

Extract from Archangel Protocol – Lyda Morehouse

Book 1 of the AngeLINK series

Chapter 1

My hairline itched where the dead receiver lay just under the skin. I reached up to caress the hard almond-shaped lump at my temple. Maybe if I squeezed just right, the implant would eke out some last drop of code, like a used tube of toothpaste. I stopped myself. Granted, since the excommunication, I no longer had to maintain the high standards of a decorated police officer, but you'd think I could retain at least some vestige of ladylike demeanor. The unconscious gesture made me look like a wire-junkie. My LINK access had been severed a year ago, but I tended to poke at it like a scab, especially when I was upset.

I picked up the note I found tacked to my office door again. Mrs. Rosenstone couldn't afford our barter anymore. She'd been using her access to the LINK to get my letters to the *New York Times* criticizing the presidential campaign published. In exchange, I did a little detective work into the death of her husband-she wanted more details than the "your husband died bravely" letter the government sent. Apparently, as of today, she decided the information wasn't worth the price. Her war-widow pension had mysteriously disappeared into the government's red tape for a second time in six months. Crumpling up her note, I tossed it in the garbage can. I could hardly blame the woman.

The office was as quiet as my empty head. Pools of light warmly mottled the hardwood floor despite the dirty windows and the layers of grime on the Venetian blinds. Dust motes sparkled, illuminated by the stripes of soft light. As my gaze followed the specks swirling through the air, all I could think of was that I really should clean this place more often, especially since I all but lived here.

The broom closet held several changes of clothes. The cubbyhole beneath the window, designed for data chip storage, overflowed with coffee cups, plastic forks, and sundry dishes. Along the far wall, a bookcase of mail slots stood. In places you could still see remnants of labels that once bore the names of former office workers. Now the mailboxes were crammed with bills and traffic tickets, most of them past due. I was a pack rat; I probably had a better archive than the Vatican, if less organized. The only things that lent any style to the office were the big oak desk and the frosted glass door with my name on it: DEIDRE MCMANUS, PRIVATE DETECTIVE.

Even after a year, it felt strange to be working alone, but Daniel was gone—and anyway, he would never have stooped to be a private eye, especially working for barter on the fringe. I snorted in contempt at my state. Solo, empty, alone: the story of my life.

It was a Saturday. I should be at home, but something about those block walls inhibited my thought processes. Maybe it was the way concrete muffled every sound, but whatever it was, I preferred to spend as little time in the apartment as possible. The sudden loss of steady income that the excommunication brought forced me into skyscraper living. Try as I might, I couldn't make that hole-in-the-wall feel like a home. Barring my bed, I moved everything I really valued to the office.

That was next. The rent for two places stretched an already tight pocketbook, and my supply of Christian Scientists in need of a private investigator was running dry. Despite their religious

convictions against getting LINKed, the Scientists were, at least, respectable clients. More importantly to me, they could pay in credits rather than barter. The government recognized their objection as legitimate because it was based on religious belief against surgery. As conscientious objectors, they were allowed official external hardware.

Anyone else not on the LINK was either a dissenter or couldn't afford the process. America, as my letters to the editor often lamented, was no longer the home of democracy. We were becoming, instead, a theocracy, and had been since the last Great War, twenty-one years ago. Science, which had brought an ugly end to the fighting by producing and detonating the Medusa bombs, and the secular humanism that spawned it, had fallen so far out of favor that it was now officially a crime not to be at least nominally part of an organized religion.

Dissenters, mostly secular humanists and atheists or people like me, who were forced out of a recognized religion, made up the bulk of my clientele. However, as dissenters, they didn't have a citizenship card-no card, no LINK; no LINK, no access to commerce; no commerce, no credits. Not even my shady landlord would take home-brew or other barter in lieu of real rent. It was credits or the street.

People had suggested I simply convert to another religion and have done with it. There had been several offers. Still, my Catholic guilt told me I deserved to be punished for what had happened between Daniel and me. Moreover, the Pope had made things more complicated when he excommunicated me. Legally, I was still a Catholic, just an excommunicated one. So, if I tried to officially join another religion, it would be like trying to marry a new husband without being divorced from a previous one-not even Mormon women got away with a stunt like that in this country.

I sighed, then tapped the space key and watched half-heartedly as the New York Times scrolled across the antique monitor propped on the edge of my desk.

"Not even a graphical interface anymore," I muttered, waiting for the next article to materialize on the screen. I skimmed another op-ed page article.

