



A PALADIN WEDDING

Devlin and Laurel



APRIL 1, 2018
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Chapter 1: Meeting the Parents

One thing a man who was born to be a warrior and a hunter knew how to do was pounce exactly when his prey least expected it. Devlin kept his eyes at half-mast and his body relaxed, sated by a bout of mind-blowing sex with his woman. Now that he had Laurel right where he wanted her—sleepy and cuddled close—he sprung his trap.

“So, tell me, when are you leaving for your folks’ place?”

Laurel sighed loudly and lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. “Okay, just how long have you known?”

He ran his big hand up and down her arm, hoping to soothe the flare of alarm in her dark eyes. “Pretty much since your mother first called and demanded that you come home for a visit.”

“I was going to tell you.” Laurel dropped her head back down to his shoulder. “Eventually.”

“I know. I also know that you’ve been driving yourself crazy worrying over this.” Time to lay all the cards out on the table. “My only question is why?”

Laurel rolled over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. For a long time, she lay there in silence. “I love my family, but . . .”

“But what?” he asked when she didn’t go on.

Her mouth turned down in a hard frown. “But . . . well, they don’t know what I do for a living and wouldn’t understand even if they did.”

Okay, now that didn’t make any sense at all. “Laurel, how could they not know you’re a doctor? What did they think you were doing all those years in medical school? Torturing lab rats?”

“Smart ass,” Laurel said with no real rancor. “Of course they know I’m a doctor, but they don’t understand why I won’t move back home and go into family practice or pediatrics.” She shuddered.

“And?” he prompted, knowing there was more to it than just what she did for a living or where she did it.

“Mom wants to fix me up again . . . you know, with someone.” Laurel gave him a quick glance, probably to gauge his reaction to that little bombshell. “Dev, I know she means well. All my siblings are married and have kids. Mom and Dad like seeing them all settled and happy, and

they want the same things for me. They've never understood that I want something different. That I *need* something different."

The thought of Laurel with another man made Devlin want to hit something. Or someone. The poor bastard probably didn't deserve to be beaten within an inch of his life, but the idea held a great deal of appeal. For Laurel's sake, though, he shoved that thought down into the dark recesses of his mind. Back to the matter at hand.

"I know you've told her about us."

Damn, he was proud of how calm he sounded even if his hands were clenched into fists and his jaw ached with tension.

"I did. I've told her over and over again that I'm seeing someone at work. I think she worries that if I'm seriously involved with someone here in Seattle I'll never move back home. And maybe our relationship doesn't seem quite real to her because she's never seen us together."

He couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Well, maybe we should fix that."

Laurel sat up, the sheet pooling around her waist. Since neither of them slept in pajamas, the sight was seriously distracting. He blinked hard, trying to get his mind back on the discussion at hand. Not an easy task with all that soft, feminine flesh right there within easy touching distance.

Focus, Devlin, focus. "Fix it how?"

He stared into that pixy face he loved so much. She'd dragged him back from the abyss. This was the least he could do for her. "Invite me along when you go visit them. Once your parents have met me, they'll know I'm real and back off on the dating advice."

After all, how bad could it be? A few days away from the barrier would do them both some good. Maybe they could take more time and make a road trip out of it. Do some sightseeing. Act like normal people on vacation. Then he realized that Laurel was studying him like a particularly interesting lab specimen.

"What?"

She shifted positions so that she was facing him directly. "Tell me this, Devlin, my love. In all your years of dating, how many times have you ever done the 'meet the parents' thing?"

He pretended to have to think about it, but the truth was that Laurel was the only woman he'd ever loved. The only one who really mattered. "This would be the first time, but how hard could it be? You introduce me. We all shake hands. It's a done deal."

Laurel blinked twice and then started giggling.

"What?"

She held up a hand as she fought for control. Finally, she managed to say, "It's not that simple."

Wide awake now, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, leaning against the headboard. “How so?”

“Well, part of the problem is that I’ve never brought a man home to meet them who hadn’t grown up in my hometown. If they didn’t already know my date, they at least knew his family and what kind of people he came from. With you, it will be more of an inquisition than an introduction.”

Then she held up her fingers and started counting off the points she was trying to make. “My father will want to know what you do for a living. You know, to make sure you have a steady job. The minute my mother realizes how we feel about each other, she’ll immediately want to reserve the church and start shopping for my wedding dress. My older brother will want to know what your intentions are with his little sister. And then, if that’s not bad enough, next they’ll invite all the relatives in.”

Devlin’s blood ran cold. Rather than think about running the gauntlet of her parents and siblings, he focused on that last remark. “Uh, Laurel, when you say *all* the relatives, just how many are we talking about? Single digits? Double digits?”

God forbid that it be triple digits.

Laurel’s laugh was wicked. “If they limit the invitations to close relatives only, we’re talking fifty to sixty people. But then there are all those kissing cousins, too. You know, the friends who aren’t actually related to us but might as well be.”

What a damned nightmare this was turning out to be! But for Laurel’s sake, he could do this. He really could. After all, he faced mobs of crazed killers for a living. How much worse could this be?

He took a deep breath and did the bravest thing he’d ever done. “Let me know when I should start packing.”

Laurel dove into his arms and kissed him senseless. One thing led to another, so it was sometime before Devlin could think straight again. He poked and prodded at the implications of meeting Laurel’s parents and realized he had one last question.

“Just in case, can I bring my sword?”

Chapter 2: It All Begins

As a rule, Devlin Bane knew better than to think the idiots would give up if he only ignored them long enough. He gave them fifteen seconds—thirty tops—before they started in again. Paladins were nothing if not determined.

It had all started with a polite knock on his door. When he failed to respond, the pounding had begun accompanied by evil laughter. He'd hit his stash of earplugs and kept on working right through the ruckus outside. Next, they'd upped the ante by having D.J. call Devlin's name in a high falsetto, trying to pass himself off as Laurel wanting a special moment with her man.

Yeah, right, like that was going to work, but Devlin did give the jerk points for creativity. In between increasingly lewd offers, someone—most likely Lonzo—had kicked the door a few times, putting a fair amount of umph behind each blow. It was testament to the quality of construction used in the door that it was still holding together.

Devlin signed the last requisition in the pile and tossed it on his done pile. Barring an unforeseen avalanche of new paperwork, he was as caught up and done as he'd ever be. Time to let the animals in. He rounded the desk and quietly unlatched the door. Pressing an ear against the thick wood, he listened to see if he could figure out what they were planning next. Yep, just as he thought. They were going to try to break the door open with a makeshift battering ram.

He waited two more seconds and then jerked the door open. Trahern came stumbling through carrying the front end of an impressive piece of lumber. God knows where they got it. D.J. and Lonzo were holding onto the other end, laughing like fools as they charged past him. Cullen, Barak, and Larem strolled in far more sedately. At least they were loaded down with beer and pizza.

“What's all this?” Devlin asked as he hustled back around to the other side of his desk to ensure he didn't have to fight someone for his chair. Not that he wouldn't enjoy knocking a couple of heads together about now, but Laurel wouldn't appreciate him showing up bruised and battered to start their vacation.

“It's the condemned man's last meal.” That comment came from the Professor, as Cullen's friends thought of him. “None of us have ever had to do the ‘meet the parents’ thing, but we're pretty sure that with our DNA, the experience might be toxic.”

“Oh, come on, guys. How bad can it be?” Although Devlin had been having a few nightmares about the subject.

Trahern shuddered. “Seriously, Dev, these are normal people you're going to meet. There's no telling what could happen.”

Devlin shouldn't be laughing, but how could he not? Still, he had to defend his honor. "Hey, I can do normal."

That set off a new round of raucous laughter. Even Barak and Larem, both born in another culture not to mention another world, joined in. This was starting to piss him off.

"Look, making nice with Laurel's parents can't be harder than it was for Barak and Larem to learn how to pass as human. If they can manage to pull that off, surely I can mainstream for a few days."

"Yeah, right. These two had us here to hold their hands. You're going in solo and unarmed. Besides, we knew they weren't human."

D.J. grabbed the first piece of pizza—no surprise there—and waved it around in the air as he continued to make his point. "Laurel's family...hell, the whole damn town...thinks you're just like they are, which we all know isn't true. Not only that, but you're the reason their little girl isn't moving back to Wide-Spot-in-the-Road, America."

Nothing like having his closest friends echoing every terrifying thought he'd had since offering to accompany Laurel on a visit to her hometown. "I'm not the only reason she's stayed in Seattle," he protested despite knowing it was the most important one. "Besides, she's happier here than she would be there."

Lonzo chimed in. "We all know that, big man, even if we have to question her taste in men. After all, she could have had me or D.J. instead. Hell, even Larem here is better looking despite his weird-as-shit alien nature."

The man in question spoke up, sounding a bit testy. "Lonzo, remember it's my week to cook. One more comment like that, and you'll be eating eggplant soufflé every night—again."

