

Chapter 1: THE FIRST STEP

Darkness suited Blake Trahern's mood. He stared out at the shadowed world and shook his head. What kind of fool would be standing alone in the chilly night air when he could be back in bed holding a warm, willing woman in his arms?

Brenna Nichols. His woman. His lover. His life.

He trailed his fingers over the limp petals of a wilted flower and sighed. The rose was part of a bouquet that was well past its prime. He resisted the temptation to dump the fading flowers in the trash. If Brenna wanted to hang onto them for a while, that was her decision to make. He'd buy her all the fresh flowers she could ever want, but he couldn't replace what this poor bedraggled bouquet represented.

He thought back to his best friend's wedding. Devlin Bane was the biggest, baddest Paladin in history. The man and the love of his life, Dr. Laurel Young, had recently tied the knot in front of all their friends and family. Trahern was happy for them. For damn sure, both of them had earned a little joy in their lives.

He just wished Laurel hadn't tossed her bouquet straight into Brenna's waiting hands. Everyone had applauded as Trahern's lover had smiled that sweet smile and held the fragrant roses to her face, drawing in their heady scent. Coward that he was, he pretended not to see, not to understand the significance of what had just happened.

Sure, it was just an old wives' tale, that the woman who caught the bouquet would be the next bride. Afterward, Brenna hadn't said anything about it, but he'd never forget that brief flash of hope in her expression when she'd sought him out in the crowd—or how quickly it had died.

God, he was such a bastard. He tried to tell himself that he was trying to be fair to Brenna. With his track record, his chances of surviving another death were zip, nil, nada. Everyone knew it. The only reason he was still walking around and breathing now was that Brenna had been too stubborn to let him go when he'd taken a bullet saving her life. With Laurel's help, the two women had fought long and hard to drag him back from the edge of oblivion. He'd never forget waking up to the sight of Brenna smiling down at him and the scent of snickerdoodles in the air.

He couldn't bear the thought of putting her through that hell again. Someday he would, though, and he hated—**FUCKING HATED**—knowing that. Every time he picked up his sword and headed back into battle, he put his life and her heart at risk. One part of him wanted to say to hell with the odds and beg Brenna to marry him, to tie her life to his for as long as he had left. To claim her as his in front of the entire damn world.

But the small part of him that was still good and decent knew that she deserved better than a used up warrior who had nothing left to give but the last drop of his blood for the cause. It wasn't much to offer any woman, but especially Brenna. She'd already lost her father to a bomb that came close to killing her as well. Blake had been too late to save the judge and damn near failed to save Brenna from the same killer. He lived with that pain every day.

He jerked his hand away from the flowers at the whisper of bare feet padding across the floor toward him. Soft arms slid around his waist as Brenna laid her face against his bare back.

"Hey, big guy, what's wrong?"

He closed his eyes and soaked up the warmth of her body pressed against his, drawing comfort from her touch.

"I'm fine, just feeling a bit restless." He tugged her around to face him, still holding her close. "Sorry if I woke you."

"Why don't you come back to bed?" Her smile was all temptation and heat. "I'm sure I can think of something to help you sleep."

The heated promise in her eyes set off a slow deep burn inside him. Despite all the reasons he shouldn't, he wanted this woman in his life. He needed this woman in his life. In his arms. Back down the hall in his bed.

Not that he could wait that long, not with her hands touching and teasing and tempting him beyond all reason. For now, he'd ignore all his second guessing their future together and let the night take them where it would. Selfish, yeah, but right then he didn't care.

The living room glowed with the moonlight pouring in through the windows. He couldn't wait see Brenna's fair skin bathed in its silvery light. The image had him smiling.

"Blake, what are you thinking?"

Brenna backed away from him, her words a mix of excitement and nerves. He followed her step for step, a predator on the hunt. Her pulse was racing, her

breath coming in short gasps as she continued to retreat. His patience for the game was running short. She knew it, too, because she fainted right and then bolted to the left.

He let her think she succeeded in escaping, loving her laugh of triumph, just plain loving her. He caught up with her before she could make it even halfway across the room.

Sweeping her up in his arms, he held her high against his chest so he could kiss that sweet, sassy mouth. Out of control with the need to bury himself in her welcoming arms and body, he dumped her on the couch and followed her down.

For now, for this moment, they were together and that was all that mattered. The future would just have to take care of itself.

Chapter 2: BRENNA REACHES OUT

"Laurel, are you busy?"