Once again, the reclusive presidential candidate, Reverend-Senator Etienne Letourneau, took a firm position against "liberal" (read: all but heathen) Rabbi-Senator Grey from New York. It took me two sentences to realize Letourneau's rant was an obvious ploy to put the fear of God into the opposition. This campaign was such a joke. If you believed in what the LINK angels had to say, and an overwhelming majority did, Reverend Letourneau embodied the Second Coming of Christ. In a theocracy, being God was a guaranteed winning platform.

I had my doubts, and not just since the excommunication. One of my main arguments all along against Letourneau was that a new messiah ought to have similar basic tenets as Christ. A recluse holed up in the mountains of Colorado surrounded by all the fresh air money could buy fell pretty damned short of my expectations. Honestly, I'd sort of been holding out for a woman messiah this time around—or, at the very least, not some nearly dead white guy.

My finger hovered over the reply key ready to fire off another letter to the editor, when I heard a loud rap of someone at the door.

"Later, Letourneau," I told the monitor, and hit save. "Door's open," I shouted, twisting the chair to step back into the leather pumps I'd kicked off earlier. I was still adjusting the heel when he let himself in.

"Detective McMannus?"

"Not anymore," I corrected, without looking up. "Door says private investigator."

With the shoe finally in place, I swiveled the chair. Something between a gasp and a hiss came out of my mouth.

Granted, masculine beauty has always been a weakness of mine, but this man literally took my breath away. Olive-skinned, tall, broad-shouldered, slender-waisted—he looked like he might have been sculpted from marble. Unfortunately, this David remembered to dress himself this morning. His fashion sense leaned toward urban combat. Leather jacket and dusty-blue jeans hugged his muscular frame. He looked like a warrior sheathed in casual armor.

As I traced the line of his throat up to his face, a smile captured my lips—a girl could cut herself on the angle of that jaw. His dark, curly locks were shorn above the ears in a martial style; gray eyes flashed from under strong, dark swatches of eyebrows.

"Are you Deidre McMannus?" He asked again, irritation marring his godlike brow.

"I am," I said, remembering to stand up and offer him a hand. Smoothing out the wrinkles in my blouse, I turned on my most charming smile. "And who might you be?"

He took my hand and I wasn't disappointed by the firmness of his grasp. "Lieutenant Michael Angelucci, Tenth Precinct."

"Oh. A cop." I dropped his handshake and turned my back to him. Not only a cop, but an angel freak. Since the appearance of the LINK-angels several months ago, thousands of converts changed their given names or surnames to include some form of the word "angel." More than half my client list was named Angelica or Angelo.

I sighed and sat back down. "Sorry, Mike, but I already bought tickets to the charity ball, so I don't think there's any more I can do for you."

Such a shame, I thought, allowing myself one last look at the way the stripes of sunlight fell across his chest. I should've figured him for a cop. My earlier assessment of his manly charms neglected to include the slight bulge of the standard-issue Glock tucked into the shoulder holster. With a clearer eye, I ticked off the other dead giveaways. The way he stood, all ready for action, held a certain flat-footedness that I should've picked up before. The biggest clue was the dumbstruck expression on his face. That said cop all over it.

Pressing the space bar, I retrieved the article I'd saved from the Times. I feigned an overwhelming interest in the screen, and added, "You boys should know I don't involve myself with police work anymore."

Michael eased his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He stood there, as if to tell me he had no plans of moving anytime soon.

Waving a hand in the air, I shooed him out of the office. "Come on, Officer, you managed to find the door once."

He glanced at the door, then swung his handsome face back in my direction. A lesser woman might've swooned, but I just tightened my smile. I gave up on the Times with a sigh. "Let me guess this time is different: it's a matter of life or death."

"Actually..." Michael sauntered over to my desk and propped himself up on the edge. "It's more serious than that."

I laughed. Leaning forward onto my elbows, I rested my head on my hands. "What could be more serious than life or death?"

"Some things have eternal consequences." He smiled slightly, turning up the very edges of his mouth. The effect on his face was stunning. His eyes widened just enough to smooth the crease from the middle of his brow. Michelangelo eat your heart out.

"Some things do," I managed to say. "But I'm not running a church. You look like the football and Bible type. Why don't you try the Promise Keepers Church down the road? It's a drive-through."

"What they're selling can't help me."

I looked back at his face, trying to judge by his expression how he meant that. The tone sounded almost mocking, but his mouth turned down, and his eyes were serious.

"Yeah? But I can, eh?" I gave him a tired smile, "I have to warn you, I don't have any plastic figurines or Bible scorecards to offer."