Lonzo looked a bit sick. "Sorry, roomie, but you know it's true."

Okay, if this continued there'd definitely be blows exchanged before this was over. Maybe they realized they were pushing a bit too hard because Trahern started passing out beers and pizza. As long as they were all drinking or chewing, they weren't yanking anyone's chain.

When every scrap had been eaten except the cardboard boxes the pizza came in, Trahern looked at the others and tapped his watch. D.J. immediately jumped to his feet and headed for the door, snagging Barak on the way out.

Devlin had a bad feeling about his. "Where are they going?"

Trahern's smile was anything but innocent. "What's a party without a few presents for the guest of honor?"

Oh, shit, this was bad. Possibly very bad. "Give me another beer. In fact, make it two."

Instead, Cullen handed him a full six-pack and stage whispered, "Drink quick. I guarantee you'll

need it.”

Taking his friend at his word, Devlin downed one beer and was starting on the second before the guys came trooping back in, this time with Penn Sebastian bringing up the rear.

He set down the bags he was carrying and glared at the piles of empty boxes scattered on the floor. “Damn it, I knew you pigs would finish off the pizza before I got here.”

Cullen looked insulted. “Would we stiff you like that, especially after you volunteered to do all the wrapping?”

“Damn straight you would,” Penn said, looking much put upon. “And I didn’t volunteer. I lost the coin toss.”

Penn looked around the room. When he spied the pack of beer on Devlin’s desk, he made a grab for one. Devlin smacked his hand away. “Get your own, jerk. I saw Cullen hide a couple over in the cabinet.”

Penn opened the cabinet and hooted in triumph when he pulled out a pizza box and a couple of cold ones. “Sorry, Prof, I should have known you’d take care of my ass.”

“Damn straight.” Cullen picked up the first of several bags and began piling gaudily wrapped packages on Devlin’s desk. “These are from all of us. Just as we wouldn’t let you go into battle unarmed, we won’t let you face a horde of relatives without the right weapons at hand.”

Devlin considered bolting for the door but figured he’d never make it that far. Besides, it might be the beer talking, but he was curious what these clowns had come up with.

One box wrapped in silver paper covered with flowers looked fairly innocuous, like it might hold a shirt. Devlin shook it, just in case. No rattles, nothing rolling around. He ripped off the paper and tossed it in the trash. When he lifted the lid, he didn’t want to laugh, knowing it would only encourage the clowns, but how could he not? Inside was a purple and green plaid shirt with a clip-on bow tie in a hideous shade of orange. Tucked underneath was a matching set of suspenders.

Lonzo and Larem were looking mighty proud of themselves. “We thought you might need to dress up one night.”

“Thanks, guys. I’ll make sure it’s packed right on top.” In next week’s trash, but he kept that part to himself.

He braced himself and reached for another box. Amidst a lot of hooting and hollering, he unwrapped one tasteless gift after another. When he had opened the last one, he popped another beer and studied the pile. What was he going to do with all of this stuff?

He was now the proud owner of his first very own pair of pajamas—the kind that had a breast pocket. What was that for? At least they were dark green and not some color that glowed in the dark. Trahern had actually fluttered his eyelashes at him, claiming the green was the exact shade

of Devlin's eyes.

The guys had also chipped in for a box of chocolates for Laurel's mother and a book on the history of Seattle for her father. Good catch on Cullen's part. Devlin wasn't sure he would have thought about taking gifts for them.

The last present was from Penn and D.J. The two idiots had been giggling like girls ever since he'd unwrapped it. He stared at the fluffy stuffed bear in disgust. "Okay, why the bear?"

Penn immediately said, "It was Penn's idea, but we all agreed that you'd need it."

"And why is that?" he asked, although suddenly he didn't like the direction this conversation was headed.

D.J. looked all sympathetic. "Well, you're not used to sleeping alone anymore. We thought you might want something to cuddle with while you're there. You know, to help prevent separation anxiety."

Devlin had been leaning back with his feet up on the desk, but his size thirteens came slamming back down on the floor. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

All of his friends looked downright sorrowful. Cullen rounded the desk and patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry to break the bad news, big guy, but you don't really think Laurel's parents are going to let you and Laurel sleep in the same bed, do you?"

"Well, damn." They were right, and he knew it. Devlin gave the bear a test hug and shook his head in pure disgust. It was warm and it was soft, but it wasn't Laurel.

Chapter 3: Hitting the Road

Laurel tossed her purse in the car while Devlin finished loading their luggage and the bag of gifts they had bought for her family. She wasn't sure why there was a big teddy bear in the backseat, but considering Devlin's current mood she wasn't about to ask.

"Is that everything? I think there's another couple of inches of space left in the trunk if we shove hard enough or, you know, we could dump the spare tire." Devlin peered at her over his sunglasses. "I mean, are you sure ten pairs of shoes are enough? We're going to be gone for nine whole days."

Tired of the sarcasm, Laurel offered up one of those sugary smiles that never failed to set her lover's teeth on edge. "No, that's all right, sweet'ums. I can always buy more when we get there. Mom loves to shop for hours and hours, and we'll have you with all those big, strong muscles to carry all those heavy bags for us."

Devlin winced as if in pain and slammed the trunk lid down hard enough to wake the neighbors. For good measure, he gave it a couple of extra bounces to make sure it stayed shut. "Okay, well, I guess we're ready to hit the road."

Fear wasn't an expression she was used to seeing on her lover's face. Poor baby, this whole expedition to meet her parents had put a serious strain on the man. She knew he was doing this to make her happy, but that didn't mean he was expecting to enjoy himself. Maybe she shouldn't have teased him about meeting all of her relatives, but blindsiding him wouldn't have been fair either.

"You can still cancel, Devlin." She gave him a quick hug before climbing into the car. "They'd believe you if we said an emergency at work prevented you from being able to get away."

Chances were they wouldn't even be stretching the truth. Even a delay of a couple of hours could make a huge difference—an earthquake might shake the area, a volcano might vent some steam, or the barrier might collapse for no discernible reason. Any or all of those things could result in Devlin grabbing his sword and heading back down into the darkness to defend the world from a secret invasion. Heck, she'd get her own phone call, too, cancelling the trip altogether.

If things went well for Devlin and his friends, she'd sew a few stitches, ice a few bruises, and send the Paladins on their way or back into battle. If things went badly...she'd be ankle deep in their blood and praying like crazy that none of the men she knew so well would die once too often. She still had nightmares about the last Paladin she'd had to put down. The thought of shoving that needle full of toxins in another arm and watching a good man die for the last time gave her the shakes. And if were Devlin she had to kill, she might just use the next syringe on herself.

It was the kind of truth she couldn't share with her parents. True, they'd respect Devlin and the other Paladins the same way they did the men and women who served in the regular military. They understood that kind of sacrifice. She wasn't sure that understanding would extend to her. Her family loved her. They really did. The only problem was that they didn't really know her at all, so the woman they loved didn't really exist.

They envisioned her treating ear infections and handing out stickers to little kids, preferably back in the small town where she'd grown up. That wasn't going to happen. Not now. Not ever.

"You're thinking too hard, Laurel. We'll survive this week. We're tough." Devlin slid into the driver's seat. "Now, let's hit the drive-thru for some fresh coffee before we leave civilization behind."

As soon as they pulled out of the driveway, he reached over to give her hand a squeeze. "I'm actually housebroken, you know. I promise to love your mom's cooking and to laugh at your father's jokes. Your brother and I will argue football, and I won't even complain about you and I not sharing the same bed."

Oh, God, she hadn't even thought about that and said so. "I'll talk to my mother. We're adults, after all."

Devlin shook his head. "You're still their little girl, and I'm the big bad who's keeping you from moving back home. Let's not rock the boat."

Then he shot her one of those hot looks that always melted her bones. "Besides, I'm sneaky. We'll manage somehow."

"I can always take you out to the lake where all the teenagers go to make out." A few fond memories surfaced, but she seriously doubted Devlin would want to hear about them.

"Don't you think I'm a bit old to go parking?" he asked as he whipped the car into line at Starbucks and placed their usual order.

"I know exactly how old you are, and I've never seen it stop you from doing anything you wanted to do—in any position, I might add." She trailed her fingers across his thigh, heading for dangerous territory.

Devlin promptly grabbed her hand and put it safely back in her own lap. "Behave, woman. And if I'd known you were going to want to get all adventurous in the great outdoors, I would have borrowed Penn's truck. That way we could at least stretch out when we get naked."

She giggled. "That's what they make haylofts and blankets for."

He gave her a doubtful look as they finally headed for the highway. "Like I said, we'll manage."

As she sipped her coffee, she decided to ask about something that had been bothering her. "You know, I still don't understand why we're taking two days to get there. We could make it all the

way to my folks' house by late tonight if we wanted to push it, especially with two of us to trade off driving.”

