

## Chapter 1: Running From Angels

THE POUNDING OF HER HEART brought her gasping awake in the colorless light of early morning. Blinking in confusion, Rori Austin struggled to get her bearings. Where was she? *When* was she? With her vision still wonky from yet another dream, she scanned the room and sagged in relief. She was home. Thank God.

As the normal lightheadedness eased up, she panicked and dove for the notepad lying on the milk crate that acted as a dresser. I have to write it down. Write it down. Write it down. The mantra flowed in her mind like a curse. Write it down. Scribbling like a crazy person, she wrote everything she could remember. After ten minutes, she ran out of juice and stared at the pad in horror.

Two words--over and over again. *Only* two words? How was that possible? The vision was so real! It was long and winding... it kept her up half the night. *Surely* there was more than that. She closed her eyes, straining to recapture the vision, but it was gone. The barest hint of heat, fire maybe, teased at the edges of her memory. Jesus, help her. She was losing her mind. Shaking her head in frustration, she climbed off the lumpy futon and headed for the shower. Slouching under the weak stream, she sniggered at her own stupid optimism. Rori Austin, why on earth are you praying for help when you know Jesus turned a blind eye to you a long time ago? And for some crazy ass reason you still pray. Ridiculous! Ladies and gentlemen, God has left the building. With that cheery thought, she shoved her face into the water for a last rinse. She was talking to herself in the third person again. Not only was she an idiot, she was a crazy person. How much worse can this get?

“What the hell?”

Declan Manning rolled over and shot out of bed in the wink of an eye. Instantly alert, he scanned the room for threats but relaxed when he saw who had dragged him out of a sound sleep. He relaxed for the nanosecond it took to get a good look at her face. Oh, shit.

Splaying his hands in a gesture of peace, he flashed a weak smile. “Now Dani--”

She marched into the room and shoved her finger into his chest. “Don’t you ‘Dani’ me! What the hell is the matter with you?” Her eyes cut to the rumpled sheets, gleaming with an unholy light.

Closing his eyes against the sight, he pried her finger out of his chest and tried again, “Don’t you knock?”

Clearly furious, Dani stalked him backwards until he came up against the bedroom wall with a thunk. She yanked his face down to her level for some eye-to-eye contact.

“You have a naked woman in your bed.” Her voice dropped to a hiss. Reaching out one delicate hand, she dragged her nails lightly across his belly, eyes hardening to granite as he sucked in his stomach. She pressed her nails just above his, uh, personal assets, pinning him in place.

Dani Taylor was more than pissed. How could he do this to her? She thought they had an understanding. She had been so careful to keep him interested while she figured out what she wanted to do. It wasn’t her fault it was taking a while to make up her mind. She had other things

to consider besides her hormones and his hot body. Finding him in bed with someone was NOT in the plan.

“And you’re naked too. How could you?” The question was more or less rhetorical since she knew perfectly well how he could do it. Still, she wasn’t letting him off the hook. Not by a long shot. She glared while he searched for the right answer. Her on again, off again Plan B looked at her now with so many emotions flickering over his face that she felt a grin trying to sneak out. Growling softly, she kept up the pressure, smirking when he hitched in his breath. He had beautiful carved abs covered with soft, tanned skin. It would be a shame to damage them too much. Once upon a time, she’d run her hands over them with more than pain in mind.

He finally sighed, long and hard, a hint of a smile curving his lips. A familiar woody fragrance floated around them, lifting the tension, filling her with calm. Suddenly she wasn’t sure why she was mad. She inhaled, blinked, and took a really good look at the man standing in front of her. Tall, lean, tightly muscled, he was rock hard and golden-skinned. There was a fine dusting of pale gold hair scattered over his chest, tapering to a more burnished happy trail dissecting those sculpted abs and drawing her eyes downward to his quite lovely...

“Go ahead. Look at me, darlin’. Maybe you’ll appreciate what you’re missing.” He wrapped strong fingers around her wrist, flattening her hand against his beating heart. With his other hand, he tilted her chin back and fixed her with a hard stare. “I haven’t done anything wrong tonight. But even if I had, I don’t answer to you.” He pushed her gently back and grunted, “Your choice, remember?”

He crossed his arms and tried not to think about his junk hanging out in the cold room. It was really hard being hard on her (no pun intended) when he was buck ass naked. Goose bumps popped up on his arms, and his boys retreated to warmer climes. Ah, hell. Would she just yell at him and get out of here before he was totally humiliated? It was all he could do not to reach for a blanket. Instead, he stared her down and waited for her to throw out another insult or two before stomping out of the room, as usual.

