



Ready & Willing
by Selena Blake

Part 27

Despite his soothing delivery, his words jerked her out of the moment.

Straightening her spine, she kept her hands where they were: one raking through the hair at his nape, the other flat over his heart. A fresh round of irritation bubbled through her at her father's lousy timing.

“Kaden, Ava, welcome back. How's everything at the ranch?” her father's voice interrupted.

Kaden turned so that they were both facing the Alpha of their pack. Her knees brushed his and his hand tightened on her hip. For some reason being in his arms brought a rush of strength, courage, and an eerie calm.

“The men are recovering well. Things should be back to normal in the next day or two.”

“Excellent.” He pressed his hands together. “I’m surprised you’re back so soon.”

He studied them, his gaze lingering on the hand around Ava’s waist.

Did he guess? Could he scent the change in her? The cycle?

It’d serve him right if she ran off with a man, abdicating her duties to the family and the pack. Just the thought was appealing. What would her father say to that? Would he shrug his shoulders or beg her to stay?

She realized after another moment of silence that Kaden wasn’t going to rock the boat. “Actually, Brianna called me.”

Her father’s keen gaze swerved to hers. “Brianna?”

“She said you had some...news.” She glanced up at Kaden. “We wanted to be sure to hear it in person.”

Phillip glanced around at the party goers. Why did Kaden get the feeling he wasn’t going to like what was about to go down. He was tempted to grab Ava’s hand, leave and say to hell with it all.

The Alpha nodded and then held a hand out toward the house above. “Come on.”

Kaden kept his hand at the small of Ava’s back as they followed her father through the crowd. The terrace was a heady cocktail of perfume, ocean breezes, and alluring female. But his wolf was on full alert, not just aware of the woman at his side, his mate, but also for the threat that lay around the corner.

Phillip led them into his study. Kaden had been in the book-lined room many times. It always smelled of leather and lemon oil. Rather than sitting down, her father leaned against the massive, intricately carved desk. It was a man’s desk in size and heft.

“A new option has opened itself.” Phillip glanced at Ava, then studied Kaden.

“There’s another person I’m considering for the Alpha position.”

“Alain.” Ava bit out the word.

Kaden squeezed her hip. They needed to keep calm.

Phillip clasped his hands together, almost as if he were praying.

Clasped hands. Praying.

And that’s when Kaden realized Phillip Garnier was bluffing. It’d always been Garnier’s tell.

“Brianna told you...” her father trailed off, not denying it.

“Why him?” Ava asked and Kaden made another realization. The beautiful woman at his side, the woman who’d spent her life looking up to this man, working herself to the bone to please him, was less than a minute away from dissolving into tears. He could hear it in her voice. Feel it in the tension of her body. And as a wolf, she would take that as the ultimate sign of weakness. Things would get ugly very quick. But before he could do anything she piped up again.

“You know what, it doesn’t even matter. I quit. I’m out. I’m done. I’ve poured over your books, learning all your businesses. I’ve planned parties and kept pack laws. I’ve made nice with the locals and been your ‘ear,’” she sneered. “But I’ve royally failed to live my own life. And I’m done trying to live yours. You win, Daddy.”

“Ava--“ her father stepped forward.

She held out a hand to stop him.

“Maybe if I’d been a boy everything would have been different. But we can’t change our chromosomes,” she laughed. She actually laughed. Kaden was stunned as hell. And oddly aroused. Her passion made him want to carry her off and claim her. *Again.*

She glanced at Kaden quickly before pegging her father again. If looks could kill...

“I’ll say this once,” she said evenly, commanding attention. “Make Kaden the Alpha. He’s given his all to this family and to this Pack and if you can’t see that then you’re blind. He’s strong, smart, and completely capable of seeing White

Paw well into the future.”

It was Kaden’s turn to whisper her name.

He didn’t stop there. “Would you excuse us a minute?” Kaden said to Phillip. He didn’t wait for an answer, rather he pulled Ava across the room.

“What the hell are you doing?” he murmured. Unable to keep his hands to himself, he cupped her shoulders. “He’s bluffing,” he whispered. “He’s not really considering Alain. There’s something else he’s after.”

Realization dawned in her beautiful brown eyes. But instead of confronting her father with the truth, she gave a sad smile and she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not built for the role. You said it yourself. If he declared warrior’s rights, I’d be SOL. I told you, Kaden, you were born for this job and we both know it.”

He stared at her for several heartbeats. “Why are you doing this?”

Did she really not want to be Alpha? So suddenly? Why? What had changed? But the pain in her eyes swiped the questions right out of his mind and the beast inside him growled. She was giving up her dreams, her goal, *for him*.

Not just for him but because her father was fucking with her mind, testing her, even now. The frustration of working against a stacked deck had been too much for her and she was retreating. Hell, he didn’t blame her.

There were plenty of days when he felt like throwing in the towel. Life sucked some times. Add to that the inner battle that he waged daily, it was enough to drive a wolf insane.