“No way. We’ll stick with the plan.”

“Which is?”

“We drive part of the way, check into a nice motel that has king-sized beds,” he paused to waggle his eyebrows at her with an evil leer, “where we’re going to have wild monkey sex all night long, and drive the rest of the way tomorrow. Any questions?”

“Just one—are we there yet?”

Chapter 4: The End of the Road

Laurel straightened up and pointed down the street. “Turn right at the next corner just past that stand of trees. Then it’s the last house on the right.”

Devlin did exactly as directed, being careful not to exceed the posted speed limit. No use rushing things. When he rode the brake all the way to the turn, Laurel shot him an amused look.

“What?” he asked, hoping he looked more innocent than he felt.

“I’ve known you for a while now, Devlin. In all that time, you’ve never had more than a nodding acquaintance with the concept of a speed limit. Is the accelerator stuck on slow for some reason?”

Okay, so she’d caught him fair and square. “Maybe I didn’t want to risk getting a speeding ticket on the way to your hometown. What kind of impression would that make on your parents?”

When she just rolled her eyes, he gave up all pretense of obeying the law and gunned the engine down the last block to their destination. Her parents must have been watching for them because they stepped out onto the porch before he even turned the engine off.

“You ready for this?” Laurel asked, sounding a bit nervous herself.

“As I’ll ever be.” He took her hand in his and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “Seriously, I’m looking forward to meeting them. After all, they gave the world you, which makes them pretty special in my book. Now, you sit still until I come around and open your door for you. I want to impress your mom with my good manners.”

He winked at her as he walked around the front of the car, earning a bright smile from his woman. After all this time, he still had a hard time believing what a lucky son of a bitch he was to have Laurel look at him with such love in her eyes. He’d walk on hot coals all the way to hell and back for her. Meeting her parents—piece of cake.

Crossing his fingers, he followed Laurel up the sidewalk to where her parents stood waiting. She hugged each of them and then stepped back to allow him to move up beside her. Her mother shared the same dark eyes and hair as her daughter with a few strands of gray mixed in, but Laurel got her smile from her father, who stood a shade under six feet tall and was built on the lean side. Devlin dwarfed him on both counts.

Doug didn’t let the difference between their sizes keep him from giving Devlin a measuring look before offering his hand in greeting. “You must be Devlin Bane. I’m Doug Young and this is my wife, Joyce.”

“Nice to meet you both.” Dev smiled at Laurel’s mother. “She’s told me a lot about you.”

Her mother returned the smile. “I’d like to say the same about you, Mr. Bane. Until she told us

that you were coming with her, we were starting to wonder if you were just a figment of her imagination.”

“Mother! I’ve told you plenty about Devlin.”

Doug wrapped his arms around his two women. “Listen, let’s not stand out here all day. I’m sure after such a long drive, you both could use a cold drink. Devlin and I will bring the luggage inside, and then we can all get comfortable.”

Laurel shot Devlin a sympathetic look back over her shoulder as she let her mother draw her inside. Divide and conquer was a strategy Devlin had some experience with. No doubt Laurel was about to be grilled by her mother while her father did the same to him. He didn’t blame them for wanting to know more about him and what his intentions were toward their daughter.

He just wished he didn’t have to lie to them. Not about Laurel, but about everything else—his job, his age, his prospects. He loved their daughter, though, plain and simple, and would lay down his life for her—permanently and without hesitation. He’d never expected to find this kind of happiness, and he planned to hold onto it and her with every last ounce of strength he had.

Was he the kind of man they would have chosen for her? Hell, no, which just went to show that their instincts were right on the money. But they’d never find a man who loved her more.

That was his truth. That much he could tell them.

“Oh, sit down, Laurel. Your father isn’t going to scare your Devlin off, so just relax.” Her mother handed her a glass of iced tea. “We’ve got about half an hour before the others arrive, and I have a few more things to do here in the kitchen.”

Laurel sipped her tea, watching her mother put the finishing touches on several salads. How many people had she invited? Judging by the number of huge bowls chilling out in the fridge, the whole bunch. Poor Devlin. Poor her.

“Here, make yourself useful and fill the relish dish for me.”

Her mother handed her the divided dish and the various flavors of olives her family liked. This had been one of Laurel’s jobs at family feasts as far back as she could remember. For a few minutes, they worked in companionable silence. It wouldn’t stay that way for long, but Laurel was willing to wait her mother out.

Finally, Joyce broke the silence. “I have to say, your Devlin is different than what I expected.”

Laurel hid a smile, knowing her mother had no idea how very different he really was. “How so, Mom?”

“A whole lot bigger for one thing.” Her mother grinned. “And I was expecting a three-piece suit rather than a flannel shirt and jeans, not to mention the long hair. He’s sure handsome enough.”

“I like to think so.”

Laurel joined her mom at the sliding glass door. What were Devlin and her father talking about? When Dev happened to glance up just then, she felt the intensity of his bright green eyes like a caress. Her hand pressed against the glass, wishing it was the warmth of his skin she was touching rather than the chill of the smooth glass.

Her mother brushed a strand of Laurel’s hair back from her face. “So, how did you two meet? I don’t think you’ve ever said.”

“At the hospital where I work.” Laurel smiled. “He doesn’t handle being a patient very well.”

Joyce snorted. “Most men don’t, but he looks healthy as a horse. I trust it wasn’t something serious.”

He’d been dead. Cold to the touch. His wounds horrific. Laurel shuddered at the memory. It had been the first of too many such encounters. Not that she could share that burden with her mother.

“He got over it.” Although it took longer than it should have for someone with his DNA. “We knew each other for quite a while before we actually started dating.”

That she’d almost been killed because of him was something else she kept to herself. Then there was the whole hanging around aliens from another world thing. Her mother, especially, would be horrified to know her little girl spent her life patching dead and dying warriors back together. Her father had served a stint in the military, so maybe he’d understand her compulsion to make those valiant men’s lives better any way that she could.

Joyce had gone back to arranging raw veggies on a platter. “What does he do for a living?”

Laurel giggled. “Okay, Devlin won that one. He said you’d ask that within the first hour. I was betting you’d hold out longer than that.”

“Very funny, Laurel,” Joyce admonished, pointing at Laurel with her paring knife. “We worry, you know. When you went off to college, we never expected you to stay away so long. We’ve been hoping you’ll move back home where you belong, but seeing you with that man makes me think that’s not going to happen. Don’t expect us to be happy about that.”

She so didn’t want to hurt her parents, but maybe it was time for some honesty. “Mom, don’t blame Devlin for that. I’ve known for a long time that I wouldn’t be happy living back here. The work I do is important, and I love being a doctor.”

Her mother’s eyes, so like her own, looked hurt. “You could be a doctor here. The town has grown, and there’s a new clinic and talk of a new hospital being built. I’m sure you could get a job at one of those.”

“Mom, I’m a scientist as much as I’m a physician. No rural hospital or medical clinic is going to provide the kind of facilities I need in order to do my research.” She looked back out at Devlin,

drawing strength from his presence. “And besides, Devlin’s job is based in Seattle, too.”

“You still haven’t answered. What does he do?” her mother asked, just as the doorbell chimed.

Laurel snagged a carrot off the platter and grinned. “Looks like I’ve been saved by the bell.”

Judging from the look on Laurel’s face, the inquisition had begun. So far her father had been playing the good host, but his wife must have launched the opening salvos. Damn, should he ride to the rescue or stay out of it? Why didn’t this “meet the parents” game come with a rule book?

They were her family and as such deserved his respect, but he didn’t like to see his lover hurting. He forced his gaze back to Doug, hoping he was making the right decision.

“Well, that’s all I can do until the others arrive. I should warn you that this whole thing snowballed on us. Our intention was to have just us as well as Laurel’s brothers and sisters and their families. But once people heard she was going to be in town, things got out of control. I’d apologize for that, but Laurel doesn’t come home nearly often enough, and she’s never brought home a man to meet the family before. People are bound to be curious.”

After dropping that little bombshell, Doug popped the top on another beer. “Ready for another one?”

“No, I’m good.” Did he get bonus points for showing restraint, especially when the thought of all those strangers about to descend on the house made he want to drink himself into a stupor?

“My wife’s probably trying to convince Laurel that she could get a job as a doctor here in town.” Doug took a long swing of his beer. “I’m guessing that’s not going to happen, at least not as long as you’re in the picture.”

Was that a question? Devlin wasn’t sure. “Laurel has a job, sir. One that she excels at.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that a minute. She’s always been good at anything she put her mind to. All of our kids are bright and successful, but Laurel outshined them all. Gifted is the word teachers used from the time she first started school. We felt bad that we couldn’t afford to send her to medical school. But then out of the blue, Laurel got that a scholarship that made it all possible for her.”