She was, but Brenna Nichols wouldn't have ventured into Laurel's lab if it weren't important. In fact, she usually avoided setting foot in the place as much as possible. She'd come too close to losing the man she loved in a place just like it. No doubt the sight of stainless steel tables and chains brought back some pretty horrific memories.

Not to mention that if Blake ever did cross the line into insanity again, Laurel's lab was where he'd most likely die—this time permanently. It was the stuff of nightmares for Laurel herself. That her own husband lived with the same kind of ticking time bomb didn't help. Shoving that thought aside, Laurel set down the chart she'd been updating and offered her friend a smile.

"I'm never too busy for you, Brenna. What's up?"

"I've got something I'd like to talk to you about, but maybe I should come back when you're alone."

The other woman looked across the lab to where one of the Paladins slept while his body repaired itself. He was well on his way to a full recovery, which meant he could wake up at any time. If that happened, it wouldn't matter how quietly she and Brenna talked; he'd hear every word. Judging by the grim look in Brenna's eyes, maybe a little privacy was definitely in order.

"I can't leave the lab right now, but we can go into the scan room to talk. It's soundproof."

Brenna flinched, but then nodded. Obviously she'd picked up some of Blake Trahern's aversion to the scans that measured out a Paladin's sanity in a series of wavy lines. His readings were among the worst in the entire organization, a visual reminder of how far down the slippery slope toward insanity he'd already gone.

Except his last numbers had been no worse than they'd been months before. In his case, that was a major triumph, something to celebrate, even if he didn't feel that way. Trahern tended to see it as only delaying the inevitable.

Inside the small room, Laurel gave Brenna the choice of the one chair or the patient's bed. As soon as Brenna sat down on the mattress, she ran her hand over the rough cotton sheets and tested the firmness of the pillow. No doubt she was picturing Trahern stretched out there, trying to relax as the electrodes did their thing. Laurel knew just how he looked because she was the one who ran the tests. The big man felt crowded by the small bed, the small room, and the tiny wires that acted as his judge and jury.

"What's wrong, Brenna?"

The other woman slowly raised her eyes to meet Laurel's. She drew a deep breath, as if she was having trouble finding the right words. "I know you have to protect patient confidentiality as much as you can, Laurel, but I need to know if you've been testing Blake again. Can you tell me at least that much?"

A blast of cold fear burned down Laurel's spine. "Not recently. What's going on with him that makes you think I have? Or is it that maybe I need to?"

Brenna went back to fiddling with the edge of the sheet. "I've heard that before he came to St. Louis he was withdrawing from everyone here. Like he knew his time was running out. But afterward, once he and I...well, you know...he was better. He's been more relaxed. I thought he was actually happy."

They'd all seen the positive change Brenna had made in Trahern's life. "But now?"

"He's withdrawing again. Not all the time, but the signs are definitely there." Brenna grimaced. "And he's not sleeping nights. I've found him walking the floor or staring out the window several times over the past couple of weeks. When I ask him what's wrong, he just says he's feeling restless and didn't want to wake me up."

Okay, this wasn't good. "When did this start?"

Brenna crossed her arms over her chest, as if chilled. "Looking back, it started right after your wedding. I don't understand what happened. He was so happy for both you and Devlin. He still is."

"But?" Laurel prodded when Brenna quit talking.

"It may sound silly, but I really think me catching the bouquet at the wedding might have triggered it. I finally threw it out because I'd catch him staring at it with this awful look in his eyes. Now he's bringing home fresh flowers almost every day, as if he's trying to replace the bouquet."

Okay, Laurel certainly hadn't foreseen her decision to toss the bouquet to Brenna would cause a major meltdown in Trahern. She and Devlin had thought it would be a funny thing to do. Obviously that had been a mistake of epic proportions.

The question now was what to do about it. She probably should do another scan on Blake, but then that might just lead to bigger problems.

Some questions were harder to ask. "Have you two been talking about marriage?"

Brenna shrugged. "Early on we did. But you know what it's been like for the guys. Once crisis after another. I didn't want to put any more pressure on Trahern. Now, though, I think the idea panics him for some reason. It's not like I've been dragging him to the mall to look at rings or anything."

"You do want to marry him, though, don't you? You still feel the same about him." That last part was a question, too.

"Yes, to both. But I'll take him on whatever terms I can. If he's not into marriage, fine."

