

Prologue:

Brooklyn, New York, 1987:

“FORGIVE ME, FATHER, FOR I HAVE SINNED.”

Confession.

It was good for the soul. Cleansing and purifying, confession would lead to absolution and forgiveness. Or so she'd been taught. If only it were that simple.

“It's been two months since my last confession.”

To 24-year-old Annalisa, those hushed words damned her as much as her sins. If only she'd come to confession earlier, she wouldn't be in this situation. A month ago, she'd been ashamed. She avoided confession out of horror of her own behavior. She knew what she was doing was wrong, yet she was in too deep to stop herself. Now, the simple words were like a neon sign, flashing her guilt for everyone to see. She slumped lower in the confessional. Peering through the screen, she watched the cleaning lady for evidence that she could hear them. The little old lady from Queens dribbled more lemon oil onto a pew and half-heartedly rubbed it in. Was it her imagination, or did she seem to cock her head in the direction of the confessional?

Pausing to dab at her eyes, she continued, “I'm afraid I can't be forgiven. It's too late.” There were some sins that were too consequential, too heinous, for forgiveness. Surely even God himself would turn away with disgust.

“There is always forgiveness, my child, if one is truly repentant. Why don't you tell me what you've done?” The priest's tone was encouraging, as usual. Patient, caring, his manner was comforting when hearing her confessions. This time though, he was about to get an earful.

She'd been taught that sins would be forgiven if the sinner was genuinely remorseful. She tried to live her life by the teachings of the church, and honestly felt bad when she strayed. Her parents and the nuns had ensured she felt guilty whenever she did something wrong.

Truly repentant? That was going to be a problem this time.

“I had sex outside of marriage, Father.”

Way outside of marriage.

She swallowed hard and rushed on before she could lose her courage. “I had sex with an angel, and I'm pregnant.”

Dead silence.

Finally, he asked, “Does he know?”

Shaking her head though he couldn't see her, the dam gave way and she sobbed, “I killed him!”

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.”

Chapter 2: Daydreams and Night Things

“SHIT, SHIT, SHIT! I AM SO LATE!” Rori balanced on one foot desperately shoving her toes into the strappy sandal that was about to lose her job for her. Stupid shoes weren’t cooperating this morning, and she was way out of time. After jamming two toes through the side straps, ripping her pinky toenail and falling on her ass, she finally threw it into the wall. “Frickin’ shoe!”

Five minutes, and a lot more cursing later, she slammed the apartment door and flew down the three flights of stairs to the lobby. Damn, damn, damn! She was so late. Again! Her boss would fire her if she was late one more time, and then where would she be? She barely had enough money to pay for the dump she lived in, and forget about eating. There was precious spare change for silly little things like food. These days she was living on noodles and the rare piece of fruit she snagged from the corner store. She was pretty sure Raul knew she was stealing his fruit, but he never said anything. He always turned his back when she came into the store. She was thankful for the small kindness. Those things were rare in her world.

Glancing at her watch, she picked up her pace. She never had enough time. In her universe, it ran in fast-forward. It didn’t matter how much time she gave herself to get ready, she was always late. And of course, she was out of bus money so she was walking - no, make that running - the ten blocks to the flower shop where she worked. The owner, Angela Donatucci, was a total bi-otch about time. She was opening, so technically Angela wouldn’t know if she was on time or not... but she had a pissy habit of showing up out of the blue. “Spot checks”, she called it. She’d been busted three times in the last month. One more time, and she was jobless. And jobless meant *homeless* soooo... Crap! Dodging around a kid on a scooter, she hung a fast right and cut through the alley behind the Downward Dog Chinese slop shop. A couple of delivery trucks were pulled up to the back door. No problem. She’d just squeeze through. With her mind on the time, she didn’t see the backup lights until it was too late.

A starburst exploded and then... nothing but darkness. Excited voices babbled nearby, but they drifted on the wind. Sirens warbled in the distance, the sound fuzzy and faint.

“Hey! Are you all right?” a man’s voice snapped next to her ear.

