

Ready & Willing
by Selena Blake

Part 19

Kaden loved the look on Ava's face. Serene. Happy. Peaceful. The tension of the night now gone, there was a breathless quality to her that he'd never seen before. Her gaze flicked to his and he saw the sheen of tears. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't touched by the whole thing. And amazed by Ava's composure...even if she had made a few biting comments about the male of the species.

He'd teased her about planning parties because that wasn't something werewolves did. Or so he'd thought. Before they'd left for the ranch he'd wondered how she was going to make herself useful. Again, she'd proven him wrong.

And today she'd proven that she was fearless.

He'd been holding his breath, sure that the mare would not welcome a werewolf into her stall, especially at such a precarious time. Kaden had been kicked enough times to know just how strong the beasts were. They might not have claws or fangs, but they had superior strength.

Once again, Ava had stepped into the middle of the battle and worked her magic. There was something soothing about her. Her voice maybe. Or perhaps her touch. Whatever it was, he'd become addicted.

"You did good, kid," Wesley said as Ava exited the stall. He and the lady vet had arrived just in time for the birth but no one had uttered a word as Ava had coaxed the foal into the world.

Ava looked a little dazed but shot Wesley a delirious smile.

The sun was just peaking above the horizon, sending a shard of light through the barn, lighting her from the back. As it had before, her dark strawberry blonde hair seemed to glow like it was on fire.

Kaden would never get tired of that sight. Not in a thousand years, not if war broke out and he had to fight for his life. Not if he was the last werewolf on earth. She would always be a bright spot on the horizon, a beacon.

Ava glanced at the lady vet who carried a long black bag. "They're all yours doc."

"I don't think they need me at all, thanks to you," the vet said and patted Ava on the back. "But I'll check them out after he's done nursing." Ava nodded then cut a glance at Kaden.

There was straw in her hair and her shirt was wet and dirty but he didn't care. A foreign emotion drove him toward her.

He cupped her cheeks in his hands and brushed his lips across hers. "You were amazing," he whispered.

"I'm dirty."

“I don’t care,” he said quickly. The sound of boots against concrete told him Wesley and the others had headed for the tackroom, leaving Kaden and Ava alone.

She hooked her hands over his wrists and stared into his eyes.

He ached to pick up where they’d left off, but there was a different kind of need as well. One born of a new found respect and admiration. One that had nothing to do with mating.

“You could be covered in horse manure and I really wouldn’t care.”

She laughed softly. “You’re crazy, Kaden Black.”

Crazy about you.

Why couldn’t he say the words? God knew he meant them, so why couldn’t he push them past his lips? He’d been falling for her, steadily, surely.

Hell, if he were honest with himself, he’d noticed her a long time ago, as she’d begun to blossom into a woman. Then as she’d made it known she intended to be the next Alpha of WhitePaw.

Even as her tongue had been wounding his ego, he’d been enamored with her fire.

That’s what she was. Pure fire. A temptation he could no longer resist. He leaned in for another kiss but she turned her head away.

“I really need--“ She paused, as if she were choosing new words.

Me.

Say you need *me*.

The air froze in his lungs as he waited for her to finish her sentence.

“I need to go clean up.”

Disappointment flooded him. Before he could say a word, she ducked around him and started down the long corridor toward the wide double doors. He turned to watch her, hands shoved in her back pockets as she strode away, head down.

Why did he feel like he'd just been kicked by a mule?

Go after her, the wolf demanded.

But he couldn't. An invisible force held him immobile. Somehow he knew that cleaning up was just an excuse. She needed time. Space.

He needed time *with her*, to show her that he'd made up his mind. To settle things. To show her that he accepted, welcomed, what his wolf had known all along.

Phillip Garnier stared at the young wolf seated on the other side of the large mahogany desk. A ball of unease sat heavily in his stomach. Near as he could remember, he hadn't felt this way since the night he'd mated with Patricia.

He steepled his fingers together and tapped them against his lips. The future of the pack depended on this mission.

