

Ready & Willing
by Selena Blake

Part 28

Ava took a cab to Kaden's house. She still didn't understand why he'd left her standing in her father's study all alone. He'd seen her father's bluff and raised him one. And he'd warned her. But did he have to leave her?

Her stomach had never twisted in so many knots as it had when she'd watched him walk away. When she'd called his name to his retreating back and he hadn't turned around. When he hadn't reassured her that everything was going to work out just fine.

The Alphaship didn't even matter anymore so long as he came to his senses. So long as he felt the same way she did.

His truck was parked out front. But even though the lights inside the house were on, there was no sign of him, as she walked up to the expensive front door with etched glass.

She rang the doorbell and waited. Two or three minutes ticked by and there was still no answer. Maybe he was in the shower.

She knocked and waited another minute, peering through the glass. A small movement on the back patio caught her attention.

Not willing to let it go, she waved the cabbie off and slunk around the side of the house. She followed the pathway and found the gate unlocked. As she neared the back corner of the house she heard raised voices. Both male. One she recognized easily.

Clinging to the darkness, she paused to listen.

“The truce is over, Kaden. Your guys broke your end of the bargain. The blood is on your hands.”

“The hell it is. You think I don’t know about the unprovoked attack? I was only gone three days, Juan. And I checked in every day.”

What attack?

“Unprovoked? My father was right,” the other man sneered. Ava peeked around the corner. The two faced off, standing next to the pool. She saw it then, a flash of brushed metal. “The only good wolf, is a dead one.”

Ava shifted without even thinking and broke into a dead run as the man aimed the gun at Kaden’s chest. Haunches curled beneath her, tail straight for balance, she launched herself at the man she loved.

A loud pop blared in her ears as she tackled Kaden. Pain exploded in her side as they hit the water. She gasped for breath, the scent of blood and chlorine filling her nose.

“Son of a bitch!” Kaden roared a moment later.

Her paws splashed the water, churning up the blood. Every heartbeat made her lightheaded. And then inky blankness claimed her.

When she came to, Kaden was holding her. “Ava, honey, you’ve got to shift.” He ran his fingers over her shoulder and down her side. “Come on sweetheart, I know you can do it.”

Shifting would hurt as much as the bullet wound. And in that moment, she didn’t have the strength. Motivation was nowhere in sight.

Darkness started to claim her again, starting at the edge of her vision. Strong hands shook her, chasing away the blackness. “Come on. One shift, Ava. One shift and you’ll be healed.”

Though she heard the words, she couldn’t bring herself to care. She’d rather take a nap. A nap would be nice. Why were her toes tingling like that?

Kaden hunkered down, got in her face. Close, intimate, his breath mingling with hers. His fingers sank into her fur.

She must be dreaming.

“Fight, Ava. One shift and you’ll be good as new again.”

What would happen if she didn't shift? Could she take a nap? If she was asleep, she wouldn't feel so bloody awful. If she was asleep, she could dream of Kaden. The tingling in her toes moved north to her paws. That didn't seem good. Neither did the light-headed...

She struggled to sit up.

"That's my girl." He cupped her cheek. "You know you're my mate, right?"

Despite her exhaustion, his words made her light and happier than she'd ever been. "Shift so I can kiss you properly."

Blanking her mind, she shifted back to her human form. But this time, she did as Kaden instructed. Releasing her mind, finding a happy place.

Her happy place was in his arms.

The moment she was human again, she wrapped her arms around him and he held her high against his chest.

"You crazy woman. What possessed you to run in front of a gun?"

"I couldn't lose you."

"You're not going to lose me." Cupping her cheek in one hand, he kissed her.

Softly at first, then deeper. "I love you, Ava."

The ringing of a phone shattered the bliss-filled moment. Growling, he stretched back and retrieved his phone from the small patio table.

Why was he taking a call at a time like this? She closed her eyes, her feelings raw.

"Yeah?" he said by way of greeting. "She's with me."

She opened her eyes. Who was he talking to?

Your father, he mouthed.

"The truce with Estivez is off." There was a pause. "Yeah. He showed up here tonight...with a gun." Another pause. "I'm fine, thanks to your daughter."

Ava heard her father's roar as Kaden held the phone away from his ear. "She's fine."

She couldn't imagine what her father was saying now. Part of her held out hope that he was scared for her. Concerned. But he was also the Alpha. The leader. He had more pressing matters to attend to...like a rogue, punk-group of *weretigers*.

"You know this will mean war." Kaden said.

War?