Yes, yes, I’m fine! She tried to speak, but her mouth wasn’t working. No sounds came out. This was so not good. Why couldn’t they hear her?

“Holy shit, Ramirez, you killed her!”

What? No way! I can’t be dead! She struggled to move, to show them she wasn’t dead, to sit up, something, anything, but she was frozen inside her uncooperative body. A wave of dizziness rolled in slow motion through her brain, spreading from head to toe. She was too weak to twitch. She strained to lift her hand, but vicious pain stabbed into her belly. Why wasn’t anyone doing anything? Didn’t she moan? She could’ve sworn she’d moaned out loud. If ever there was a time to moan, this was definitely it. No one responded, so maybe she hadn’t. Darkness pressed in, her inner vision tunneling to a single spear of bright light. Seriously? Damn... *I am dying.* Well, this sucks.

I should’ve seen this coming.

“Hang in there, darlin’. You’re going to be all right.” In contrast to the muted sounds around her, the soft words rang clear as a bell inside her head.

Someone loosened the hoodie's zipper before lifting the tiny gold cross she wore around her neck. An amused chuckle floated in her head, and the voice came again. "Nice metal. Okay, hang on to your heartbeat; I'm gonna rock your world."

Dec studied the woman's pale face and prepared to work a little miracle 'cuz that's what he did. Piece of cake. No way was he letting her die. He was in the right place at the right time and he could fix this. Looks like it was her lucky day! He laid his cheek against her breast to listen for the music of her heartbeat. When it faded to quiet, he got to work. Okay, sweetheart, time for a little preventative kissing. This is the fun part... Carefully parting her lips, he gave her mouth-to-mouth while the ambulance screamed from blocks away. A small crowd had formed, chattering loudly, but he didn't care. They had no idea he was using his powers to heal her. In between breaths, he ran his hands over her body, searching for injuries. Poor woman had some internal bleeding. He could hear the blood pooling in her abdomen, sloshing against the side of the visceral peritoneum. Where is it? Ah ha, here we go. Celiac artery. Not good. It was damaged enough that blood was flowing at a good clip. She'd never make it to the hospital without bleeding out. Soooo, time for that miracle. He tucked his hand inside her hoodie. With palm flat overtop of the torn artery, he got to work. After a few seconds, the ragged edges were neatly knit back together. Now back to her lovely mouth... she seemed to be breathing, but it wouldn't hurt to be extra positive.

Rori's back arched off the ground. Her arms opened to welcome what her brain didn't yet understand. Glorious fire warmed her from the inside out. Brilliant light flooded her mind, blocking all memories, all thought, until there was nothing but tranquility. Floating weightlessly, all substance drifting away... she was nothing and everything at last. There was no time, no place; nothing but the light pulling her higher.

Peaceful, so peaceful...

Settling like a feather to the earth once again, she gradually came back to herself. The blinding light dimmed to a soft luminescence behind her eyes. She must be dead after all and this was Heaven. The excruciating pain in her abdomen vanished. Her inner vision was still taking a siesta, but she was acutely aware of the strong fingers that held her jaw, the lips that pressed against her own... slightly rough. Male. The loops and whorls of his fingerprints branded the soft skin of her face. Capable hands... A fresh green scent washed over her, sending her mind to a fantasy of forests and waterfalls. As her heartbeat steadied to normal, she could almost see him in her mind's eye. The images came in fragments... ghostly and unclear. Windblown blond hair... cobalt blue eyes... a lean face was taking shape when the voice came again.

"Gotta bolt, beautiful. Have a nice life."

The half-formed face scattered like dandelion fluff just before she sank into a dream-free sleep.

Leaning against the stone wall of the penthouse garden, he closed his eyes and thought about the woman he'd rescued. She was a tiny little thing, half starved, too thin. No wonder she'd been hurt so badly; she didn't have any extra muscle on her bones. Aside from that, she was intriguing, pretty but not perfect. Fresh blood trickling down the side of her face couldn't hide the fine texture of her skin or the height of her cheekbones. She had a small pearly scar above her left eye. Shaped like a bird's wing, it lay parallel to the winged arch of her eyebrow. Her eyes had been closed, curly lashes sweeping her cheek. He'd wanted to see the color, but couldn't exactly pry them open while he was giving her mouth-to-mouth. That would've been uncool.