"I'll have to make do," he said. Michael took my words as an invitation to stay and settled himself more securely on top of the scattered snail-news clippings and other clutter of my desk. His knee grazed the edge of a pewter picture frame. The back-prop folded and began to tip over, but Michael reached out to rescue it. He turned the frame over in his hands and glanced down at the photo. Something in the picture caught his attention, and his eyes flicked over it as if searching for some clue.

I leaned back in my swivel chair to observe him. The springs of the chair creaked noisily. He showed me the photo, "Family?"

"Yeah," I admitted, wary of the direction this conversation was going. My personal life was off-limits. Still, I'd give him the benefit of the doubt. "My brother, the priest."

As he set the frame down near its original spot, his deep-set eyes searched out mine. I didn't like the intimacy of his gaze, so I found myself bristling and talking without thinking.

"So, what are you implying? My brother's a problem?" I scoffed. "Mike, I have it on good authority that Eion's nearly a saint."

"What? No, no, not at all. I was just... hmm-mmmmm." He paused, as if searching for the right words. Absently, Michael pushed at the glossy cover of the dog-eared paperback novel I'd been reading. His finger traced the edge of the design, skirting the hem of the heroine's ripped bodice. Slowly, along the embossed folds of the dress, his fingertip moved toward her bosom. Grabbing the book out from under his touch, I slapped the cover facedown on the desk, surprising both of us.

When he raised his eyes, I gaped at him mutely. I couldn't explain why I'd reacted that way. The feeling was silly, and I was losing control of this conversation. So, I grabbed the novel and tossed it

into the bottom drawer of my desk. I kicked it shut with the toe of my shoe. "Bad habit." I shrugged. Michael lowered his eyes. That slight smile turned up the corners of his mouth again. "Tell me something, McMannus. Are you still Catholic?"

"Does the Pope shit in the woods?" I fired back.

His gray eyes flashed up at my words, pinning me under a harsh glare. Determined to stay on top of the pecking order we seemed to be establishing, I stared back just as hard.

"So what does my faith have to do with anything?" I asked. "What? Are you one of the New Christian Righters out proselytizing for Letourneau? I always figured the force was crawling with Letourneau's minions. Listen, Officer, I have less than no time for you if..."

"I'm not," he cut me off. "Though in a way, it's Letourneau that brought me here."

"Well, if he's involved, I'm not," I bristled. "The good senator has caused me enough trouble."

"I know he has," Michael said quietly. He stood up, careful not to disturb the photo. Michael moved over to the window and looked out between the dusty blinds. He pushed the slats down with a finger. He had to be thinking hard about something, because the only view out my window was the unimpressive back alley of an abandoned Western Union. Truth was, most things were empty and derelict on this level, my office being one of the few exceptions.

"If not one of Letourneau's lackeys, then what are you?" I asked Michael's back.

"Just a messenger," he said absently, still watching the alley.

"Oh yeah? Well then, what's your message?"

"It's not for you," he said in a low voice. Michael squinted as though tracking the movement of someone outside. Pointing out the window and down toward the street level, he asked; "Is that man often there?"

"Who? A scruffy-looking soapbox preacher?" I asked. When Michael nodded, I checked my watch. Sure enough, the time read quarter to four. "Like clockwork. He's the only other guy besides me who works on a Saturday afternoon, I swear."

"Damn," Michael said through clenched teeth. Though he'd whispered, the curse cut through the still office air like a knife.

"Is that why you're here? The preacher? I can attest he's pretty harmless." Uncomfortable with the silence that had settled in the room, I asked, "So, if your message isn't for me, who is it for?"

"Why does he come to your office window? He's not going to get much of a crowd back there." Hooking his thumb toward the street, Michael turned toward me.

"He doesn't want a crowd. He wants me. When the window is open, I can hear him harping about heretics and all that. He wants to save me, I think." I shrugged. "Nice thought, but it gets old, you know?"

Michael smiled.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and let out a long breath. "Even though his rants sometimes irritate the piss out of me, I'm grateful for his persistence. At least someone thinks I'm worth saving."

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"You ever use that receiver in your head?" I asked him, tapping the hard, dead pellet at my temple meaningfully. I smiled to take the sting out of my tone.

"Martyrs and saints are rarely understood in their own time."

I sputtered out something between a choke and a laugh. "You're joking."

Michael shrugged and turned back toward the window. "Eternal consequences," he repeated.

I gave in to a chuckle I'd been trying to hold back. "Oh, I get it now. This is some kind of sales pitch. Cop salary is still that bad, that you have to work door-to-door for some shady 'indulgence' company, eh?"

He turned back to give me a patient smile. "No, but I am here on personal business. Listen, I'm willing to barter."

Barter." I sighed. "Just what I need."

