

Ready & Willing
by Selena Blake

Part Twenty One

Ava closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Don't look at him.* With the way she was feeling right now he'd be able to see everything she was feeling.

If he didn't feel the same...no. She couldn't go there.

He'd apologized. *At least he had in her daydream...*

He'd kissed her.

He'd turned her life upside down and inside out.

If only she could trust him again. If only there weren't so many 'if onlys' between them.

Continuing to the paddock, she inhaled the dry evening air. She sat the pans on a hay bale and searched the grassy expanse for the equines. The colt was much more surefooted than he had been in the minutes after his birth. He trotted around, testing his legs, tail in the air, never far from his mother.

Chipper kept a watchful eye on her son as she grazed. She didn't look like she'd given birth twelve hours earlier. Nature was amazing.

Kaden took a spot at the rail to Ava's right. He laced his fingers and watched the pair.

"Helicopter busy?" he asked.

"I didn't call for it." She'd reached for her phone twice, put it back both times. This morning she'd been desperate for distance and at the same time, hadn't wanted to leave Kaden. For the first time, he seemed to really see her. Pay attention to her.

That kiss had terrified her just as much as it had excited her. She'd never expected such profound feelings, such a connection. Pleasure yes. But like he'd completed her, like her life was suddenly whole...no.

For her heart's sake, she needed to know he saw a future for them.

Despite her heartache and resolution to abstain from men, she couldn't seem to control the wolf inside her, the voice that demanded she get as close to the handsome Beta as she could. She couldn't squelch the hope that if she stayed by his side, if she stuck it out, that he would finally see what he'd been missing. That he would finally see her as more than a kid sister or a quick roll in the hay.

"Why not? You seemed ready to high tail it out of here this morning."

"I made enough casseroles to get the men through the week." It sounded like a plausible reason why she'd spent the day in the kitchen, rather than calling for the helicopter. Reasonable, but it wasn't the truth.

She hadn't stayed out of duty, for the sick ranch hands, or even to impress her father.

There was a pause before he spoke again. "You know that many of the guys are well enough now..."

She nodded. They wouldn't need to stay at the ranch much longer.

"A part of me thinks that they got better so they'd have a shot with you."

His rueful smile made her insides melt. There it was. The reason she'd stayed.

The reason she hadn't fought the wolf. She'd wanted to bask in Kaden's smile. Somewhere in the last seventy two hours, she'd stopped worrying about the full moon and what her father would say. She no longer needed his approval. Now she craved Kaden's.

She'd stayed for a chance at a future. A different future perhaps than the one she'd been working toward. But one that her heart desired.

Ava gave a terse laugh. "They'd never have a shot with me."

"Why not?" Was it her imagination or did he lean closer? Though he didn't look at her, she sensed all of his attention turned her way.

Because they're not you.

"I don't date humans. You know that." She'd never met a human male that could keep up with her physically, and the animalistic side of her nature could accept nothing less. Even a handsome, strong man was weaker than she was. And breeding was important. More so for an Alpha. Strong, true-blood werewolves were a must.

"To my knowledge you've never dated anyone."

She turned toward him, eyebrow raised in question. "Why Kaden, I didn't know you were paying attention." That thought stroked her ego and a thrill of desire made her breath catch.

Damn he was handsome. He cut her a look. Totally, completely, grade A gorgeous.

And, she realized in that moment, why she had never dated anyone else, never really looked at another man from the time she was old enough to look. Even after Kaden had crushed her fragile teenage heart. If she couldn't have him, she didn't want anyone else.

"Why did I never see you?" he murmured. Shaking his head, he turned and studied her for a long moment. What did he see when he looked at her?

The spoiled daughter of the Alpha? The woman who set his blood on fire? The *shewolf* he couldn't live without? Or an itch he needed to scratch? His expression thoughtful, he returned his gaze to the pasture again. "I always knew you were around...but..."

"Don't beat yourself up Kaden. *I'm a kid sister*," she said, her tone sharper than she'd intended. She still remembered the way he'd told her father that the Alpha had nothing to worry about. "*She's like my kid sister. Nothing more.*"

"In the past maybe," Kaden said fiercely. Whether he remembered his past words and realized she'd overheard him that day, she couldn't be sure. She couldn't decide if she wanted to press him, to find out, or not.

"But right now it's taking every bit of will power I have left not to strip you down and take you against this fence."

His words caused a flush of heat to spread like wildfire over her skin.

Her heart needed a little more assurance... "That's just the heat talking." His reaction to her cycle, she meant. The hormones, the pheromones...thousands of years of mother nature conspiring for procreation.

"And Sunday, at the wedding? Your cycle hadn't begun then."

“I’m starting to think you’re deliberately trying to keep me off kilter, Mr. Black,” she teased. It was working. She’d been off kilter since she’d looked up from arranging Brianna’s train and locked gazes with him.

Faster than she could blink, he pulled her against him, the hard ridge of his erection squeezed between them. A startled gasp left her lips an instant before he captured them with his own.

“Is that deliberate enough for you?” he whispered.

“Kaden--“ She pushed at his chest but he didn’t let her go. So she closed her eyes and turned her head away from his kiss. “Stop...we need to talk.” *Don’t stop!* What was she saying?

“Why, Ava? Give me one good reason.”

“You know the reason.” If she gave herself to him and he changed his mind again... It would destroy her this time. If he swept them away with pleasure now but decided six months from now that he’d made a mistake...

He sighed, the movement caused his chest to rub against the hardened tips of her nipples. “Because of the Alphaship...” There was an intense pause. “Always the fucking Alphaship.”

That wasn’t really the reason. Not anymore. But she’d let him think that because the alternative meant putting everything on the line once and for all. She licked her lips and gave a single nod.

“What if neither of us were to become the Alpha? What if your father weren’t stepping down. What then?”

“Kaden--“ She knew what he was asking...

“What if he declares Warrior Rights?”

A shiver of panic raced down her spine.

She’d never considered that. Hadn’t heard of any Alphaship being decided by a fight to see who was strongest...not in the last hundred years. But it was a possibility. It was still part of pack law.

And yet, she'd been so certain that her father would name her Alpha. Her. *A woman*. This week was showing just how silly that idea had been. Sure, she was capable. She could survive on her own just like any wolf. She was fast, had incredible endurance, and she was strong for a woman. She also prided herself on her intellect and attention to detail. All fine qualities for an Alpha, but she would never win a head-to-head battle with Kaden. And brute strength would always be a consideration in the naming of an Alpha. She'd been silly to believe that heritage would change that.

"You hadn't considered that, had you?" he murmured against her temple. Damn him. Damn the whole situation. Why did he have to hold her like it was the most natural thing in the world? And why did his touch make her want to say to hell with everything else?

"No."

"He wouldn't do it you know."

She pulled back to stare up at him, searching those familiar eyes. "How can you be sure?" One thing she knew about her father is that he played by his own rules. He might do it just to test her.

"Because he couldn't risk losing his daughter."

He was probably right. She knew her father loved her, even if she had to work hard to win his praise. The elusive pat on the back.

"And," Kaden continued, "he knows I wouldn't fight you anyway."



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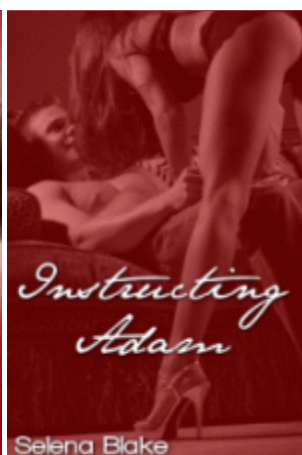
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