He rubbed a finger over his lower lip and had a clear flash of her mouth as his lips brushed against hers. The image surprised him, and he held his breath waiting for more. He felt the silky texture of her tongue when she held him closer and fell into their kiss. Encouraged, he threaded his fingers through her hair, tilting her head back for better access.

Jolting awake, he snorted at his own daydreaming. This was getting out of hand. Three years was definitely the max he could deprive himself without going insane. At the rate he was going, he would be ambisexual in another month. It was bad enough that he had waaaaay too much alone time with his immoral compass, Mr. Crowley. As far as penis nicknames went, it was his favorite. Named after one of his favorite Ozzy Osbourne songs, Crowley was not to be trusted. He had absolutely no sense. For example, right now, Crowley was all but yelling to tap that ass. He was even pointing in her direction, like a helpful little compass... little being figurative, not literal.

Smacking himself in the forehead, he shoved *those* thoughts to the back of his mind. He wasn't going to think of her that way. Rori wasn't an ass to be tapped--At least not by his tapper. She was just a woman he helped--one of, oh, probably 200,000 or so since he'd become Primani more than 1,500 years ago. Saving her was just part of their job description: Hunt and kill demons and save pretty women. Well, technically, they didn't have to be 'pretty' or even 'women', for that matter. Saving humans was something they did occasionally. 'Course, sometimes they *hunted* the humans and killed them too. Depended on the mission.

In Rori's case, she was lucky he'd been on his way to grab a bagel. Right place, right time. Good for both of them. She got to keep living, and his funky mood was gone. Win-win. Forcefully dismissing her from his mind, he let the night sounds of the city wash over him. The hum of traffic blended with the deep vibrations of bass in the apartment building across from this one. In the distance, a baby cried, and he smiled inside.

Crying meant living. Go ahead, little dude. Cry. Live. Make your parents mental. It's your job. Grow up to be someone you believe in. Be someone you like.

Up here, on the 18th floor, he was completely alone. Alone to think, alone to breathe a few deep breaths. He'd wanted this, hadn't he? Yeah, sure he did. He'd wanted to get away, get some space. Mostly he wanted to get away from Dani. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes to brush away her image, but she stayed put. Shoving away from the wall, he stalked across the patio, zeroing his gaze on the park so far below him. Dark now, there wasn't much to see.

Three years! He'd given her three years to come around! He felt like such a dumbass now. He'd thought he had everything all figured out. She had to be into him, didn't she? The signs were all there. They'd hung out together. She'd been sweet to him, right? She'd shared a kiss or two and a few other things that kept him waiting for more. He was pathetic. He hoarded those kisses like morphine, dragging the memories out when loneliness got to be too much. She laughed at his jokes... and most of them were pretty lame, too! She wouldn't do that if she didn't really like him, would she? In his mind, the biggest sign was jealousy. Dani had a fit every time he even friggin' looked at Abby. He slammed a hand into the railing and closed his eyes.

Abby.

With her rebel pink hair and grass green eyes, she was a pretty little thing. She wore a funky diamond nose stud that made him stare at her face. Pretty sure that was the point. She didn't need to bother with that, though. Fit, adorable, and energetic, it was impossible to ignore her. God knew he tried hard enough for more years than he could count. She just wouldn't give up on him. She'd be a friggin' stalker if she wasn't so damn likable.

He'd hurt Abby's feelings so many times his karma was on life support. She deserved better than him. He was dangerous. His *life* was dangerous. Abby didn't know all that. She'd wormed her way into his heart without him even knowing it. He'd tried to keep her at a distance for what felt like forever. She was Mica's baby sister, for crying out loud! He couldn't hook up with her. *Wouldn't* hook up with her. Even though he'd drawn that line, he still spent more time with her than he should.