I shook my head and walked back behind my desk. I'd been excited at the prospect of a live client, but at the mention of the word "barter" the ache returned to my temple. I bit my lip to keep from scratching at the receiver.

"Maybe you can't afford me," I told him. "I only work for credits," I added to the lie with a flourish. "And, I mean Christendom credits, not the local variety Free State crap."

He looked around at my shabby office. "I think you might be interested in my barter."

"Oh yeah?" I sneered back, offended that my desperate straits were so blatantly obvious that he didn't even pretend to believe my lie.

"I can offer you the LINK."

I suddenly forgot how to breathe. Then, the insanity of his offer pushed a stream of words out of my mouth in a rush. "Impossible. No bio-hack in the world could bypass the meltdown trigger, and, if you're talking external mode, I'd be just as toasted. The feedback loop alone would kill me." As an afterthought, I added, "Not to mention the fact that it would be totally illegal."

"But if I could do it...?" Michael's eyes twinkled.

"You'd be a god and I'd be your slave." I coughed out a laugh and dropped into the chair. I twirled a mouse-pen through my fingers. "But, you can just keep dreaming, big guy. You might as well offer me the moon."

"That would be a bit tougher," he admitted with a smile, but his tone was serious.

Michael's eyes still held that "I've got a secret" look, and my disbelief eroded. I dropped the pen and my flippant attitude. "You're serious."

"I am."

"Christ," I breathed, my mind reeling.

"It would be worth a lot to you, wouldn't it?" Michael asked quietly.

"You have no idea," I said. My voice sounded like sandpaper. The desperation in it reminded me of the urgent whine of the wire-junkies begging for access on Forty-second Street. I had to try to pull myself together; otherwise, this guy would think he could walk all over me. More than that, I hadn't seen the goods yet. I cleared my throat. "Presuming you can perform this little miracle, what exactly are you expecting in exchange?"

"A LINK-hack." Michael's eyes watched my face.

I looked over his shoulder to where the certificate of merit hung on the wall. I'd gotten that honor for successfully collaring a wire-wizard named Weasel, who was terrorizing the LINK. Michael was asking me to become what I used to hunt when I was on the Tech Vice Squad. He was asking me to break the law.

"Is that all?" I gave a relieved laugh. "Hell, I could do that in my sleep. What do you want, Officer? Access to the department's slush fund? A peek at an Internal Affairs file? What?"

I tried, unsuccessfully, to keep my tone light. My finger stroked the lump of the receiver.

He scratched the short hairs at the back of his neck. "I want you to help me bring down the LINK-angels and expose Letourneau as a false prophet, a pretender."

His face scrunched up, as though preparing for a bad reaction.

I gave it to him. "What? Are you insane?"

"You heard me."

"The LINK-angels, fake? That's not possible," I told him flatly.

He nodded. I stared at him incredulously. The LINK-angels were a bona fide miracle. It wasn't just that they looked like angels. After all, anyone could assume any type of avatar out on the LINK. The thing that made LINK-angels different is they broadcast emotions, feelings. As a former tech-cop, I knew sending emotions via electrons was as unlikely an alchemist's attempt to turn lead to gold. The equipment needed would fill more than just one person's head. The human mind was still enough of a mystery that even if we had the technology to link to the emotional centers, sending something coherent was another matter. All that either party would most likely receive was a garbled jumble of images, sound and smell—as the bard might say, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Thus, all of the experts had agreed, secular and religious, what the LINK-angels did, no human could duplicate. The LINK-angels were what they claimed to be—a sign from God.

"Some people might say what you're suggesting is heresy," I told Michael.

"That's why I need you. You're already excommunicated. The Pope can't threaten you." Michael leaned against the windowpane and gave me a hard stare. "Besides, if Letourneau isn't the Second Coming, it's hardly heresy. Some might even consider a hack like that God's work. Anyway, why do you care so much about heresy?"

"I care. All right? I happen to care a lot. Despite what people say about me on the LINK, I don't take this sentence lightly. I lost my job." My fingers stroked the implant with an almost feverish desperation. "More than that, I lost a friend."

"Right... Daniel."

I wasn't surprised that Michael knew about my personal history. I had a fan-run site somewhere on the LINK, where people kept track of all my comings and goings. I was surprised at how much hearing that name out loud hurt.

"I apologize," Michael said. He dropped his gaze and stared at his chest.