As a few tears welled up in Brenna's eyes, she finally laid it all on the table. "I'm losing him, Laurel, and I don't know why."

Laurel immediately joined Brenna on the edge of the patient bed. She wrapped her arm around her friend's shoulders and let her cry it all out. Her own heart ached, too. Blake loved Brenna. It was obvious to anyone who saw them together. He was different with her—softer, gentler, at peace.

So if Brenna was losing Trahern, it meant they all were.

Chapter 3: GUY TALK

The swords clashed together hard enough to make Trahern's teeth ache. Devlin grinned like a mad man and kept coming. He was on a real slash-and-burn mission designed to leave Trahern bruised and hurting.

Okay, if the man wanted to hammer on each other, then he was definitely in the mood to dance. He held his sword up and wiggled the fingers of his free hand at the Paladin leader. "Bring it on, you bastard. Just be prepared to bleed."

Devlin bellowed in challenge and charged forward again. While his friend might have him beat on style, nobody-NOBODY-had ever beat Trahern for sheer cussedness, which made it an even match. Back and forth, neither of them giving an inch.

It was odd that it was just the two of them in the gym. Most of the time, Paladins trained together, the place full of men sweating, grunting, and egging each other on. Not this time.

Trahern managed to force his opponent to back up several steps before Devlin dug in his heels and came roaring back. Roaring be the operative word.

"You dumb fuck, what the hell is going on with you?"

Dev punctuated each word with a swing of his sword, using the steel as much as his words to communicate. Fine. Trahern got that. What he didn't get was what had Devlin so pissed off at him.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Right now I'm mainly trying to keep from getting sliced and diced by you." He got in a few good swings of his own. "This was your idea, remember?"

Devlin signaled a halt. Trahern backed away and lowered his weapon. Both of them were breathing hard with sweat pouring off their faces and bare chests. Maybe a cold drink would cool off more than their tempers. Trahern grabbed two bottles of water out of the fridge in the corner and tossed one to Devlin. Both of them sank down on the floor and leaned back against the cool of the tile wall and stretched out their legs. The chilly water felt damn good going down. A lot better than the talk Devlin was obviously about to force on him would, for damn sure.

It wasn't long in coming. Devlin kept his eyes directed at the opposite wall, but that didn't mean his attention wasn't focused one hundred percent on Trahern himself. The silence stretched on to the breaking point. Finally, Dev sighed loudly. Okay, here it comes.

"Evidently Brenna's worried about you enough that she talked to Laurel."

Trahern winced, but couldn't really blame her for seeking out the good doctor. The two women were the closest of friends. "So?"

"So that means Laurel's worried about you, too."

Trahern couldn't look at his friend either. Not when he felt like his guts were being spread out for the world to see. "You mean even more than usual?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I mean. And when she's worried, she's not happy. I don't like it when my wife's not happy." Devlin took a long swallow of water, probably a delay tactic to give himself time to think about what he wanted to say next.

Finally, he actually looked at Trahern, his eyes sympathetic. "Just so you know, Laurel didn't share details, only that Brenna stopped by to see her."

Obviously this was where Devlin expected Trahern to slit open a vein and pour out his problems. Not happening. If he couldn't bring himself to talk about stuff with Brenna, he sure as hell wasn't going to confess all to Father Devlin.

Okay, that image cracked him up. He could just imagine what kind of penance Dev would hand out in the confessional. Last time he got pissed at D.J., he had the poor bastard dusting light bulbs in the tunnels below Seattle.

Devlin punched Trahern in the arm. Hard. "Is there something funny about my wife losing sleep over you?"

"No, there isn't, but that wasn't what I was laughing about. I just had an image flash through my head of you acting as our priest in the confessional. You know, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have punched Cullen.'"

"Okay, I get that, even if it is a little close to home for my comfort. It's like herding particularly demonic kittens around here." A reluctant smile slowly spread across Dev's face. "It's nice to hear you laughing. It's been awhile."

Who knows, maybe Devlin would understand. Trahern blurted it out before he could stop himself. "Brenna caught Laurel's bouquet."

The big man snorted. "Yeah, I know. I was there. Besides, we planned it that way."

"Well, you know the tradition behind what that means." Trahern picked at a hole in his jeans, anything to avoid looking at his friend. "And yeah, I know it's just an old wives' tale, but that doesn't mean Brenna doesn't deserve the white dress and the whole shebang."

"So give it to her."