How could he say no to a woman like her? He honestly didn't want to. He liked her. She was so in love with life, with living each and every day. She was fun to be around. He felt damn good around her. He loved her wide-eyed approach to new things, her passion for the people around her. She cared about people, truly cared. It was a rare thing these days. In the past few months, he found himself looking forward to seeing her when she wasn't around... the second he realized this, alarm bells, whistles, and sirens went off inside his head.

Time to walk away.

Her humanity would weaken him, would change him. It'd taken him centuries to finally be the Primani he was today. The future was murkier than ever and he, none of them, could afford to be vulnerable. Besides, she was human. That alone was a deal breaker. He wanted a forever kind of love.

He'd thought that love would come from Dani. After all, she was beyond death; an angel in the truest sense of the word. She could stand by him for his eternity. But Dani... well, she was just jerking him around all this time. Damn it to Hell anyway. Mica was right. He wanted to kick himself for being so blind. Flopping down onto a chaise, he remembered Dani's last words. Was it really only three days ago? Yeah, guess so. Time flies when you've been kicked in the teeth by a pain-in-the-ass, blond working angel.

Before he left for Manhattan, she'd followed him to his car and watched silently as he loaded it with a couple of suitcases and a backpack. The new Dodge Challenger was a gift to himself for not murdering her. The iridescent blue paint sparkled in the morning light. Feeling a wee bit heavy hearted, he'd closed the trunk and turned to find her waiting.

"What do you want, Dani? Come to make sure I leave?"

"It's not like that, Declan. You should know better." She was using a snotty tone that he was just about sick to death of. She pulled it out when she knew she was wrong, but didn't want to admit it. He'd heard it more times than he could count. With any luck at all, he'd never hear it again.

Her fine hair fluttered in the breeze, and he pulled his eyes away from it. "Really? What's it like then? 'Cuz I sure as hell don't know what to think anymore."

She sighed and tossed her hair like he was being a difficult child. He really hated when she did that. It made him feel childish, unreasonable. Who did she think she was? "Tick-tock. I'm waiting. No words now? Not another insult to send me on my way? That's a surprise."

Her eyes flashed, and she snapped, "You have no idea what I'm thinking, so give it a rest."

He flinched at her tone and studied her face one last time. He'd really thought he might love her, but she was right. He didn't know her at all. That's exactly how she wanted it, too. Sharing next to nothing about herself, she had kept him at arm's length all this time. He'd been stupid. Shrugging with nonchalance he didn't really feel, he buried the pain behind sarcasm. "And that's our problem, isn't it? You never talk to me. So I don't know you at all, do I? And now, I'm not sure I want to."

She grimaced at his words, grabbing at his arm to stop him. "Wait--"

Jerking his arm away, he cut her off. “No, Dani. I get it. You don’t want me. You don’t need to beat me over the head with it. I’m finally seeing things clearly. Shit, girl, I just wish I’d seen the truth years ago. I’ve wasted too much time waiting on you. I’m through.” He gave her a hard look and got into the car.

Even here in Manhattan, she followed him. It was beyond annoying. She didn’t want him, but he couldn’t get her out of his head. He was a moron. Go away, Dani! Mentally scrubbing her face from his mind, he stomped back into the kitchen. A quick recon through the pantry turned up a nice fresh bottle of Jim Beam. Just what the doctor ordered. He’d just downed a double when there was a subtle shift in air pressure. Company. Please don’t be Alex. He wasn’t in the mood for their boss.

“Yo, Dec!”

He perked up. Now *Sean* he could stand in the mood he was in. Sean was his other Primani ‘brother’. More like him than Killian was, Sean was practically his twin. Except he had a sense of humor and Sean, well, he just didn’t. Ha. His timing was perfect! If anyone understood misplaced love, it was Sean. After all, Mica had ended up with Killian... after starting out with Sean. He’d get a ton of sympathy from Sean. “In here drowning Dani in bourbon. Come on in.”