A sleepy moan from the bed saved Dani from another undignified retreat. Her eyes practically fell out of her head when she glanced over.

“Abby?”

Three nights later, Dec leaned against the kitchen counter inside the Primani headquarters. The farmhouse was nestled inside a huge wooded lot outside of Plattsburgh, New York. His ops cell had used it for years. It felt a little more like home than anyplace else they’d been in several centuries. Of course, nothing could ever replace his real home, but that was long since gone.

The only woman he’d ever been able to count on was throwing together dinner while two of her three toddlers were out from under her feet. Mica Leahy was his best friend. The sun and moon rose and set behind her beautiful denim eyes--really, they did. He loved her from the first second he laid eyes on her about, oh, eight years ago. She had been young and naive and in a whole lot of trouble. Lucky for her, he had a soft spot for damsels in distress. She was as far from ‘damsel’ as he could imagine now. He’d watched her take apart a demon using nothing but the power of her mind. Yeah, that was pretty freakin’ creepy, but hey, they all had their special abilities. It made them what they were. Telekinesis just happened to be one of her stronger talents. Her husband, Killian, was his Primani leader, and the older brother he never had. They were tight. But no matter how much he loved Killian, he still loved Mica more. She was way nicer than her uptight husband. Even so, he’d been trying for weeks to find a way to bring up his

problems with Dani, but wasn't sure how Mica would react. Dani's latest temper tantrum was pretty much the last straw. He was through being dicked around and wanted Mica's advice before he made his choice.

She squeezed his shoulder and dropped a kiss on his cheek on the way to the oven. "Okay, I'm going to be straight with you, Dec. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you need to hear the truth." She paused to see if he was paying attention before continuing, "You know I love Dani; she's a good friend to me, and she's an awesome nanny for the kids. But damn it, Dec, she's sucked the life out of you. You've been moody for months. You're not yourself anymore, and I've been a little worried about you. I'm glad you asked for my input; I was about to give it to you whether you asked or not!" She shot him a quick grin and pulled out the tray of blueberry muffins that were baking.

"Look, the love of your life is supposed to feed your soul, not strangle it. She's supposed to build you up, have your back, nourish your dreams. That's just not Dani. She's left you hanging every step of the way. I can't explain her attitude. She isn't much of a sharer. You deserve better, though. Move on. You'll find a woman who's worthy of all that you are."

"Are you serious right now? I can't believe you'd say that! I thought you'd take her side."

She caught him in a sisterly hug and murmured, "Oh, sweetie, you'll always be my favorite. You're good and kind," she met his amused eyes with a grin, "and just completely adorable. You and I have been through too much for me to side with her over you." She pulled the tiny golden locket out of her shirt and waved it with a smile. "Blood is truly thicker than friendship."

Kissing the top of her head, he ignored her mangled quote and remarked, "Yeah, I *have* saved your life a few times. Thanks, sweetheart. It's not what I wanted to hear, but I'll think about it."

They were interrupted by the anguished howls of two of the triplets. Guess they were done napping. Mica beat him to the living room, where the boys had been snoozing on a fat sleeping bag. Michael Declan, his namesake and the youngest, was crying and rubbing his ear, but Rafe had gone rogue and was scaling the bookcase trying to get to God only knew what. He was clearly terrified, hence the howls, but he kept climbing, taking action in the face of fear! He would be a killer warrior someday. Good thing too; he had a big job to do.

Mica tossed him a hassled look and begged, "Dec, baby, please go grab Rafe before he falls!" She gestured with her elbow; her other hand was full with Michael who was squalling in protest as his mother slipped the spoon of purple medicine into his crying mouth. Dec's heart tightened when he spotted the first tear running down the little cheek. The youngest two were fighting off a cold, while Killian Jr. was healthy as a horse. That kid never got sick. Ever. It was eerie.

"Here, let me have this one. You go after Rafe." He plucked the unhappy toddler from Mica's grasp and lifted him over his head until he stopped crying. Squalls turned to whimpers and then giggles. There we go. Better. He kissed the top of Michael's sweaty head and said, "Come on, little dude, no crying today. You're all right. Where's your daddy?" Michael sniffed and pointed to the back door.

