to scavenge

for food, so the only thing she felt toward the mare was sympathy. But she certainly didn't want horse flank for dinner.

"You're doing good, pretty girl. Your baby will be here before you know it."

Leaning to the right, she checked the foal's progress. "I can see the hooves!"

Chipper tossed her head again.

"Good job, Chipper. Thatta girl."

Several tense minutes passed. *Grunt, contraction, grunt*. Ava felt completely helpless. Regardless of the fact that women gave birth around the world every day, she couldn't help but worry that something was wrong. She was no vet. Her years of research, her knowledge of business, her ability to plan a flawless party, or run five miles...none of that mattered right now.

Almost as if they understood what was happening, the rest of the barn had gone quiet.

Instinct brought Ava to her knees. "Shh... I'm just going to check things out."

Chipper swung her head around toward her belly and made the most forlorn sound Ava had ever heard. Sad, pained, frustrated. There was no need for translation.

"I bet you're wishing for an epidural, huh, big girl?" Ava kept up a steady stream of chatter as she crawled toward the mare's hindquarters. It seemed to sooth the animal. Thoroughly aware of how big the horse was, how strong those long legs would be, she made more soothing sounds. Where was Kaden? Or Wesley for that matter? The timing of his poacher hunt really sucked.

"I still see the hooves. Want some help?"

Ava's eyes went wide as the horse nodded her head up and down emphatically. "I'll take that as a yes." She leaned forward and wrapped her hands around the golf-ball-sized hooves. A gentle tug yielded no results.

She pulled harder.

“There we go,” she murmured as the foal’s nose appeared. “Almost there momma.”

The scent of horse and hay hung heavy in the air. Ava spread her legs so she could get better control. One long pull and the foal landed in her lap. She estimated that the pile of wet, slimy fur and hooves weighed around a hundred pounds.

“It’s a boy,” Ava murmured and the mare sneezed. “He has your star.” The baby looked up at Ava with big brown eyes and she fell instantly in love. Nose twitching, tears rolled down her cheeks. “Hello, handsome. Welcome to the world.”

She gave the colt a watery smile, uncaring that she was wet and tired, filled with emotions and unquenched desires. None of that, not her past, not her current problems, mattered. Never in her twenty four years had she been witness to childbirth. And until this moment, she hadn’t understood what a true miracle it was. It seemed the odds were so stacked against the baby from the instant of conception all the way to that first breath and beyond.

But nature found a way.

Completely in awe, Ava wiped the tears from her eyes. The foal sat up as his mother stood. Very carefully, like a gentle giant, the mare stepped closer and began to clean and nuzzle the baby. “Why don’t I give you two some privacy?”

Ava couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled up her throat as the newborn made his first few attempts at standing on his own four legs. Shaky, he toppled into the hay between her legs. Then, summoning his strength, he made it.

“Look at you,” Ava whispered, a feeling of joy taking over. Very carefully, he picked up those miniature hooves and made his way over to his mother to nurse.

Smiling, Ava stood. Heart full of love and happiness she turned to the door and saw half a dozen smiling faces outside the stall.

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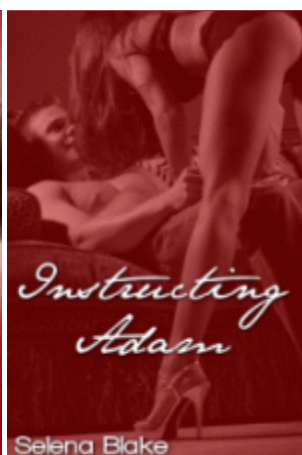
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An action movie buff with a penchant for all things supernatural and sexy, Selena Blake combines her love for adventure, travel and romance into steamy paranormal romance. Selena's books have been called "a steamy escape" and have appeared on bestseller lists, been nominated for awards, and won contests. When she's not writing you can find her by the pool soaking up some sun, day dreaming about new characters, and watching the cabana boy (aka her muse), Derek. Fan mail keeps her going when the diet soda wears off so write to her at [selenablake@gmail.com](mailto:selenablake@gmail.com). Visit her online at <http://selenablake.com> or become a friend at <http://www.facebook.com/authorSelenaBlake>

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