“Because...it’s the right thing to do. The right decision for the pack.” She glanced over at her father. “And.” She lifted her gaze to Kaden’s. “Because I love you.” Her words ricocheted inside his ribcage. Pride, hope, joy, love. It was all there. Swirling inside him. Making him want to howl at the moon.

It made him want to fight for her. Kill for her.

He pegged his leader with a glare. “I’m out too.”
“

What?" Ava actually screeched the word. She sounded more hawk than human.

Her father parroted her.

Kaden had to force the words past his lips because they went against everything he'd ever worked for, "let Alain have the job."

"Kaden--"

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Kaden was running blind. Unsure of his next move. His feelings for the Alpha's daughter shook him to the core. His Alpha's bluff confused him. But Kaden had learned from the best.

"Your daughter would make a perfect Alpha, sir. I know I don't have to tell you why. But barring that, Alain would be a fine choice."

"Kaden, you can't do this," Ava said, her eyes pleading.

"Sure I can, sweetheart. You were right. I am an outsider. And the Alphaship is yours by birthright." In for a penny...in for a pound. This was going to hurt like hell. He just hoped he was right.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?" Phillip thundered.

Kaden cut him a glance, sure that he was on the right track. Phillip was up to something. Using Alain as a smokescreen. But two could play that game. "When you've made your choice, give me a call."

Phillip's mouth dropped open and for a moment he looked like a fish.

"See you around," he whispered to Ava. Avoiding her eyes, he tapped her under the chin with a finger and then, to prove he was serious, he made a beeline for the door.

Heart aching, he kept walking even when she called him back. He'd give Phillip till sunrise to get his head out of his ass and do the right thing. Then he was coming back for his woman.

Ava rounded on her father, the beast inside her ready for a knock-down, drag out fight. Her lip curled and she dropped her chin.

“What have you done?” she demanded, her heart breaking.

“Ava, Phillip, come back to the party,” her mother appeared in the doorway

Kaden had just exited. Ava felt her mother’s gaze. “What’s going on?”

Ava gave an unladylike snort. “Ask your mate.”

She turned to leave, hurt by Kaden’s departure. He’d confused her, aroused her, made her fall in love with him...then he’d claimed her.

She closed her eyes and pursed her lips.

But when push came to shove, he’d abandoned her. Was she just part of the package? If he wasn’t going to be Alpha then he didn’t want her either? Until that moment she’d thought it impossible for her kind to hyperventilate. But she was oh so close.

She’d thought that she’d meant more to him than that. At the very least, shouldn’t they discuss--discuss what? He’d done the same thing she had. If he was going to give up everything he’d fought so hard for and turn his back on what they had...how could she argue with that?

“He’s bluffing,” her father called.

She whirled around and marched across the room until they were toe-to-toe. “How can you be so sure? He’s gone, in case you haven’t noticed,” she said, gaining her second wind.

He didn’t answer, but he did lean back...away from her fury. She couldn’t remember ever being so angry with him. Disappointed, disheartened, frustrated...yes, but never ready to draw blood.

“Phillip, what did you do?” her mother crossed the room.

“He’s naming Alain, Alpha. Or didn’t he tell you?” Ava said the words without looking at her mother. If there was one thing her father had taught her, it was never turn your back on the enemy.

“Dammit, Ava. I was never going to name Alain alpha. Kaden called my bluff.”

He glanced down at his hands.

Ava could do nothing more than blink. Her father was admitting his bluff?

“Now he’s bluffing,” her father said, glancing at the door Kaden had just exited.

“God knows why he didn’t just call me on it. I always knew that kid was too smart.”

The tips of Ava’s fingers itched, as did her teeth. Her skin tingled, moments away from her shift. She fought the wolf but growled out her displeasure.

“He’s not a kid,” she said slowly. “He’s a man. A smart man. And you hurt him with your stupid games.”

A smart, sexy man. But what if he wasn’t bluffing? What if he really didn’t want to lead the White Paw pack? What if he was forcing her father’s hand? Forcing him to accept Ava as the new pack leader?

Would he do that? For her?

And if he was, that meant--

“I just wanted the two of you to get your heads out of the sand, stop dancing around each other and fall in love,” her father shot back.

Ava was so stunned that the wolf stopped pressing. Hell, she almost tipped over backwards.

“Phillip,” her mother scolded, a deep frown marring her lovely face.

Ava shook her head but the thoughts up there were still scrambled.

“You...let me get this straight,” she said, stepping away from him. She closed her eyes, sure she hadn’t heard him correctly. Her practical father...“You were trying to play match maker?”

“The Alpha of a pack is more than one person, Ava,” her mother said, as if that explained everything. As if that excused her father’s manipulation.

“It takes a team,” her father agreed. “A strong Alpha team. You and Kaden--“

“Me and Kaden? Do you see Kaden in this room? He left!”

And he’d taken her heart with him.

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About Selena

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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