On cue, Killian materialized in the doorway. Letting his molecules settle for a nanosecond, he shook his fingers out and zeroed in on Mica. "Everything okay? I swear I heard the screaming in transit." He pulled Rafe from his mother's arms, studying his pale face before setting him down again. "Fever's gone?"

Mica gave him a distracted kiss and agreed. "And the cough is just about gone too. They're okay, just crabby. It's hard for them to be stuck inside all day. This weather sucks."

A sudden shower of rain struck the kitchen window. Fall in New York... chilly, rainy, dark. It reminded Dec a whole lot of England some days. He shuddered at the thought. He totally didn't miss England. His memories were not so good. When he peered into the darkest places of his mind, he could still see Sean's face covered by the stone angel. With skin bleached white and eyes bloody red, he'd suffered a fate worse than death... all for the greater good. He'd sacrificed himself to save millions from what would've been the worst smallpox outbreak mankind had ever seen. It'd been three years since they'd cleared Sean's name and gotten him freed. Even so, the nightmare images were still too close to his heart. *Sean* might be fine now, but he wasn't. They'd nearly lost Sean completely. He never wanted to go to England again.

Mica was right. He was brooding. Shaking his head clear of those maudlin images, he passed Michael to Killian who held him close for a second before setting him down and ordering, "Go play with your brother, Michael." Turning to Mica, he asked, "Little Killian's not back yet?"

Over the past year, Killian Jr. had shown signs of significant psychic powers. The archangels were intrigued and not just a little smug. To have such a strong asset on their side was a huge boon for them. Even though the triplets were only three years old, they were all showing signs of their strengths. All of the boys had powers from Killian, Sean, and Declan. Killian Jr. had inherited his father's most dominant power: the ability to control natural forces. He'd been doing it since before he was born, but they hadn't put the pieces together until he called forth lightning on his first birthday. Raphael had insisted they begin training about one minute later.

Mica smiled up at her husband and said, "He's not due back for another day. Raphael wanted to keep him for another week, but I told him you'd lose your mind." Tugging him by his belt loop, she slipped her cold hands under his shirt. With a wink at Dec, she suggested, "I think you need a nap. Dec volunteered to babysit for a few hours."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. You gotta be kidding me... Did everyone have sex on the brain? Must be something in the air. Full moon?

An hour later, he slouched on the porch swing, scowling into the dripping trees. He wasn't trying to listen, really. But his hearing *was* supernatural. It wasn't his fault he could hear everything inside the house. He couldn't exactly crank up his iPod since he was babysitting. It was a nightmare trying to drown out *some* noises while also keeping his ears open for crying kids. The damn happy couple was quiet now, probably snuggling in some supernatural afterglow, but he was left with a teeth gritting, throbbing ache that was making him mental. He looked down at his lap and scowled some more. Go back to sleep! Shit. At this rate, he'd need some alone time before dinner! He flashed a grin that no one saw. Yeah, he was pathetic, but it was funny as hell.

Out of the three Primani in his ops cell, he was the one with the strongest ability to influence the minds of anyone around him. It was a powerful weapon in their arsenal. They all had that ability to some degree, true. But he was actually charming. Ladies liked that. Women responded to him in ways that boggled Sean and Killian's minds. Even Dimitri shook his head, and that was saying something.

With a mental wave of his hand, he could distort memories, charm the pants off of someone (literally or figuratively), or loosen up a stubborn suspect they needed to question. Theoretically, he could use these psychic abilities to get *more* women to sleep with him. Not to mention, he was

also easy on the eyes. Modest, too. He *could* get laid every day if he wanted. But he didn't, for more than one reason.

Unable to sit still, he paced the length of the covered porch and studied the trees some more. It was still raining, but more softly now. Mother Nature must be running out of juice. The wind shifted, and he caught the faint peal of Mica's throaty laughter.

Ah, hell.

He couldn't stand living here any longer. It'd been three years since they all moved in together and things had been great at first. The triplets were a riot, and Mica and Killian were two of his favorite people. He'd gladly die for either one of them, but they, well, they had way too much sex. And damn it, he wasn't getting any. If he was being honest with himself, he'd admit he was jealous of what they had. They were crazy for each other, and everyone could see it. Mica looked at Killian with such intensity it hurt to watch. He wanted a woman to undress him with her eyes, to drag him off to bed... to just give a shit about him... yeah, he wanted that too. But that dream was so distant it might as well be nonexistent. And... he'd be fronting himself if he didn't admit he was just plain horny.