Yeah, right. If only it were that easy.

"She deserves better." Although the thought of her with another man made him physically ill.

Devlin wasn't buying it. "So does Laurel, but guess what—she wanted me. Despite the difference in our ages and all the other crap that should've kept us apart, she picked me. A man would have to be three kinds of a fool to walk away from that."

Then he stood up and offered Trahern his hand to pull him up to his feet. "You've been a lot of things in the time I've known you, Blake, starting with a major pain in the ass. However, being either a fool or a coward isn't one of them."

Devlin's eyes saw too damn much. "I figure this is about those damn scans and the numbers they spit out. Fine. I get that. But none of us knows when his number is going to come up. That's true for regular humans, too. It's all a crapshoot. You haven't asked for my advice, but you're going to get it anyway."

Trahern braced himself. "You're not going to be happy until you get it off your chest. Spit it out."

"Okay, here it is. I've never served with a man I respect more, and that's not just me bullshitting you. Those scan numbers don't mean a damn fucking thing when we're standing back-to-back, knee deep in crazies. You can ask anyone around here who they'd want to head into battle with, and your name is going to be at the top of the list."

He paused to take a deep breath. "But a warrior isn't all that you or any of us are. The Regents might not agree, but I'm thinking Paladins should get more out of life than one continuous battle. We deserve some happy, and you've had that with Brenna. Life doesn't come with any guarantees. Take what she's offering and hold on to it with both hands with the last breath in your body."

Trahern didn't know what to say to that. It was all he could do to nod.

Devlin picked up his sword. "Now, do I need to bruise you up some more or are we good?"

"We're good."

Chapter 4: THE LETTER

Trahern pulled over and got out of his car. This place was as good as any for what he had to do. The small park was perched on a bluff looking out over Possession Sound a few miles north of Seattle. He chose a picnic table at random and sat down. For a few minutes, he stared out at the water and soaked up some sunshine.

Finally, when he couldn't stand it any longer, he reached for the envelope that he'd tossed on the table. He'd been carrying it around for three days, trying to get up the courage to read the letter inside. He didn't know why he was being such a wuss about it. It wasn't as if he hadn't read it before.

The first time was right after he'd found it and its twin hidden in the secret stash in his old bedroom at Judge Nichols' house. The judge had left the two letters where he knew only Trahern would find them, one for him and one for Brenna, the judge's daughter.

The two of them had been on the run when they found the letters with no time to read them until they'd found a roadside park, much like this one, where they could stop for a while. Brenna had opened her letter while he'd done the same. Brenna had shared the content of hers with him, letting him see that her father had trusted Trahern. Specifically, he'd trusted Trahern to take care of Brenna. Even now, that idea left him stunned.

He slipped the letter out of the envelope, taking it slowly, taking it one step at a time.

The thick piece of paper was covered top to bottom with the Judge's messy scrawl, which made Trahern smile. He'd always suspected his mentor's poor penmanship was due solely to the judge's inability to write as fast as his brilliant mind thought. It was the reasons behind the letters were the real puzzle. Had the judge known that he was in danger? Was that why he'd written the letters or had he written them just in case? What if Trahern had never come back? Brenna might never have found her letter, her father's final farewell to her. That didn't make sense.

But he knew the answer to that one. Come hell or high water, Judge Nichols had always known someday Trahern would come back. If not for him, then for Brenna. It still hurt to know that he'd arrived too late to save the man who'd saved him. Instead, Trahern had died to save the Judge's daughter, the only woman Trahern had ever loved. Would ever love, which is why he was sitting there on a picnic table about to read the letter again.

Dear Blake,

If you're reading this, I must be . . . well, you know. Sorry I never got the chance to tell you some of this in person. I always planned to.

Let me start by saying that you are everything I would have ever wanted in a son. We might not be related by blood, but that never mattered to me. You're the son of my heart, which is far more important. From that first day I saw you in my courtroom, I felt the connection. You were so amazing, standing there beaten and bloody, your pride the only thing keeping you standing.

I saw hundreds of young punks over my years on the bench, some worth saving, some too far gone. But there was just something different about you, and not just the fact that I quickly realized that you were a Paladin. I know you've always felt you owed me, but watching you turn into the man you've become is thanks enough for what little I was able to do for you. All I did was provide the opportunity. You're the one who took that chance and ran with it. I'm so proud of what you've accomplished.