"Forget about it." I shrugged. With some effort, I halted the rhythmical rubbing. To give my hands something else to do, I shuffled through the clippings and printouts on my desk. I couldn't look at Michael as I continued, "The LINK-angels are more untouchable than the Mafia, and they've picked Letourneau. The election is sewn up and people are roasting 'heretics' wherever they find them. A person can't even get a dissenting opinion printed in the Times, these days without retribution." Thinking of Mrs. Rosenstone, I frowned and gestured at my monitor to empathize my point. "No. I'm truly sorry for whatever's happening to you or to whomever you represent, but count me out. I tried to go up against the New Right before and I lost... lost a lot more than I was willing to sacrifice."

"I'm certain Daniel's soul is clean," I heard him whisper.

Something in his voice made me search out his eyes. "Clean?" I repeated, "Clean of what?"

"Sin," he said simply.

I shook my head slowly. "I wish I could be so certain, big guy."

"So do I." His voice sounded heavy with defeat. Boots scuffed against the floor, as he turned to leave. "If you reconsider, my offer still stands."

I didn't look up from the clutter on my desk. In my attempt to straighten up the mess, I'd unearthed the article about Danny's trial. Damn filing system. Between my trembling fingers read the headline: "COP CONVICTED IN POPE'S MURDER." Despite everything, I should never have turned him in like that—never, I thought desperately.

"For him then," came Michael's voice at the door, startling me.

"What?" I quickly shoved the article facedown under a coffee cup. I couldn't stand the sight of Danny's accusing face. "What did you say?"

"If not for me, then take my case for him. It would clear your conscience."

"What makes you think it's my conscience that needs clearing?"

"Daniel is an innocent man."

"Everyone saw him shoot the Pope, Michael. Daniel's guilty. That case was closed a year ago. I want to leave it behind me."

"But can you?" Michael's eyes held me tightly, and my breathing became shallow.

My smile froze, and the room seemed suddenly smaller. Michael's eyes, with their molten passion, felt only inches away. I took in a deep breath to steady myself. I closed my eyes, not letting Michael's gaze drag me deeper into something I didn't want to do. 'I'm not the hero you're looking for. I can't fight anymore. I'm spent.'

Michael's hand gripped the doorknob. He looked out into the hallway. "Just consider my offer, would you?"

"I'm not taking your case, not for any price." It was a lie, but it was what a smart woman would say. After all, I knew nothing about Michael. This whole offer to reconnect me to the LINK could be some elaborate sting to try to entrap me into doing something really stupid. I looked up into Michael's eyes, which still watched me from the door. I wanted to trust those calm, gray eyes, but I shook my head.

When he turned to leave, I knew my false bravado didn't really matter. For all intents and purposes, I was already on the case. I had to find out more about Michael and why he wanted the LINK-angels discredited. I had to know what he knew about Daniel. I'd take this job; I had to.

Excerpt from the *NY Times*, April 2075

COP KILLS POPE

Daniel Fitzpatrick, 33, of the New York Police Department was arrested today in connection with the shooting of Pope Innocent the XIV.

Ironically, Detective Fitzpatrick had volunteered to serve as crowd protection along the Pope's parade route. Witnesses on the scene reported that when the Pope's parade came through the pedestrian tunnel on the 50th level Broadway, Fitzpatrick moved in closely to calmly address one of the Swiss Guard, then pulled out his service pistol and shot the Pope dead. Fitzpatrick was wrestled to the ground immediately and taken into custody, [hot-link here for video and/or virtual reality replay]

The Swiss Guard who was approached by Fitzpatrick said, "I feel completely responsible, but I was fooled by the uniform. The police are supposed to be the good guys, right?" When asked what Fitzpatrick had said to the Guard, he replied, "Nothing, really. He was pointing out Muslim troublemakers in the crowd. We took him seriously, but I guess it was meant as a distraction."

However, police confirmed that Muslim extremists were spotted in the crowd. According to sources on the scene, the police had, indeed, requested via LINK that Fitzpatrick verbally inform the Swiss Guard of the possible danger, since, due to tradition, the Guard is not LINKed.

Police are suggesting that perhaps Fitzpatrick took advantage of a sudden possibility to get close to the Pope, and that the murder, in fact, was not premeditated.

Yet, according to inside sources, Fitzpatrick had been acting strangely before today's events. "If you ask me," said an undisclosed source, "It was only a matter of time. He was a Protestant, you know. He was always going on about what would happen if the President made an alliance with Christendom." Though characterized by many as easygoing, inside sources said Fitzpatrick had been

having angry outbursts. One report said, though no formal charges were made, Fitzpatrick might have attempted sexual assault on his partner mere days before shooting the Pope.

Rabbi-Mayor Klien demanded to know why the police officers assigned to the Pope's parade route had not been tested psychologically. To this accusation, Captain Allaire Morgan of the 10th precinct had no comment. The FBI has been called in to investigate this incident.

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