It had been *years*.

Stupid tool that he was, he'd been saving himself for Dani. He cared about her and didn't want her to think he wasn't picky. He liked sex, but he wasn't a man-whore like Rivin or Dimitri. Those two got more ass than they deserved. He missed the playfulness of it all, the warmth, the fun, and hell, the explosion of a spectacular orgasm. Damn. He needed to get laid. He adjusted his jeans with an irritated shove. Apparently there was some urgency. It was time to get his own space before the party in his pants turned into a full riot. Chewing on the tip of his index finger, he planned his escape. Could he really walk away?

"Uncle Dec! Why are you sad?" Rafe's piping voice snagged his attention away from the blond-haired angel that was invading his thoughts. Her stormy grey eyes glittered with anger and accusation. She was always angry these days, even before the Abby incident. Why she was mad was a mystery he couldn't figure out. Truth? He was sick to death of trying. He was just done.

*Could* he walk away from her? No. He couldn't.

He was about to sprint.

Sighing with regret, again, he turned to the toddler and forced a smile. "I'm not sad, Rafe, just feeling a little off today. That's all." Standing and sweeping the boy onto his shoulders in one move, he loped down the steps and headed for the boys' playhouse at the bottom of the porch. It was a stroke of genius, if he did say so himself. He and Sean had surprised their godsons with it a few months ago, and it turned out to be the perfect gift. Like a treehouse on the ground, it was fully enclosed with a couple of cool windows and an escape hatch in the back. They'd insulated it so it would be warm, and Mica'd lined it with soft carpet and some heavy curtains for winter. With three cozy chairs and a bunch of their favorite toys, it was a perfect place to hang out. Even if you were only three...

"Come on, buddy. Let's see what Michael's done with your racetrack." As he ducked inside, he glanced at the forest. A trickle of warning slid over his shoulder blades and he froze. Setting Rafe down, he shooed him inside, closing the door with a click.

There it was again. A feeling of eyes watching him... Straightening to his full height, he let his Primani senses take control and felt the hum of his *saol* revving him up. The energy readied him for battle, giving him strength and power that no human could ever hope to have. His eyes burned with a low blue flame as he used telepathy to search the woods. Come on, come on... show yourself... Where are you hiding? A chill swept over him like a shadow blocking the sun.

He swiveled to the right, scanning the woods again. Nothing. No humans, no demons, not even a bear. The creepy feeling was still there though, and he tensed for a fight. What the hell is out there?

Switching his gaze towards the road, he studied the dense line of pine trees that loomed like sentinels across the front of the property. The dim afternoon light barely penetrated the canopy of branches, leaving the ground murky with shadows. A gust of wind bent the trees sideways, sending shadows flying in all directions. One shadow remained still... separate from the tall pines and larger than any tree trunk. Red eyes glittered within the darkness, the acrid stench of burnt earth drifted on the breeze. Gotcha.

Without a sound, he let his molecules scatter and dematerialized. Rematerializing directly behind the shadow, he pulled his silver Primani blade and skewered the darkness in front of him.

What the hell?

It was gone. His blade hit nothing but air. Impossible! Looking left and right, he was shocked to find himself alone. The air still reeked of evil though... something wasn't right... a shrill scream brought his head up and the blade out. The boys!

Acting on sheer instinct, he launched himself into the playhouse. If it wasn't so serious, he might've laughed at the sight that greeted him when he rematerialized inside. Most of the small space was filled with the bulky frame of a demon who'd been trying to grab the boys. He held Michael with one hand, leaning as far away as possible. The little boy was kicking and swinging his tiny fists at the demon's stomach while Rafe clung to his back screaming like a rabid howler monkey. Rafe had jammed his fingers into the demon's eye sockets and was practically ripping them out of his head. Black demon blood splattered the new carpet. It was hard to tell who was yelling the loudest... the demon or the boys.

The demon cursed, "You little bastards! Let go of me before I skin you alive and eat you!" Twisting this way and that, he finally flung Michael off. Dec caught him easily and set him down by the door. "Michael, run to your father. Now."

Michael shook his head. "No! He's got Rafe!"

He shoved him out the door. "Don't argue. Just go!"