About Brenna. I love her so much. She's her mother all over again, so bright, so beautiful. I never said anything, but I know that she captured your heart almost from the beginning, tying you up in knots, thinking you weren't good enough for her. I have one thing to say to that: bullshit, Blake. You can't help where you came from, but you rose above those humble beginnings to become one of the finest men it's been my privilege to know.

You used to watch Brenna when you thought she wouldn't notice. Well, I've got news for you, Blake. She was looking back. I should warn you that she's always made her own decisions and then gone after what she wanted with a determination that's almost frightening. If she decides that it's you she wants, you might as well raise the white flag and surrender.

I don't know if young men ask for a father's blessings these days, but I thought you might like to know that you have mine. Nothing would make me happier than to have you as my son-in-law. I know you'll spend your last breath trying to make my Brenna happy.

Guess it's time to wind this up. However things turn out for you and Brenna, I love you both. I know you have this incredible sense of duty to the mission of the Paladins, but don't forget to take time to enjoy life. We never know how long we'll have on this Earth. Don't miss out on a moment of the time God gives you with the people you love.

Dad

Trahern read it a second time, this time more slowly. Despite a certain burning in his eyes, the letter made him smile. He'd never called the man anything but Judge or sir, but he'd always secretly called him Dad in his head. The judge's death had left a big hole in Trahern's life, but it helped to know the man had known all along how Trahern felt about him.

It also helped to know that the Judge had freely offered his blessings if Trahern and Brenna hooked up. Now it was up to Blake to take that final step, to claim Brenna as more than just his girlfriend and lover. She deserved more. If she'd have him, he would make her his wife.

Folding the letter up, he stuck it back in the envelope, tucking the flap in with care. Time to go home and make plans. Special plans. He patted envelope and smiled up at the heavens. *Thanks, Dad.*

Chapter 5: A MAN ON A MISSION

Years of fighting had taught Blake Trahern a lot about tactics. He knew how to make a stand and how to go down swinging. He'd been shot, sliced and diced, and killed too many times to count. None of those things scared him as much as what he was about to do.

How did a man propose these days? Do guys really still get down on one knee? In public? He tried to picture Devlin Bane doing that when he'd asked Laurel to marry him and couldn't quite bring that picture into focus. It made him smile, though.

Never one for making a bunch of lists, Blake had made one for the evening he had planned for himself and Brenna. As nervous as he was, it was a foregone conclusion he'd forget something important if he didn't write it all down. He scanned the wrinkled piece of paper, mentally reviewing everything he'd done so far and what he had left to do.

1. Ring-check
2. Dinner reservations-check
3. Suit-check
4. Flowers-check
5. Plastic to pay for everything with-check
6. Speech all written out and memorized-check, but still wondering if he shouldn't just hand it to Brenna and let her read it for herself.
7. Remind Brenna they were going out for dinner-no check yet, but it was up next on his agenda.
8. Propose-and pray she says yes.

"Blake?"

He jumped like a recruit in his first battle. How had Brenna managed to sneak up on him? He shoved the paper in his front pocket before turning to face the woman who owned his heart, owned him.

She was staring up at him with a determined look in her eyes. With her arms crossed over her chest, she obviously had something on her mind. Something serious. What had he done now?

He aimed for nonchalant and ended up sounding defensive. "Is there something you wanted?"

Brenna nodded. "Yes, there is. We need to have a talk."

And obviously it would be one of "those" talks. The kind where she explained what was what and he could only stand there and take it. His lover didn't get ticked off at him often, but when she did, it wasn't pretty. He leaned against the doorframe, trying to look casual and unconcerned.

"Okay, I'm listening. What's up?"

She stepped closer and stared straight up into his face. "Blake Trahern, I don't know what's going on in that thick skull of yours, but you've been moody and secretive ever since Devlin and Laurel got married."

That was nothing less than the truth. "Sorry."

She rolled her eyes. "Sorry doesn't cut it, buster. I want to know what's going on."

Then she held out her hand. "Starting with that piece of paper you've been carrying around and mumbling over for the past few days. Is it a scan report from Laurel?"

Now what was he supposed to do? If he handed it over, it would ruin all of his plans. If he didn't, she'd think the worst. Son of a bitch, he knew he'd screw this up.

"Are you still going out to dinner with me tonight?"

Brenna blinked her eyes and looked at him as if he'd grown a second head. "Don't try to distract me, Blake. Just give me the paper. I'm worried about you, but I can't help if you won't talk to me and insist on hiding stuff from me."