"They suspect nothing?" he asked.

"No."

He could only hope that it stayed that way. His daughter had the best of him and his *wife-mate*. His strength and conviction, Patricia's passion and femininity. Unfortunately they didn't live in a society that was ready for a young, single female wolf to lead such a large and influential pack. Lately he'd begun to wonder if he'd made a mistake in encouraging Ava...telling her to be a leader.

She was dead set and he was going to have to crush her dream...if his plan didn't succeed.

He was hard on her, but with good reason. His *wife-mate* didn't agree. In Patricia's opinion, he didn't offer enough praise. Hell, his father hadn't offered him much praise either. Still didn't.

"And your thoughts on who the better Alpha would be?" It was a delicate situation. Ava was his daughter. Headstrong, smart, but a daughter never the less. And while he knew that she was a strong leader and had earned the respect of the pack, it didn't matter as far as many of the males of their pack were concerned. They saw femininity as a weakness, where Phillip knew it was a strength.

The problem with Ava was she often allowed her emotions to rule her. Especially where Kaden was concerned.

Though she tried to hide it, he knew she'd had a crush on the Beta of the pack for years. She'd flat out denied her attraction more than once. Werewolves were sexual creatures and it hadn't surprised him when she'd taken a liking to Kaden Black.

Kaden was, after all, a strong, handsome, healthy wolf who knew how to lead and protect a pack. The runt of the litter and orphaned at an early age, he'd had a hard life growing up when the west had been wild. But he hadn't let that stop him from developing a level head and a charming personality. Traits that would work wonders for the pack well into the future. That was one of the many reasons Phillip had let him into the pack.

Kaden had no problem trusting his gut, but his heart was another matter.

Lately, Ava's infatuation had turned to delusion, thanks to the fact that Kaden was Phillip's second. Ava thought that birthright meant everything. It had...hundreds of years ago.

Now the world was changing so fast. The Alpha needed to be smart - street smart *and* book smart. With technology making it almost impossible to remain anonymous... He sighed. Future leaders would have a battle unlike any he'd ever known.

Unable to stop himself, he'd sheltered his children from the ugliness that was the world - human and werewolf. Now Ava was set on being the next Alpha.

But Kaden was more than man enough for the job, and Phillip's own son could care less about Pack duty.

Phillip saw no easy choice.

Kaden was the strongest, most level headed wolf he knew. Ava fit in flawlessly with the human world, the perfect mix of elegance, refinement, and savage instinct.

"I say neither. You cannot select Ava without alienating Kaden and half your pack. You cannot select Kaden without losing your daughter."

"It comes down to that, doesn't it?" The exact quandary Phillip had been living with for years. The one he did not have a ready answer for. For longer than he cared to admit, he'd hoped Ava and Kaden would fall in love and work things out themselves. A strong Alpha pair would be an easy sell to the pack.

But Ava resented Kaden's presence and Kaden had never seen Ava as more than a kid sister. The fact that she was Phillip's daughter certainly didn't help matters.

"I have an alternate suggestion."

Phillip's brows rose. "I'm all ears."

"Announce that there's a third option for Alpha."



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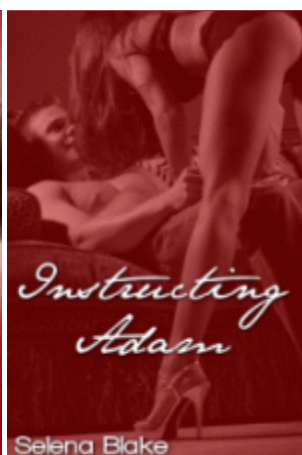
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An action movie buff with a penchant for all things supernatural and sexy, Selena Blake combines her love for adventure, travel and romance into steamy paranormal romance. Selena's books have been called "a steamy escape" and have appeared on bestseller 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. Visit her online at <http://selenablake.com> or become a friend at <http://www.facebook.com/authorSelenaBlake>

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