He turned to the demon who was desperately trying to shimmer, his form wavering in and out of the plane. The human facade shifted back and forth to his real scaly self. Rafe was still screaming at the top of his lungs, the sound deafening in the tiny cabin. Clearly he took after his mother. All right, as amusing as this was... it was time to wrap it up. He was getting a headache.

"Rafe! Buddy, stop! For God's sake, stop." His sharp tone broke through the noise and Rafe immediately stopped yelling. His bright blue eyes snapped open and he broke into tears of relief.

"Good work, little dude. I'll take it from here." To the demon, he said, "So, demon, you seem to be stuck here." He circled closer, blade at the ready. "Looks like your intel sucks."

"I'm going to rip your scales off one at a time. Then I'm going to carve out chunks of your flesh and send each piece back to Hell in a special package for your boss to open." Mica's eyes burned with a white-hot flame as her anger threatened to turn her into a torch. You just didn't touch a woman's kids and expect to keep your naughty bits.

Since he wasn't needed for anything, Dec leaned against the railing and watched her work. As she circled the demon, her tone sent a shiver of fear through *him*, and he had a twinge of pity for the stupid demon. Said demon was tied to a chair, blood still covering his face, eyes blinded by a berserk three year old, and furiously trying to shimmer out. Sadly for him, this place had a

new security system. No way was this demon getting out of the chair. Killian made it shimmer proof. Sometimes magic was a good thing.

The sound of heavy boots on the stairs distracted him. He glanced up at Killian as he ducked his head to enter the basement. “Well?”

“Dani’s on her way. Do you want to meet her and fill her in?”

He shrugged. “Not particularly, no.”

Killian shot a meaningful look in Mica’s direction and said, “You two have to get past this. It’s not helpful.” To Mica, he said, “Babe, I’ve got this. Would you go upstairs and wait for Dani?”

The sound of her teeth grinding together was loud and clear as she stomped over to them. Glaring up, she snapped, “Dani doesn’t need help. I’m going to carve this asshole into dog food, and then I’m going to finish dinner. We still need to eat.”

He choked on a laugh and turned his back before she caught him. This was exactly the reason he loved Mica so much. Ruthless *and* practical.

Later that night, they sat around the dining room table bullshitting about this and that. He waited for the right time to bring up his plans. Fidgeting in his chair, he drummed his fingers against the side of his thigh and tried to find the words. Leaving wouldn’t be easy. He’d miss them. He rested his gaze on the two little boys giggling together at the end of the table, and he sighed again. How could he do it? How could he leave them? He was their godfather. They needed him. As he sank deeper into thought, Domino’s warm nose prodded his hand demanding his attention. The pretty little Dalmatian seemed to look right inside his mind.

*You’re leaving again?*

Gently fondling her silky ears, he cringed. Was he so obvious? She rubbed her head on his leg and snorted a blob of dog snot all over his knee. Nice.

*Duh!*

Best get it over with. Straightening a bit, he blurted, “I’m moving out. Tomorrow.”

Mica choked on her wine. “What? Why?”

He hated the shock on her face. But surely she suspected? She was psychic, after all. “I... I need some space. It’s not you guys!” He tried to avoid looking at Dani, but his eyes slid that way on their own. She clamped her lips together and glared daggers.

“This isn’t my fault!” she hissed.

Purposely ignoring her, he spoke to Mica and Killian instead. “It’s not a big deal, Mica. I’ve been on my own for a long time. I’m used to more solitude than I’ve had here. I just need some space to do my own thing for a while.” He gestured with his hands and added with half a smile, “Don’t try to tell me you haven’t suspected anything.”

Sighing into her wine glass, she took a sip and set it down before saying, “It’s okay, Dec. I can feel your unhappiness.” Her eyes cut to Dani, and she hastily turned back to Dec. “You have a right to your own life, your own happiness. We don’t expect you to live here until the apocalypse begins. God only knows how many years that will be!”

Feeling the first spark of excitement he’d had in weeks, he shot up and went around the table to hug her. He should’ve known she’d understand. She knew him better than anyone else; anyone in this lifetime, anyhow. “Thanks for understanding, darlin’. I didn’t want to let you down. I swear I’ll be here whenever you need me. I’m still on the team for ops, and I’m still the best godfather the triplets have. I’ll be here for them too.”

She squeezed him back with a cheeky wink. “Don’t be a dork, dork. We totally get it. You want your space. You got it. You can come back any time you want.”

“Can I help you pack, Dec?” Dani asked.  
He gave her a level stare and said, “You’ve done enough already.”