Doug’s tone made it clear that he thought that was a mixed blessing at best. No surprise there. The Regents had recruited Laurel’s services by paying her way through school. But these people wanted their daughter to be happy and were having a hard time with the realization that in some ways she’d outgrown this small town. Devlin sympathized. He wanted to protect Laurel from the harshness of his world, but it was far too late for that. Besides, without her sheer cussedness when it came to her patients’ welfare, more than one of his friends would have been dead and buried by now.

Most likely him, too, for that matter.

“She doesn’t like making you and your wife worry, sir.” Devlin finished the last of his beer.

“That’s our job—we’re her parents. It might help me worry less if I knew—”

Doug stopped midsentence and tilted his head as if listening for something. “We’ll have to pick up here again later, Devlin. The others are here.”

Devlin rose to his feet as the sliding door flew open and people began pouring through out onto the patio. He instinctively backed up a step in response to the onslaught. His empty hands flexed, making him rethink the whole decision to leave his sword at home. He wasn’t used to facing an invasion with no more than an empty beer bottle for a makeshift weapon.

Laurel cut through the crowd, heading straight for him. The second she slid her arm around his waist and leaned into his side, his tension drained away. As always, this one woman grounded him. The two of them could face anything as long as they were together. Yeah, damn straight. Bring it on!

The crowd was finally thinning out. Over the course of the evening, he’d met more people than he could remember names for, but that was okay. They were here for Laurel. Well, and to check him out to decide if he was good enough for their hometown girl. He wondered what the verdict was. He’d had years of practice at fending off questions he couldn’t answer, but he hated to be less than honest with people who, in their own way, loved Laurel as much as he did.

He automatically sought her out. She was talking to two of her sisters-in-law while holding one of her young nephews on her hip. The little guy had been fussing until she’d picked him up. Dev didn’t know what she’d said to the boy, but the tears had stopped immediately. Now he was contentedly sucking his thumb as she kept him cuddled close. Lucky kid.

It struck him how natural Laurel looked holding a child. For sure, with all her nieces and nephews, she’d had plenty of time to practice the skill. But for some reason he kept picturing her holding a little girl with her curls and his green eyes. He shook his head, wondering where that thought had come from. Before he came up with an answer, someone tugged on his sleeve.

He expected it to be one of the kids, but he couldn’t have been further from the truth. Instead, a tiny little old lady stood blinking up at him. She’d been introduced to him earlier as Laurel paternal grandmother.

“Ma’am, was there something you needed?”

She sniffed. “Not me, young man. But I’ve noticed my granddaughter isn’t wearing an engagement ring, much less a wedding ring. Why is that? Are you trifling with her emotions?”

While others had hinted around the same subject, the feisty old gal was the first one with the guts to come right out and ask. He liked that about her. Unfortunately, Grandma Young must have been a little hard of hearing, because every word was said loud enough to carry across to her

granddaughter. Laurel looked as if she wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole. Finally, she handed off her nephew to the nearest pair of arms before cutting across the patio, totally ignoring the now silent crowd.

As she charged to his rescue with same fierce determination she used to fight for his men's lives, everything came together for him. Together—like her parents were after forty years of marriage. Like all of her siblings, who were happily married and busy raising the next generation. He wanted some of that for himself. No, he wanted *all* of that for himself and Laurel.

Holding his arm out to Laurel, he offered her the sanctuary of his embrace. Drawing a deep breath, he leaned down to whisper to her grandmother.

“Mrs. Young, can you give me a few minutes alone with your granddaughter before I answer that question?”

The older woman's eyes sparkled with mischief. “Yes, I believe I will. But first, take this. I'm thinking you'll be needing it,” she said as she tugged a ring off her left finger and pressed it into his hand. “I've worn it since the day my Herbert ask me the same question. I hope it brings you as much happiness as it did us.”

Devlin accepted the priceless gift. He leaned down to kiss her cheek and whispered one more thing. “Wish me luck.”

Mrs. Young eyed the two of them. “Young man, I believe people make your own luck. Now, off with the two of you. I won't be able to hold this crowd off for long.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Then he took Laurel's hand and all but dragged her around to the far side of the garage where the darkness would offer them some degree of privacy.

“Devlin! Quit manhandling me,” she ordered, digging in her heels. “I should have known something like this would happen. They mean well, but they just don't understand.”

She swiped at her eyes with her hand. “God, I'm so embarrassed. We'll pack up the car and leave immediately. Give me Grandma's ring so I can give it back to her.”

“Let's not be such a hurry.” Devlin gently pried her hands away from her face and pulled her into his chest. “Take a deep breath and let me talk for a minute. Okay?”

When he felt her nod, he took a deep breath and rolled the dice. “Laurel, I've lived a long time as a Paladin, with all that means, and never expected more out of life than serving alongside men I love like brothers. Then I met you and discovered what I'd been missing. Now I want it all—love, marriage, children—and I want it with you.”

He dropped to one knee. “Dr. Laurel Young, will you be my wife?”

Only his enhanced Paladin sight allowed him to witness the stream of powerful emotions

flashing across his lover's face—shock, wonder, hope, and finally joy. Finally, she knelt down and took both his hands in hers.

“Devlin, are you sure? That you want this? That you want me?”

“I've never wanted anything more, Laurel. I love you too much to live—or die—without you there in my corner.”

She studied his face for several more seconds before she nodded. “Then, yes, Devlin Bane, I'll be honored to be your wife. I'm warning you, though, I won't be satisfied with anything less than a church wedding with all the bells and whistles.”

“If that's what you want, that's what we'll do.” If it killed him. “Besides, imagine how much fun it will be to tell Trahern he has to rent a tux.”

They were both laughing as he slipped her grandmother's ring onto Laurel's finger, sealing the deal. Then he kissed her long and sweet, his heart threatening to burst with terrified happiness.

Finally, Devlin helped his new fiancée to her feet. “Now, let's go tell your mom and your grandmother that they have a wedding to plan.”

Chapter 5: The Showdown

“Mr. Bane, can we borrow you for a minute?”

“Sure thing,” Devlin answered. “I’ll be right there.”

Damn, he’d known it was only a matter of time before Laurel’s parents cornered him alone, but did it have to be now when the Seahawks were about to score? He was tempted to nudge the volume up on the television a couple of notches, hoping he’d be able to hear the score from the kitchen table. On the other hand, with Laurel’s mother back to calling him by his last name, he probably shouldn’t divide his attention.

He should’ve noticed that they finally managed to separate him and Laurel, well, besides making them sleep at opposite ends of the house. He really missed having her sweet warmth curled up beside him all night, so he wasn’t sleeping all that well. Still, having Laurel’s sister show up unexpectedly and insist that Laurel needed to go shopping with her, just the two of them, should’ve set off alarms.

Bracing himself for the worst, he walked into the kitchen to face his future in-laws. Laurel’s father looked decidedly grim while his wife appeared to be ready to do battle. *O-kay, this was going to be fun.*

Joyce immediately jumped to her feet. “I’ll pour us all a cup of coffee. Do you take cream and sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

Just as it had been each time she’d asked him since he and Laurel had arrived. Either her mother had a memory problem or it was her way of letting him know that he wasn’t going to be around long enough for her to learn his likes and dislikes.

While she fluttered around the kitchen, pouring coffee and piling a plate high with cookies, her husband Doug sat in stony silence, his arms crossed over his chest. If he hoped to intimidate Devlin, he was in for a big disappointment although he didn’t fault the man for trying. Doug wanted was what was best for his daughter and was smart enough to sense the Devlin wasn’t what they were looking for in a son-in-law.

Joyce finally set three mugs on the table, handing one to Devlin before joining her husband at the opposite end of the table.

“Thank you, Mrs. Young.” He took a cautious sip of the coffee and waited for the storm to break. It didn’t take long.

“Mr. Bane...Devlin.” Doug’s eyes flickered to his wife and then back to him. “There are a few things we’d like to say to you without Laurel being here. I also think it’s time we got answers to our questions.”

Devlin set his cup down and mirrored Doug’s actions, crossing his arms and stretching his legs out. “Ask away.”

“First of all, we feel that Laurel’s grandmother put you in an awkward position and forced the issue last night about an engagement. We did not invite you here to force you into marrying our daughter. We apologize for that and will explain the situation to my mother and the rest of the family.”

So they were hoping he’d take it all back. Fat chance. “No apology necessary, Doug, and there is nothing to explain. I think you’ll find that I don’t push easily. If I hadn’t wanted to propose to Laurel, I wouldn’t have.”

He paused to let that much sink in before continuing. “To be honest, it’s been on my mind for some time. Your daughter means the world to me. We’re very happy with the life we’ve built together.”

“We want our daughter to be happy, but...” Joyce’s voice trailed off, obviously struggling with how best to continue.