She was having trouble wrapping her mind around it all. Soaked to the bone and naked, a chill was working its way through her body. Less than a week ago she'd been dancing at her sister's wedding, her life, for the most part, peaceful. Now she was in love with a wolf who put duty above his heart and there was talk of war.

Gingerly, she eased out of Kaden's lap and circled the pool.

"Sir, I need to go."

She heard the clank of the phone as he returned it to the table. Then, soft foot-falls behind her.

Staring down at the dribble of blood on the concrete, her hand went to her side, just above her right hip. The bullet wound was just a memory. A painful memory.

She hadn't thought, simply reacted. The *weretiger* was obviously long gone, which was lucky for him. At the moment, she wasn't feeling particularly magnanimous.

"You were right," she murmured. "Daddy was bluffing."

Kaden stepped closer. She felt his heat before his hands clasped her shoulders and turned her to face him.

"All this time, he was playing matchmaker." She told him what her parents had said.

Kaden pulled her into a hug. "I'll admit I didn't see that one coming."

She soaked in his warmth, despite the fact that he was still soaking wet. His strength surrounded her. Eyes closed, she memorized every breath, the feeling of his body pressed against hers.

"Why did you leave?" she finally managed to ask just before a shiver took over.

"So that your father wouldn't call my bluff. I've always respected him as a leader but I don't appreciate being manipulated."

She leaned back in his arms and stared up at him. "Even if that manipulation brought us together?"

"I don't mind that at all." He brushed kisses across her forehead, down her cheeks, over her lips. "I was giving him till tomorrow morning to come to his senses. Then I was coming for you."

"You were?"

"But you got here first."

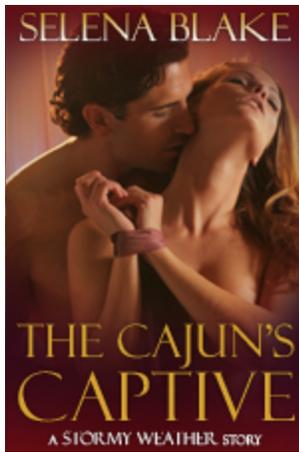
"What will happen now? With the weretigers?" Did Elizabeth know?

"It doesn't matter." He scooped her up and headed in through the open door, leaving a trail of water droplets in their wake. She clung to his shoulders as he started up the stairs. "The only thing that matters from here on out, is you."

He kissed her then. It was a kiss of love. And promise.



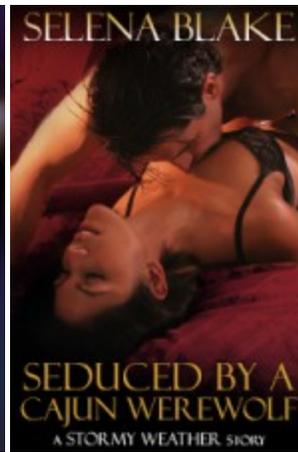
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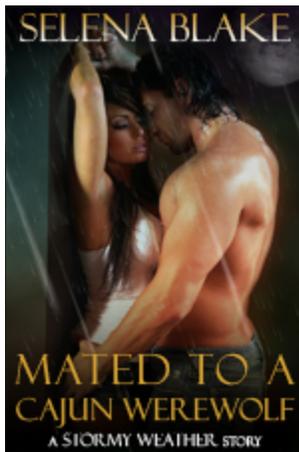
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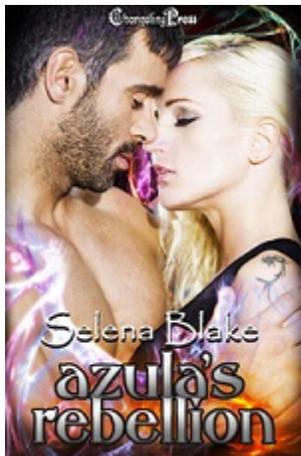
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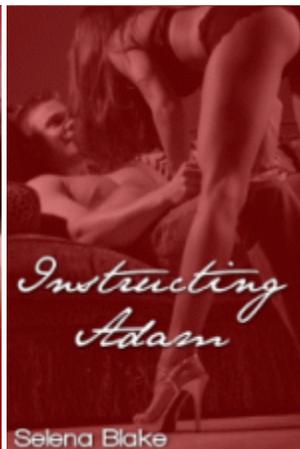
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An action movie buff with a penchant for all things supernatural and sexy, Selena Blake combines her love for adventure, travel and romance into steamy paranormal romance. Selena's books have been called "a steamy escape" and have appeared on bestseller 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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