"I can't give you the paper. It will ruin the surprise." He tried a smile to see if that would help. "Can't I take my best girl out to dinner? I made reservations someplace nice, so wear your black dress."

Crap. She didn't look pleased. In fact, she looked scared. What had he said to trigger that much fear in a woman who'd faced down a armed shooter without hesitation? When she started to sag, he caught her up in his arms and headed for the sofa. Her eyes filled with tears as he cuddled her next to his chest.

"Blake, whatever it is, just tell me. I can take it."

He shifted her off his lap so that he could pull a handkerchief out of one pocket and the wadded up note out of the other. As she dabbed her eyes, he smoothed

out the paper and tried to come up with an explanation of where his head had been.

"You caught Laurel's bouquet."

Brenna had been staring at the paper in his hands, not that she could read it from where she sat. "Is that what this is all about? A stupid bunch of flowers? Devlin and Laurel thought it would be funny if I caught it, but I never took it seriously."

But she had, at least a little. Otherwise she wouldn't have kept the flowers long past their prime. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close to his side. "Regardless of how you came to catch the bouquet, it got me to thinking about things...about us. You do know I love you?"

She nodded. "And I love you."

That was the one thing he'd never doubted. "Well, people who love each other like we do usually get married."

Brenna's eyes flared wide, and she started to say something. He shook his head. "Let me finish or I might not be able to."

She settled for squeezing his hand and waited for him to continued. He swallowed hard and started in again.

"Guys like me and Devlin, well, we never expected to have it happen to us. This whole falling in love thing, I mean. We've spent our lives fighting to keep the world safe so normal people can live normal lives. That's all we had, and it was enough. But then you came back into my life."

He thought back to the first time he saw Brenna back when she was about thirteen, and he'd been a couple of years older. She'd brought him dinner on a tray. When she'd seen the bruises given to him by the cops, she'd been furious, ready to defend him against all comers. His heart had been hers from that moment, even if he'd been too much of a coward to admit it.

"Seeing Devlin take that giant step of marrying Laurel got me to thinking that I'd like some of that for myself, for us. But with my scan numbers being what they are, I couldn't decide if I should ask you to risk it."

Brenna cupped his face in her hands. "You listen to me, Blake Trahern. Numbers don't mean anything. *You* matter to me. Whatever time we have together, it will never be enough for me to show you how much I love you. I'm yours as long as you want me."

God, he loved this woman. It was time to take that leap of faith. He brushed his lips across hers and handed her the piece of paper. She scanned it quickly, her face lighting up, all vestiges of fear and worry gone.

She handed the paper back to him. "Looks like I'd better go press my little black dress and do my hair. Seems I have a date for tonight."

After kissing him again, she popped up off the couch and headed for the bedroom. Before she disappeared from sight, she looked back at him one last time with all that love shining in her eyes.

"And if it helps you to know, Blake, the answer's yes."

Then she took off down the hall, laughing as she went.

Chapter 6: HERE COMES THE GROOM

“Your dress is beautiful, but not as beautiful as you are.”

Brenna turned to face the quintet of women who’d rallied to help her pull this whole wedding together in record time. Laurel was the one who’d just spoken, but they were all nodding in agreement.

“All brides are beautiful. I think there’s a law about that.” But she did look good if she said so herself and smiled at her friends.

Lusahn, who was still learning the traditions of the human world, tugged at her own dress. She was more used to wearing pants and carrying a sword than she was to wearing pantyhose and carrying a purse. Tate was her usual cute self, and Gwen looked great in her spring green dress. It brought out the color of her eyes and contrasted nicely with her red hair. They’d all just met her, but it was obvious she was going to fit into their group perfectly.

Tate adjusted Brenna’s veil. “It’s almost time. How are you holding up?”

Brenna figured her smile was a bit ragged. “Fine, except I hope my hands aren’t shaking so hard the flowers in my bouquet fall apart.”

Lacey laughed. “No one will even notice. Don’t forget that we’re having Shiri toss flower petals down the aisle first.”

A knock at the door brought all six women to attention. The judge who was performing the ceremony stuck his head in. “Five minutes till show time, ladies.”

Brenna fought down the surge of panic. She didn’t have a doubt in her mind that marrying Blake Trahern was the smartest thing she’d ever done. She just wished they’d managed to keep the pomp and circumstance surrounding their wedding to a minimum. But her man had wanted all the bells and whistles, and it wasn’t in her to deny him his day in the spotlight. The thought had her smiling again.