Devlin finished it for her. “But you’d like her back here with some guy who you’ve known his entire life. I get that. In fact, so does she. But to be blunt about it, with or without me, Laurel doesn’t belong here anymore. She has important work to do, work that makes her happy, and it can’t be done here.”

Doug jumped back in. “Work that involves you—work you’re both awfully closemouthed about.”

“It’s classified, sir. That’s all I can say.” At least that much wasn’t a lie.

“Which I assume means it’s also dangerous—at least for you and maybe for her.”

Yeah, it was. She’d almost died because of him, but that story was never going to be told here. “Mr. and Mrs. Young, I’ve already said I can’t talk about my work or Laurel’s for that matter. What I will say is that what she does is special and important. Lives depend on her being there.”

He hated the pain in Joyce’s eyes, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. “No one will ever love Laurel more than I do, and I promise to do everything within my power to make her happy. I’d lay my life down in a heartbeat to keep her safe from harm.”

Doug reached over to take his wife’s hand, communicating without words the way married couples sometimes did. Devlin wondered what was being said and if he needed to go start packing.

“It’s obvious that you two love each other, Mr. Bane.” Joyce’s voice cracked with emotion. “I feel as if I’m losing her all over again and for good this time. It was hard enough when she left for college and then medical school, but I also know my daughter. Once she sets her sights on something she wants, there’s no stopping her.”

“And Devlin is what I want, Mother.”

The three of them had been concentrating so hard on their conversation that none of them had heard the front door open. Laurel stood in the kitchen doorway. How much had she heard? He recognized the look in her eyes. She’d heard enough to have her wanting to take names and kick asses. He wondered if her parents had ever seen Laurel in warrior mode or if she kept the fierce side of her nature hidden from them.

He rose to his feet and held out his arm to her, ready to present a united front to her parents. He also hoped the physical contact would help his woman regain control of her temper before things were said that couldn’t be taken back.

“Mom...Dad, how could you? Devlin is a guest in your home and here you are embarrassing him and embarrassing me. I was hoping—really hoping—by meeting him you’d finally understand that my life is in Seattle and why I’m so happy there. Instead, you pull something stupid like this. You both should be ashamed of yourselves.”

Her father came to his feet. “Young lady! You will not talk to your mother like that.”

Laurel looked incredulous. “Don’t lecture *me* on manners. You two started it!”

Hell, this situation was officially out of control. Time to put a stop to it before the damage was irreparable.

“ENOUGH!” he bellowed, using the same voice he used on rowdy raw recruits. “All of you sit down and get quiet!”

All three Youngs looked at him as if he’d just sprouted horns and a tail, but at least they’d quit hurling barbs at each other. He glared at each one in turn until they surrendered and sat down.

He took charge of the conversation. “Now, as I was just telling your parents, Laurel, your life is in Seattle where your job is, and I plan to be permanent part of that life. The main problem seems to be that they have no idea of what your life there is like. I was going to suggest that they come for a visit. That way they can see where you live and maybe meet some of our friends.”

Doug looked at Joyce, who slowly nodded. “That sounds reasonable, Devlin. We’d love to come. And we understand about your jobs being classified. I’d always suspected something along that line because Laurel so rarely spoke about work. We promise to back off on those questions.”

“Thank you for your understanding, sir.”

Now to deal with Laurel's issues. "Honey, I know you want to protect me from the inquisition, but I'm a big boy. I can handle whatever they dish out because they have your best interests in heart. I understand that and even agree with it. Okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, as long as *they* understand that the two of us are in this for the long haul. I can't imagine a day in my life without you in it."

Then she leaned in close to plant a big one on him, making his toes curl... and a few other body parts sit up and take notice. Damn it was going to be another long, lonely night. When she broke off the kiss, she smirked. Brat that she was, she knew exactly what she'd done. Fine, but there would be retribution.

Doug cleared his throat. "Now that we have all of that settled, why don't we all go out for a nice dinner and celebrate your engagement properly!"

Laurel nodded, clearly happier with the whole situation than she had been a few minutes earlier. "That would mean a lot, Dad."

Joyce wiped at her eyes, but at least she was smiling. "Where would you two like to go?"

Before they could answer, Devlin's cell phone rang—and so did Laurel's. He didn't need to look at the number to know that their vacation had just come to abrupt end.

He grimaced and said, "Sorry, but can we take a rain check on that dinner?"

Chapter 6: Back to the Real World

“I wish you didn’t have to go.”

Laurel handed her suitcase to Devlin and turned to face her parents. She knew this sudden departure was going to be hard for them. There wasn’t much she could do but offer hugs and a promise to keep the time between visits shorter in the future.

“I know, Mom, but something has come up, and we’re needed.”

That much was true, and it didn’t comfort her parents at all. Meeting Devlin had finally shattered their illusions about the life Laurel had chosen over the one they’d envisioned for her. But forcing them to face reality was something she should have done a long time ago.

As usual, her father took charge. As soon as Devlin loaded the last of the luggage, her dad stuck out his hand. “We’re glad to have finally met you, Devlin, and to welcome you to our family. Next time you come we’ll do that dinner we promised.”

Devlin nodded. “That sounds good to me. And we meant what we said about having the two of you come visit Seattle. Let us know when you want to come, and we’ll iron out the details.”

Sandy, always the hugger in the family, gave Laurel a quick squeeze and then did the same to Devlin. She had to hide a smile at his look of surprise, but Laurel gave him credit for hugging her mom right back. He hadn’t had any family of his own in decades, so this whole affair had been a bit of a refresher course for him. It would be interesting to see how her parents would react if she told them how old he really was. No use in totally freaking them out, though.

She owed him big time for the effort he’d made to make all of this as painless as possible for all of them. And poor baby, he hadn’t complained about the whole separate bedrooms thing—at least not much. She wondered how far down the highway they’d actually get before he started looking for a hotel room for the night. Not far, she was willing to bet, even if they only stopped for a couple of hours.

Her father wrapped his arm across her shoulders and murmured, “Better not let your mother see you staring at Devlin with that hungry smile on your face, Laurel. You’ll have both of us blushing.”

Okay, so now she was the one whose face was flaming red. “Sorry, Dad, but I just love him so much. He’s a good man.”

“He must be for you to have chosen him. Now get in the car with Devlin. I’m guessing whatever is waiting for you back in Seattle is big time serious. Go save lives and do what you do best.”

She heard the unspoken questions in his voice. “I wish we could explain, Dad, but we can’t.”

“I know, but a father can’t help but be curious,” he said as he opened her door for her. Then he leaned down and looked at Devlin. “Be careful, Devlin, both with yourself and my daughter.”

“Will do, sir. And thanks for everything.”

Laurel fastened her seatbelt and leaned back, drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. She was definitely ready to be going home. Devlin wasn’t the only one who’d missed having someone to cuddle with all night long. They both lived with the knowledge that every time he picked up his sword and went into battle could be his last. That made every minute they spent together even more precious. She waved at her folks one last time as he backed out of their driveway. Her mother’s smile was definitely on the shaky side, but that was okay.

Devlin caught Laurel’s hand in his and brought it up to his lips for a quick kiss. “We survived!”

“That we did.”

As soon as they were out of sight of her parent’s house, the car picked up speed. She could feel the tension of the past few days dissipating with each passing mile, her lover looking more relaxed than he had since they’d left Seattle. Because of the unexpected phone call, they’d gotten a late start, the perfect excuse for checking into a hotel for the night at some point and driving the rest of the way tomorrow.

Devlin looked over. “Let me know when you’re hungry, and I’ll start looking for someplace to stop.”

She giggled and checked her watch. “Darn, I lost another one.”

“Lost what one?”

“I had a bet with myself that you’d hold out at least an hour before you started looking for a motel.”

He laughed. “Smart ass, I was just trying to be considerate of your needs.”

Yeah, right. She reached over to lay her hand on the inside of his thigh, smiling when the thick muscle immediately tensed. He obviously had a few needs of his own.

“What time do we need to be in Seattle tomorrow?”

“I told Trahern we’d be back by late morning. The new guy from St. Louis will be there around noon, and I’ll need to meet with him right away.” Devlin frowned. “So I guess that means we really should keep driving for a while.

Work had to come first so that settled that. She withdrew her hand. “Yeah, it does.”

“Sorry about the delay, babe.”

“Not a problem. It just gives me a little something look forward to.”

Devlin’s laughter was wicked. “Honey, there won’t be anything little about the something you’re looking forward to.”

She would have accused him of bragging, but they both knew he was just stating a fact.

“Hey, I just realized this will be our first time as an officially engaged couple!” She held out her left hand to study her grandmother’s old fashioned ring.

Devlin changed lanes to pass a slow driver. “About that. I should’ve bought you a ring long before now. I still will if you’d rather have one of your own.”

That was sweet. “Actually, I talked to my grandmother about that very thing. She suggested I keep the diamond, but have it reset. We both liked the idea of mixing something old with something new. That okay with you?”