Sean strolled into the kitchen and frowned at the bottle. He shook his head and straddled a stool. “Don’t drink alone, man. It’s lame.”

The morning brought a brand new day full of sun, and sunlight, and more sunlight. All of it was trying to kill him. Swearing very quietly, Dec shoved his head under a pillow and wished for the energy to close the blinds. Just the idea of getting up sent a shaft of pain through his skull. Not gonna happen. A few hours later, he dragged himself out of bed and stumbled into the shower. While the scalding waterfall sluiced over his back, he let his *saol* purge the toxins from his body. With arms folded against the glass, he rested his cheek on his crossed forearms and sighed. Breathing slowly and deeply, he let nature do its thing. At his command, the *saol* released a gentle pulse of healing energy that raced through his cells, burning off the garbage that was making him feel like crap. The rhythmic vibrations were soothing, so he took the world’s longest shower.

Hot water on demand was a blessing that no one who wasn’t immortal would ever appreciate. Two hundred years ago, he was lucky if he got a bath in a tub. Most of the time, the Primani settled for a scrub in a creek or a swim in a freezing lake, unless of course, they were working ops in Paris or another cultured city. The wealthy had bathtubs, sometimes. He smiled at a flash of memory. Mmm, Paris. He’d had a few girlfriends there. The last one died in 1777. Beautiful, pampered...blond and sweet, Justina. The youngest unmarried daughter of a fat, old count, she was left to her own devices more often than not. They’d met at a winter ball, of all things, and the chemistry was potent. At 23, *she* was potent. Tall, willowy, with lush breasts, she was stunning. She also had all of her teeth, which was a rare thing back then.

It had started out as a simple fling. She wouldn’t take no for an answer, and he didn’t really want to say no. Despite the work he was doing, he was able to squeeze in time to see her. Day visits turned to night visits faster than he could say ‘*ménage a trois*.’ Apparently, her bedroom was soundproofed, because they never got caught by her parents. He still wondered if they ever found her toy box.

Justina.

He’d never met any woman who had such a passion for sex, before or since. On their third ‘date,’ they were at a party when she suggested a visit to the stables. She had to see the horses.

After oohing and ahing over the horses for about, oh, ten minutes, she unlaced his breeches and gave Mr. Crowley the royal treatment. Twice.

On their fifth 'date,' she smuggled him into her bedroom via the servants' stairs and a secret passage in the wall. They'd laughed and kissed and drank wine until after midnight. As the clock struck 12:00, she gave him a sly grin and dragged a carved wooden chest out from a hidden cabinet in the wall. Grinning hugely, she popped it open and told him to take his pick. Judging by her cries of pleasure and the claw marks on his back, he'd chosen well.

The chemistry burned too hot to last though. He knew that now. Then? He was addicted to Justina and the joys of her box. More than once, Sean warned him that nothing good could come from seeing her. They couldn't get married, and the count would demand it if she got pregnant. He accused Sean of being jealous. Sean shrugged it off with a knowing look and let the matter drop. But it turned out he was right.

The girl might have seemed innocent on the outside, but she did things that rocked him to the core. Worse, she let him do things that should have terrified her. But she begged, demanded more, and he gave it. God help them both, he gave her whatever she asked for. On more than one dawn, he'd crawled home feeling as though she took his soul along with his seed. The last night they were together, she drugged him. In his stupid lust-crazed head, he thought that was a good plan. On one level, it was the best sex he'd ever, ever had. Hallucinations blew his mind while she blew his... Every cell in his body burned, no *exploded*, with even the lightest touch of her tongue. And God only knew she touched him with way more than her tongue.

They'd emptied her entire box.

The overwhelming physical sensations were downright evil, and he still twitched at the memory of that night. Sometimes evil could feel heavenly...

He'd woken up to find both Sean and Killian shaking their heads at the foot of the huge four-posted bed. As he'd yawned awake, he realized the bed curtains were ripped down, the pillows scattered across the room. He, himself, was lying spread-eagled across the bed, shaved clean.