Lacey and Laurel were serving as her attendants. Blake had chosen Jarvis Donahue and Devlin Bane to stand up with him. In fact, Jarvis was doing double duty because he’d volunteered to walk Brenna down the aisle. Her eyes teared up briefly as she thought about her late father, wishing he could have been there to see her marry the man he’d loved like a son.

Tate gave her an impish grin. “We’ll go take our seats. Just think, the next

time we talk, you'll be Brenna Trahern."

Yeah, she would be. How cool was that?

Devlin hovered right behind Trahern, staring at their reflections in the mirror. "Come on, Blake. I managed to do this. You can, too."

Trahern glared at his friend. "Yeah, well whoever thought up bow ties should be skewered with a dull sword."

Devlin rolled his eyes and then knocked Blake's hands out of the way. "Let me."

A few seconds and a lot of curse words later, Devlin stepped back to admire his handiwork. "Looks good."

D.J. gave Trahern the once over. "I hate to admit it, but you do clean up nicely. Maybe you should wear a nametag so Brenna will recognize you."

"Shove it where the sun don't shine, D.J."

But the man had a point. He hardly recognized himself in the mirror. He'd worn a tux in Devlin's wedding, but somehow that had felt different. Maybe it was because he hadn't been the one in the spotlight. Still, he was pretty sure Brenna would be pleased and that's all that mattered.

The judge stepped into the small anteroom that served as a holding pen for nervous grooms and their handlers. "It's time, gentlemen. The ladies are ready and the guests are seated."

All but two of the guys took off, each one punching Blake on the arm or slapping him on the back on the way out. Their support meant a lot to him. Finally, it was down to him, Devlin and Jarvis, the two men who'd served both as his mentors and his friends over the years.

There were no words for what they meant to him, but he tried anyway. "Guys, I want to thank you for always being there for me. For being here now."

Devlin faked a big sigh. "Yeah, well, someone had to keep an eye on you. Besides, I get hazardous duty pay for putting up with you."

Jarvis laughed and stepped up to give Trahern a quick man hug. Devlin did the same, pounding him on the back hard enough to leave a few bruises.

The music started. Showtime.

“I’ll go fetch your bride for you.” Jarvis’s voice was thick with emotion. “I hope she knows how lucky she is.”

Trahern shook his head. “I’m the lucky one.”

Devlin’s expression had turned solemn. “You’re both lucky. Trust me on that. Now, let’s get a move on. Don’t want to keep the lady waiting.”

Out in the small chapel, every seat was filled. Most of the guests were his fellow Paladins and the scattering of Kalith warriors who were part of their group. The men outnumbered the women several times over, but he was glad that Brenna’s friends were all there to help make the day special for her.

When he and Devlin were in place, the judge caught the eye of the string quartet in the corner. They nodded and brought the song to an end. Then with a flourish, they played the opening strains of the Wedding March. A hush fell over the room, as everyone turned to face the back of the chapel. Lacey started down the aisle, followed by Laurel.

As soon as the two women took their positions at the front of the room, Brenna came into sight, her arm looped through Jarvis’s. The two of them made their way down the aisle.

She looked straight at him and smiled. That small connection was enough to make everything else fade away, as if they were the only two people in the room. His lover simply glowed. He wanted to shout to the heavens that Brenna Nichols was his and his alone. That he loved her. That without her, he would be nothing, just the cold, half-dead man he’d been before she’d dragged him all the way back to the living.

That aisle hadn’t seemed so long the previous night when they’d rehearsed the wedding, but it was taking forever for Jarvis to bring Brenna to where Trahern stood waiting for her. But finally the pair reached front of the aisle, where they paused. Jarvis lifted Brenna’s veil and pressed a quick kiss on her cheek, making her blush.

Trahern held out his arm and she didn’t hesitate to join him. The two of them faced the judge who began to read from the book in his hand. Finally, he got to the important part and the moment finally arrived that Blake had been waiting for since that first night when Brenna’s father had brought him home to live with him and his daughter.

The judge looked at Blake and asked, “Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Without hesitation, Blake smiled down at Brenna and said, “I do.”

And even better, when the judge asked her if she’d take Blake as her husband, she smiled back up at him and said, “You bet I do!”

When he drew her into his arms and kissed her for the first time as his wife, his soul felt complete.