“Yeah, it is.” He cleared his throat. “Maybe we should pick out matching wedding bands at the same time and get this whole wedding idea rolling, but whatever you want is fine with me.”

Her heart fluttered at the sheer joy of loving and being loved by this man. “And if what I want right now is you?”

“Then you can have me.”

Devlin immediately hit the turn signal, cut across the other two lanes of traffic and whizzed off the highway onto the exit ramp. He ignored the trucker who honked and flipped him off. He had much more important things on his mind at the moment. All of them had to do with getting naked with the beautiful woman sitting next to him. God, it had been way too long since they’d last slid between the sheets and drove each other crazy.

There were three different motels clustered near the highway. He aimed for the last one in the row and stopped in front of the office. Ten minutes later he was back, key in hand and yanking their luggage out of the back of the car. Laurel picked up her bag and let him lead the way.

It was all he could not to run, but that would only embarrass his lady. She put up with enough because of him and deserved a seduction. Inside the room, he tossed his bag in the corner and tried to tug Laurel’s from her hand.

“Hold that thought,” she said and gave him one of those special smiles of hers—the kind guaranteed to drive him crazy.

“I need something out of my bag. Give me a minute.” She disappeared into the bathroom for what seemed like an eternity.

When Laurel finally came back out, hot damn, it had been worth the wait. She was wearing something made out of sheer black lace, a touch of satin, and nothing else. She was also several inches taller thanks to the high heels she was wearing.

Laurel struck a pose and asked, “You like?”

He suspected his tongue was dragging on the floor. “Oh, yeah, I like . . . I like a lot.”

She strutted her stuff over to where he stood. Reaching up, she traced his jaw with her fingertips. “As mad as I was about the fake shopping expedition, I decided that there was no use in wasting the whole trip. I doubt my mother would have approved, but I thought this was perfect.”

“I love the way you think, but there’s one problem with that outfit.” His hands checked out the feel of the lace sliding over her skin. Oh, baby.

She pouted. “And that would be?”

“As good as you look in it, you’ll look even better out of it.”

Five minutes later, he proved his point.

Chapter 7: Crunch Time

Devlin sent Hunter on his no-so-merry way, glad to have that little chore out of the way. Jarvis had been right about his friend: The poor bastard had had it tough, but nothing could fix what was broken except time and Hunter's own willingness to fight his way back to normal. With luck, the man's new position away from the day-to-day fighting would give him the time he needed to heal.

Before Devlin could think about where to start on the stack of work on his desk, someone knocked on his office door. Couldn't they give him half an hour to settle in? Obviously not.

"What now?"

Cullen poked his head in. "You're back."

Obviously. "We got in early this morning."

His friend came all the way in, followed by the usual suspects. From the grins on their faces, news was already traveling fast. Trahern was the last one to file in. Devlin glared at him.

"Let me guess. Laurel told Brenna. Brenna told you. And you just had to tell everyone else."

The big Paladin nodded. "That pretty much sums it up."

Then Trahern grinned and stuck out his hand. "Congratulations, Devlin. I'm happy for the two of you. We all are."

Devlin accepted the handshakes from his friends. Their sincere happiness over his good fortune meant a hell of a lot to him. Paladins weren't always the best husband material, but maybe that was changing. He wasn't the only one with a special lady in his life, and he hoped they all found someone.

He was convinced that Laurel's love for him was a major factor in his stability. Brenna had made a huge difference in Trahern's world, too. No one had expected the man to hold on to his sanity this long, least of all Trahern himself.

"So when's the big day?" DJ asked. "We want to start making plans for the bachelor party."

Devlin rolled his eyes. "Cut us some slack, DJ. We just got engaged a couple of days ago."

"Yeah, well, it takes time to plan these things. It's not every day one of us ties the knot."

"The wedding will take place sooner rather than later, but the down side is that it will be in Laurel's hometown. Her mom is checking to see when the church is available. God, Laurel has

an enormous family.”

He shuddered at the memory although there were a few bright spots. “Seriously, I thought her grandmother was going to kick my ass for not having proposed before now. She took her own ring off and gave it to me to use.”

Trahern grinned. “If she’s that tough, maybe we should hand her a sword and put her to work down in the tunnels.”

“Laugh if you want to, but I’m telling you she was one determined little lady.”

Cullen, always the calm one, joined in. “You like her.”

“I do. They’re all nice—and normal. Her folks had a hard time because now they know their daughter really does have a life here in Seattle. Which reminds me, we invited them to come visit sometime.”

Lonzo looked surprised. “Here? What if they want to see where the two of you work? Or if you both get called in for one of our blood-and-guts parties?”

He wasn’t saying anything Devlin and Laurel hadn’t already been thinking about. “They already know we can’t talk about our jobs and that we’re on call. All we can do is hope for the best.”

“I know!” DJ announced. “If the barrier is acting up when they get here, we can take turns showing them around town. I know some great places to take them.”

Now there was a nightmare in the making. He tried to picture Laurel’s parents hitting some of DJ’s favorite dives. Actually, the whole image had him laughing.

“I’ll definitely keep that in mind. Now, all of you get back to work. I’ve got a ton of stuff to shovel off my desk this afternoon.”

He settled into his chair and waited for them to leave. It didn’t surprise him when Trahern hung back until the others were gone.

“Go on, Blake. Spit it out.”

His friend swallowed hard. “Was it scary? You know, asking her? I mean, knowing what lies ahead for men like us?”

The reasons behind his friend’s question were obvious. Both of them were living on borrowed time. He trusted Trahern with his truth.

“Hell yes, it was scary, but I should have asked her a long time ago and don’t know why I hadn’t. Maybe I was afraid she’d stop and think about what a poor risk I am as a husband. But once the words were out of my mouth, it was as if something clicked and suddenly everything was clear. For you and me, there’s so many things about our lives that we have to hide from the world. I don’t want my love for Laurel to be one of them. All joking about the wedding aside, I

look forward to the day I can stand in front of a room full of people and publicly claim her as mine.”

Trahern nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

Then he walked out, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Twenty minutes after Laurel had called Brenna to share the news about her engagement, the woman had showed up to drag her down the street to a café. Lusahn and Lacey were already there waiting for them. At least they waited until the waiter had taken their orders before starting the inquisition. She’d already told them everything and then repeated most of it as they grilled her for what seemed like hours.

“Okay, enough already. Devlin and I haven’t had time to make any plans yet. Once my mother calls me with the dates the church and hall are available, we’ll make a decision.”

“Are you sure no one caught any of the proposal with a camera or even their cell phone?”

“For the last time, no camera, no film, not even a pencil sketch.” She took another sip of wine. “Besides, my folks tried to talk us out of the engagement, blaming my grandmother for forcing the issue.”

Lacey laughed. “They obviously haven’t gotten to know Dev very well yet if they think he could be forced into doing something he didn’t really want to do. Personally, I think Paladins have stubborn hardwired into their DNA.”

Then she looked toward Lusahn. “Must be part of what they picked up from you guys because Barak has the same problem.”

The former Sworn Guardian nodded. “I am sure of it. My brother has always been exceedingly hardheaded and difficult to deal with. I don’t know how you can stand living with him.”

The geologist wiggled her eyebrows. “He has other, umm, outstanding characteristics that make up for his few faults. I’m sure you’d say the same of Cullen.”

“True enough.” Lusahn held up her glass. “Here’s to our men and their...outstanding characteristics.”

“Here, here!”

Laurel realized how glad she was to be back home and sitting there with three such good friends. It had been years since she’d been able to hang out with anyone without having to guard every word. These three all lived in the same world she did. Each of them loved a man who was different, either because he was a Paladin or because he was Kalith.

“Big wedding or small?”

Brenna's question dragged Laurel out of her reverie. "I'd go for small, but Mom will have other ideas. I'll probably let her have her way as long as she doesn't go too far overboard. I know it hurts her that I live separated from the family, so I want to give her this much."

Then to lighten the mood, she reached for the menu. "Okay, dessert's on me. And today, calories don't count."

Before they could place the order, her cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen and frowned. Why was her mother calling her now?

"Mom, what's up?"

As she listened, the menu fell from her fingers. "Are you sure? Those are the only two choices?"

Her mother talked for another minute or two. When she finally ran out of steam, Laurel didn't know what to say. She settled on a non-answer.

"I'll have to talk to Devlin first, Mom. I'll call you tonight. I promise."

When she disconnected the call, she realized her friends were all staring at her. "Sorry. That was my mom."

Brenna picked up the menu and set it aside. "We got that much, Laurel. What did she say that has you so upset?"

"Mom checked on the church. They had a cancellation, Mom grabbed the spot before someone else could." She was having trouble getting her head around her mom's little bombshell.

"So?" Lacey prodded.

"We either get married in two weeks or wait ten months for the next opening."