He tried to sit up and hissed at a sudden prick of pain on his stomach. Killian nearly died laughing. All he could do was point. He followed Killian's finger and nearly stroked out. Oh, my God!

The brilliant hummingbird's beak was poised to suck nectar from his cock.

At least it would if it ever got erect enough to reach his stomach again... right now, it was curled into a fetal position searching for the warm nest of curlies that were long gone. At this point, Killian had collapsed against the side of the bed. Sean was torn between humor and sympathy. Having been busted in inappropriate beds a few times himself, he understood the draw of forbidden sex way more than Killian. The fact that he'd been caught with his dick in a sling just a few months earlier didn't stop him from laughing out loud. As Dec struggled to sit up, he realized he was tied to the bed. Even now, he could just imagine the look of shock on his face.

Sean had finally given in to the urge that was strangling him. "I tried to warn you."

He shifted so the shower spray hit his stomach and let the memory surface. Ah, good times. He had millions of memories inside his head. Most he shuffled to the back and never brought up to the light. You'd go mental if you tried to keep up with that many. All of them did that; it was how they kept sane after all these years. Justina though... Well, she had been some kind of woman. It had taken him a month of focused healing to get that tattoo to vanish. He had to admit, it was amazing work. The artist had been talented. The tiny bird wore a studded collar around its

delicate throat. He didn't know what that meant back then. Now? He was a little shocked. He didn't realize she wanted him to own her. He was up for kinky fun and games, but it never crossed his mind to take it to another level. Not that level, anyhow.

Probably just as well they never saw each other again. After Killian stopped laughing, he'd announced they were done in Paris. Time to move to America... wherever the hell that was...

A face full of cold water snapped him back to the present. Time to get his ass in gear. The past is the past. Justina's long dead, and he had more important things to do in this century. First thing on the agenda was following up on that pretty little accident victim. After all, he had saved her life. He should at least make sure she was still alive.

Rori. Her name was Rori. Pretty name. It meant 'brilliance' in his home country of Ireland. 'Brilliance' was a lot to live up to. Still, maybe it fit her. He'd have to judge that for himself. He ran the word around his head and finally said it out loud, "Rori Austin."

The instant the words ran off his tongue, an odd chill rolled across his skin. With a slight shiver, he opened his sight. A fleeting glimpse... an impression of something hovered out of his vision. Was it a shadow? A light? It was gone too fast to see. A sense of sorrow and pain lingered. Was she in trouble? There was something about her that tugged at him a little. He was always a sucker for a sad face, but this was... different somehow. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he was going to keep an eye on her. If nothing else, she was a diversion.

Rori closed her eyes and let the dream pull her under again. It was maddeningly close to the surface, the images skipping through her vision like an old black and white film. Again and again, she saw what she didn't want to see, what she would never remember. The dream's images were blurry, indistinct... the barest hint of reality. Flames licked at the edges, darkness lingered in the center. Framed against a gleaming arched window, the wings spread wide... the wings, the wings...

With a sharp cry, she jerked upright, heart in her throat, hand on her chest. Squeezing her eyes closed, she clung to the last rays of golden light that had appeared so suddenly in her vision.

The light was gone. Again.

Damn it!

Shoving her tangled hair away from her eyes, she squinted into the darkness of her room. Every day for three days, she'd had this same dream. It was making her crazy. Before her accident, she'd dreamed of the wings and the fire. But now there was a new element--the golden light. It invaded the darkness and chased the wings away. It radiated safety, escape, protection. Symbolic? Maybe. What did it mean? Shit. What did any of this mean? Most people dreamed random, disjointed images that were dredged up from their subconscious, their brains tidying up the loose ends of the day's work. She liked to think of it as the brain dumping the cookies and temp files it created after a long day of functioning. Kind of like a wicked powerful computer. *Most* people wouldn't find any significance in what they saw floating around inside their skulls at 2:00 in the morning. Huffing with frustration, she looked at the notepad and read her scribbled words.

What she wouldn't give to be like *most* people.