Thank goodness she had friends who weren't afraid to take charge. Brenna called out, "Waiter we need our check. We have a wedding dress to buy!"

Lacey grabbed Laurel's phone and punched in Devlin's number. "Here, tell him."

She did as she was told. If she wasn't in such a state of shock, she would have thought Devlin's reaction to the news he was going to be a groom in short order amusing. As it was, all she could do was sympathize.

"I may be late tonight, Dev. Seems I'm going to be shopping for a wedding gown and some bridesmaids' dresses today. While we're doing that, you round up your buddies and get your backsides over to a tux shop."

She listened to him sputter for a few seconds before cutting him off. "Look, if it's that much of a problem, you can call my mother back and tell her to cancel the reservation."

The silence coming from the other end of the line was all the answer she needed. “That’s what I thought. I love you, but I’ve got to go now.”

Devlin laid his phone down and stared at the wall full of weapons across the room. He might just need one of the swords to defend himself in a few minutes.

He started calling his friends, telling them to come running. As soon as the last one filed in, he stood up.

“Men, we have a mission, one that will require careful planning and execution.”

Barak looked especially puzzled. “What’s the matter, Devlin? Are you expecting the barrier to fall?”

Devlin shook his head. “Something far scarier. Seems I’m getting married in two weeks and we’ve got to get measured for tuxedos—today. As in right now.”

DJ summed it up for all of them when he said, “Holy crap!”

“Exactly.”

Chapter 8: Till Death Do Us Part (*Although for Devlin, that would only be temporary*)

Thursday, Seattle

“So, how’s it hanging?”

Devlin looked up from the list he’d been working on and glared at his good buddy Trahern. The other Paladin stood leaning in the doorway, looking more bored than interested in Devlin’s current state of well-being. After all, how much could have changed in the fifteen minutes since that last time one of the guys had stuck his head in Dev’s doorway to check on him?

“I was fine with Cullen asked. I was fine when Lonzo poked his nose in my business, and I’m fine now that you’re asking. And, I’m guessing I’ll be fine when Barak or whoever else is lurking out there asks me the same damn thing in another fifteen minutes.”

Trahern shrugged as he came all the way in and flopped down in one of the other chairs. “Yeah, I tried to tell them that, but they’re all on edge. I swear, they’d rather face the barrier failing singlehanded armed with a toothbrush than deal with the all this wedding rigmarole.”

The man looked and sounded disgusted. Devlin knew just how he felt. “Yeah, well, trying being the one on center stage.”

“So it sucks to be you,” Trahern said, grinning. “Nothing different about that.”

Dev gave his friend a one-fingered salute and went back to scribbling down everything he needed to pack. After he finished that list, he’d start on the one for Cullen, who was going to be covering for him while Devlin was on his honeymoon. Damn, whoever saw that one coming?

He paused and looked across at his friend. “I’m getting married in two days.”

Trahern’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’d better be. If you chicken out now, a line’s going to form outside your door while we each take a turn kicking your ass for you.”

“I’m not backing out. I’m just trying to get used to the idea.”

He leaned back in his chair to stare up at the ceiling, not wanting to be looking at Trahern when he said this next part. “God, Trahern, I know why I’m marrying Laurel. What I can’t understand is why she’d tie herself to a...well, to me.”

There was a mix of understanding and sympathy in Trahern’s expression. “You think I don’t ask myself the same damn thing every day about Brenna? Laurel’s a smart woman, Devlin. She

knows that there isn't anything in this world you wouldn't do to make her happy. She feels the same way about you. Deal with it."

God, Devlin hated the lump that showed up in his throat every time he thought about all of this stuff too much. "I'm trying. Now get your ass out of here, so I can finish up. I promised Laurel I'd be done here by four."

"Okay, and I'll tell the guys to lay off of you for a while. What time are we all due at the airport tomorrow?"

Devlin consulted the list of instructions Laurel had left for him. "We need to be there at ten-thirty. We take off at noon and arrive at five. Dinner is at the restaurant at six, and the rehearsal is at the church at seven."

Trahern wrote down the times. "Have you talked to Laurel since she and the others took off for her parent's place?"

"Yeah, they got there fine. Sounds like all of them had a great time on the way. Laurel wishes she was staying at the hotel with her friends, but understands why her mom wanted her closer at hand."

Trahern unfolded himself from the chair. He shot a wry look in Devlin's direction. "Funny, I lived a damn long time on my own just fine, but I have to tell you the house seems pretty empty without Brenna there."

"Aw, ain't that sweet?" D.J. stood in the doorway grinning at the other Paladin. "What's the matter, Trahern? Missing Brenna's snicker doodles, are you?"

Trahern took a menacing step toward D.J. "Dev, can I kill him now? Please? He'd probably be back in time for the wedding, and he'd sure be a lot quieter on the flight over there."

Devlin pretended to check Laurel's instructions again. "Sorry, no can do. Killing a pain in the ass is definitely not on the list. Maybe after the wedding, though. Now both of you get out of here. I've got to get this shit done before we go."

"Right, boss." D.J. lingered. "I'm supposed to tell you that Lonzo picked up all the tuxedos, so you can check that off the list."

Devlin did exactly that. "Thanks, guys. By the way, it's also on my list to take all of you out for dinner tonight, my treat, as long as we don't make a late night of it."

"Don't worry, boss, we'll have you all tucked in by your designated bedtime."

Good. That would be one more item off the list.

* * * * *

Friday, Laurel's parents' house

“More eggs, sweetheart? You’re going to need extra energy to get through the next two days, you know?”

Laurel pushed her plate away. “Nope, I’m good, Mom. Remember, I still have to be able to fit into my wedding dress tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Just the thought had her hands shaking. Her. Devlin. Married. It was hard to get her head around the whole idea. How was the poor guy holding up? Trahern had called Brenna last night to say they’d all been keeping an eye on Devlin. She bet that her fiancé was ready to explode.

She grinned.

Her mother started clearing the table. “You’re thinking about Devlin again.”

“Yeah, I am.”

She knew her parents still had some misgivings about their daughter’s choice of husbands. Maybe they’d feel differently if they knew the truth about what he was and what he did—or maybe not. Either way, that wasn’t going to happen. She made an effort to share what she could.

“I found out that his buddies have been checking on him constantly since I left to make sure he’s okay. Devlin’s not the type to appreciate being hovered over, especially by that bunch.”

Her father had just walked in. “I’m looking forward to meeting Devlin’s friends.”

Well, that should prove interesting. If her parents had any doubt about the nature of Devlin’s work, it would be quickly dispelled as soon as they laid eyes on the Paladins and their Kalith friends getting off the plane. There would be no hiding their warrior natures. Even though they’d all be on their best behavior, it was impossible to miss that air of danger that they all wore like a second skin.

Time to change the subject. “What’s up next, Mom?”

“You’re free for the morning and early afternoon. I’m going to get my hair done, and Dad will be out working on the yard.” She gave her husband a look, as if daring him to argue the point.

Laurel knew that both of her parents had been running themselves ragged to pull off a wedding in two weeks. She’d feel guilty about it except she knew her mother was secretly enjoying all the hubbub. Her dad, maybe not so much.

“Do you need any help, Dad?”

He shook his head. “No, I just need to mow the front and finish weeding the flower beds. It will keep me busy and out of your mom’s way.”

“Okay, if you’re sure, I’ll go hang out with my friends until time to meet Devlin’s flight.”

* * * * *

Friday, the airport

Brenna giggled. “How often are you going to check the time? You’d think we weren’t good enough company for you. Are you trying to will the plane to get here faster?”

Okay, so she’d been caught. “I don’t want it to be late. I swear, my mom should be running the government. She’s got everything organized and scheduled without even raising a sweat. But if one thing goes wrong, I worry about the whole domino effect.”

Lacey moved up beside her. “It will be fine. Don’t forget, you’re the bride. Nothing happens without you. Besides, I’m missing Barak, too.”

Lusahn came back from the vending machine with bottled water for all of them. “Cullen called just before they left Seattle to say they expected to take off on time.”

That was one of the reasons Devlin had decided to splurge on chartering a private plane to ferry all the guys over for the weekend. After the wedding, the pilot would fly Laurel and Devlin to their honeymoon destination and then return to take the rest of the wedding party back to Seattle. Devlin had refused to tell her where they were going for their first week as husband and wife, so she’d had to pack for a variety of possibilities.

Her dad interrupted her thoughts. “Do you think that’s them?”

She checked out the small jet that was pulling up to the terminal. “The logo is from the right company.”

Her pulse sped up as the plane slowed to a stop. A few seconds later a staircase unfolded from the side and the first passenger appeared in the doorway.

Brenna lit up with excitement and started waving like crazy. “Blake!”

Laurel’s mother blinked twice and stared out the window as the men filed off the plane. “Oh, my. Would you look at them?”

Laurel glanced at her, trying to gauge her mother’s reaction to her first sight of Devlin surrounded by his friends.

Her mother turned toward her, her eyes wide in surprise. “Laurel, all I can say is that they sure do grow them big in Seattle!”

“Must be something in the water,” her dad added, but he was nodding as if seeing Devlin with his friends confirmed a suspicion he’d had.

Laurel couldn't help but grin as the men walked into the terminal, drawing the attention of those they passed. Yep, there was no mistaking them for anything other than big and bad. And, lucky her, the biggest and baddest one was all hers.

With that happy thought, she took off running. And Devlin, smart man that he was, dropped his suitcase and met her halfway.

* * * * *

Saturday evening, at the church

Devlin studied his image. He'd offered to get his hair cut short for the wedding, but Laurel had begged him not to, saying she loved his hair long. He was wearing it pulled back and tied at the back of his neck as a compromise. He pretty much a jeans and flannel kind of guy, but he had to admit that there was definitely something about a tux that made even him look good.

D.J. stepped between him and the mirror on the wall. He tugged at his tie and then shot his cuffs. "How do I look?"

Trahern elbowed him aside to check his own appearance. "No one cares, D.J. It's Devlin's day to dazzle the world, not ours."

"I just don't want to embarrass him."

Cullen joined in. "In that case, don't show up."

And of course, D.J. rose to the bait just like the others knew he would. "Hey, Laurel's grandmother already told me how handsome I look. I bet she didn't say that to any of the rest of you clowns."

Barak snorted. "That's because she needs a date for the reception and is trying to convince herself that she can stand to be seen with you."

D.J. flushed. "I did promise her the first dance. Hope it's a slow one. She seems pretty spry for her age, but I wouldn't want to risk giving her a heart attack out on the dance floor."

Devlin had to laugh. His friends had been on edge all day. Granted, none of them had any experience with anything remotely like the extravaganza that Laurel's mother had put together to honor the marriage of her daughter. He could have done without all the hoopla himself, but he'd have walked down the aisle on broken glass to make his lady happy.

A knock at the door brought them all to attention. The young minister stuck his head in. "It's time, gentlemen. You have five minutes to get in position."

Okay. This was it. No going back from this moment. Powerful emotions flooded through him as he looked at each of the men who surrounded him. More than friends, closer to brothers. "I know I'm not much for the mushy stuff, but thanks for being here for this. I never thought..."

His voice trailed off. It didn't matter. They knew what he was trying to say. They all lined up, offering him a handshake, a pat on the shoulder, or a man hug, each silently honoring the brotherhood that connected them all with a bond that nothing, not even death could change.

Then Trahern took charge and shooed them all toward the door. "Let's get this party started."

There wasn't an empty pew in the entire church. It looked as if the entire town had showed up to see one of their own married.

Devlin offered his arm to Laurel's mother, Joyce. She tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow.

"Shall we?"

She nodded and whispered, "You can smile, you know."

He did his best. "Did I mention I'm terrified?"

"You'll do fine."

When the music changed, the two of them stepped out onto the long white runner that lead down the aisle to the front of the church. Devlin concentrated on keeping the pace slow and dignified, shortening his strides to make it easier for Joyce to walk in step with him. He paused where she was to be seated as the mother of the bride and leaned down to press a kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you for doing all of this, Joyce. It means a lot to both of us."

His soon to be mother-in-law blinked hard to ward off the tears that filled her eyes. "You're welcome, Devlin. Just make my baby happy."

"I'll do my very best." It was a vow no less important than the one he'd be taking in a few minutes. "I promise."

When she was seated, he continued up to the front where the pastor stood waiting. Then one by one, his friends escorted the bridesmaids down the aisle: Trahern with Brenna, Cullen with Lusahn, Barak with Lacey, D.J. with one of Laurel's sisters and Lonzo with the other one.

Once again the music changed and his pulse marched in double time. A hush fell over the church as Laurel appeared in the doorway. She smiled up at her father standing proudly by her side. As they started forward, her gaze bypassed all of the people crowded in the small church and locked onto Devlin. This time, his smile was real, not something he pasted on for the benefit of the roomful of strangers.

With each step Laurel took, the knot of tension in his gut eased. In another few seconds, his lover would be right where she belonged, at his side, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him, his partner in life. He was dimly aware of her father lifting Laurel's veil to kiss his daughter's cheek. As he stepped away, Laurel handed off her flowers to Brenna and then took Devlin's hand.

The pastor started talking, probably repeating the same stuff he'd gone over with them during the rehearsal. Devlin didn't care what he was saying as long as he finally got to the important part.

Trahern held out the ring. Devlin repeated the words the pastor had coached him on as he slipped the simple gold band on Laurel's finger. He could feel the slight tremor in her fingers as she tied him to her with the matching ring. He'd never been one for jewelry, but it felt so right when the weight of the gold settled in place on his left hand.

Finally, at long last, the pastor smiled at each of them in turn, said a short prayer to bless the union. When he gave them the nod, they turned as one to face family and friends. His words rang out over the room, sealing the deal.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honor of presenting to you Mr. Devlin and Dr. Laurel Bane, husband and wife.”

* * * * *

Devlin held his wife in his arms. Man, oh, man, he had a wife. Him—Devlin Bane, Paladin.

Laurel pushed against his chest. “Dev, you know I love to slow dance with you, but I still need to breathe.”

He loosened his hold on her. “Sorry, I guess I'm still freaking out here.”

She smiled up at him with such love in her dark eyes. “Nothing's changed, big guy. I was yours before the wedding, and I'm even more yours now.”

The song came to a stop and the room erupted in applause. Their first dance as a married couple was a success. Laurel's father appeared to sweep her away in his arms, while Devlin did a turn around the floor with her mother. Slowly the dance floor filled up with friends and family. As promised, D.J. was dancing with Laurel's grandmother, holding her with such care and respect. He'd have to remember to thank him later.

He owed all of his friends big time. They'd always had his back, but this was different. Instead of their usual dance of death, they were here to celebrate life. He automatically sought out Laurel, who was laughing at something her father said.

“She's not going anywhere, Devlin.”

Okay, he'd been caught. “I know, but I can't seem to help myself, Joyce. She's so damn beautiful.”

Joyce's eyes sparkled with tears as the song ended. “Yes, she is. And she's happy, and I have you to thank for that. Now go hang out with your friends until it's time for you and Laurel to leave.”

Devlin kissed Joyce's cheek for the second time that evening. “We're not ready to go yet.”

But soon. He hoped Laurel enjoyed where he was taking her. She'd mentioned once that she'd always wanted to visit Las Vegas. He'd gotten them a penthouse suite and had it stocked with champagne and her favorite expensive chocolates. Just in case, he'd also ordered tickets to several shows. If it were up to him, they'd never leave the room, but he wanted the trip to be memorable and in more than just one way.

After returning Joyce to her husband, Devlin cut through the crowd to reclaim his bride. The thought of having her to himself for a solid week without interruption had a predictable effect on him. He glanced around the reception hall, looking for someplace where they could find a little privacy.

Laurel laughed and danced back out his reach. "I recognize that look, Mr. Bane, and it will have to wait. I'm not starting off my honeymoon with a quickie in a broom closet."

She was right. She deserved the seduction he'd been planning for the past two weeks. That didn't mean they couldn't mess around a little bit. "I'd settle for a couple of hot kisses out on the patio. You know, just to tie me over until we get where we're going."

Bless the woman, she grabbed his hand and headed straight for the door. Ten minutes later, they came back in, probably looking a bit ruffled but definitely happier.

* * * * *

Laurel checked the time. It was a bit early to be leaving, but she was ready to have her man to herself. She caught Brenna's eye nodded toward the room where Laurel's traveling outfit and luggage waited. If she'd hoped to limit it to just the two of them, it didn't work out that way. Both her mother and grandmother were waiting for her.

"We'll help you with your dress. Then all you have left to do is toss the bouquet."

Between the four of them, they stripped off her dress and slip, and then she put on the sparkly sweater and dark slacks she'd picked to wear as they travelled. A quick touch up of her makeup and she was ready.

Devlin was waiting for her. He'd ditched the tux, but still looked sexy as heck wearing black slacks and a green shirt that matched his eyes. He still had his hair slicked back and tied. Yum.

The deejay they'd hired for the night got everyone organized for the bouquet toss. Laurel checked to see where Brenna was in the crowd and successfully sent it flying her way. Everyone laughed and applauded—except Trahern, who looked a bit shell-shocked. Too bad.

"Well, Mrs. Bane, ready to go?"

She smiled up at her husband of three hours. "Definitely, Mr. Bane. I'm counting the minutes until we're alone. I've got plans for you."

He pressed a quick kiss on her lips. "I can't wait."

Then with one last wave at the crowd, he opened the door. They walked out into the night, husband and wife, lovers forever.