



Chapter One

Rogue Angel

Remi

“Oh, you think you can keep me out? Not today.” My fingers danced over my keyboard. It glowed, each keystroke near soundless. I’d paid a small fortune for the keyboard and laptop.

They were my babies.

I’d already mapped the target system. Their cybersecurity was good, but not great. I knew I had tripped some alarm, so they were aware I was poking around.

“But no one can stop the Rogue Angel.” With a smile, I stared at the glowing screen, analyzing the code. I tapped in a command.

Woot. I was in.

I wiggled my butt in my chair. *Time to finish this.*

I zoomed through the system, found the file I needed, and made a copy.

Time to go.

I left my signature image behind—glowing, blue angel wings made of computer code.

Smiling, I sat back and flexed my hands. Then I polished my nails on my shirt, and blew on them. I was a hacker, so I kept my nails short and neat, but I loved painting them. They were currently bright, eye-searing yellow.

Next, I opened up a new window and made a call.

My boss appeared on-screen.

I took a second to appreciate the view—Killian Hawke deserved a second or two of appreciation.

The man always made me think of a sharp blade, honed to precision. He was lean, had a hawkish face, black hair, black eyes. Those eyes were sharp and missed nothing. He wore a black suit even though it was Sunday—I'd never seen him in anything else. Even across the computer screen, he radiated a predatory danger that made my hindbrain sit very, very still.

“Done,” I said. “Check your inbox.”

The head of Sentinel Security glanced to his left, then nodded.

“Well done, Remi. Impressive, as always.”

Damn, the man had the sexiest voice. Like warm, melted chocolate with a dash of spice. It totally didn't go with the sleek, dangerous persona.

“Our client will be very happy,” Killian said.

“Happy that I hacked them?”

“Happy they know their vulnerabilities, and how Sentinel Security can help plug them.”

And pay Killian a bazillion dollars for his trouble.

Sentinel did all kinds of security. I knew Killian had a private army of ex-military badasses,

but he also specialized in cybersecurity. I'd been working for Sentinel for several years.

Companies hired me to test their systems and improve their security. It was a sweet deal. I used my special skills, and got a paycheck at the end of each month.

"I'll email you your next job, Remi." The faintest tilt of Killian's lips. "Or should I say, Rogue Angel?"

I grinned. "Bye, Bossman."

I ended the chat, closed my laptop, then glanced at my watch. The kids would be home from school soon, and my stomach rumbled. Mmm, I could do with some of Mama's cookies.

I strode across my loft space. It wasn't big, but it was mine. It had an industrial vibe, with my bed in one corner, shrouded by gauzy curtains. A tiny kitchenette that I barely used sat in one corner, a doorway led into my compact bathroom, and an open-plan living area where my desk took prime position against the far wall.

My gaze snagged on a picture above the desk.

I got a little shiver every time I saw it. It was of an angel warrior, coming in to land on the battlefield. I had a thing for angels. His huge, white wings were outspread, sword in hand, boots about to touch the ground. His body was mostly in shadow, but that didn't hide the power of his musculature, or the hint of a rugged face.

Wrinkling my nose, I sighed. I wished they made men like that in real life.

I headed down the stairs, my boots thumping on the metal treads.

Noise assaulted me. There was some tool whirring close by, and I also got a hit of grease, gas, and exhaust.

My loft was above my foster brother's auto shop. At the bottom of the stairs, I swiveled and saw three cars in various states of repair—one parked with the hood open, one hooked up to

some machine, and another one up on the hoist, with a mechanic underneath.

I recognized Steve's lean body, and baggy, grimy jeans. He was busy, and the guy that worked for him was away on vacation, so I guess that was why he was working on a Sunday. I headed out the open front doors.

Brr. It was a cold, gloomy day in Brooklyn. I wrapped my arms around myself. I should've grabbed my jacket, but thankfully I wasn't going far.

I went next door to the two-story, brick house and opened the gate. The metal screeched.

The house had a downstairs basement apartment, where Steve lived with his four-year-old daughter, Kaylee. I jogged up the steps to the main house and opened the door.

"Hello!"

"We're back here," a female voice said.

I found Mama Alma in the kitchen. Of course, where else would she be? Kaylee was on the floor having a tea party with her dolls and bears.

"Remi!" The little blonde princess leaped up and ran at me. I caught her, and she wrapped her arms and legs around me. I breathed in her apple-scented shampoo.

"Hey, KayKay. You being good for Mama?"

Kaylee smiled and nodded. Then she wriggled and I let her down to return to her tea party guests.

Mama smiled, and I walked over to press a kiss to her dark, papery cheek.

She smelled like home. For the first eight years of my life, I hadn't known what that word meant. Then angels had smiled on me, and sent an angry little girl to this foster home run by Mama.

She'd owned this house in Sunset Park, Brooklyn for years. The small warehouse next door

had been her husband's. Unable to have kids of their own, they'd become foster parents. Big Mike died the year before I'd arrived, but Alma hadn't stopped opening her home.

And some of us hadn't really left. I'd be twenty-seven on my next birthday, and I hadn't gone far. Steve had been one of Mama's first foster kids. Kaylee was Steve's daughter, but Mama still had three kids with her—two boys, aged nine and ten, and a teenaged girl.

"I'll pour us some tea," Mama said.

I dropped into the chair at the rickety table. The kitchen hadn't changed in decades. "I'd prefer a shot of bourbon to celebrate. I just finished a job."

Mama made a sound in her throat. "No bourbon in this house."

I snatched a cookie off the plate on the table. *Mmm*. Choc-chip, my favorite.

She set a teacup in front of me. Mama loved collecting flowery, delicate cups from flea markets. None of them matched.

Like my family, Mama always told me.

As I finished my cookie, I studied Mama—she looked tired, and her face was drawn. I frowned. Mama always said that she was a mix of the best—African-American, a dash of Hispanic, and some hardy Irish stock.

I think that's why I'd liked her on sight—I was a mix, too. Mostly Hispanic, although I had no idea who my parents were. I probably had an African-American ancestor somewhere in the tree as well, and some other things—who knew what—dashed in.

Mama had beautiful, dark-brown skin, and tightly coiled, black hair. She was also two inches taller than me.

I sighed and sipped my tea. I was curvy and petite, aka short, at five feet—okay, *almost* five feet. And I had hips, a butt, and boobs. My dark-brown hair got a few golden streaks in the

summer, more so if I actually made it out in the sun.

“You okay, Mama?”

“Fine, child, fine.” She didn’t meet my gaze.

My heart sank. She was lying. Mama never lied. Sometimes she chose not to answer, but she never lied.

“Mama?” I pressed my hand to hers. *When had it gotten so frail?*

She looked away, down at Kaylee. That’s when I noticed the paperwork on the table.

I grabbed it.

“Remina, no—”

I scanned it. It was a letter from a doctor. I saw the words and my chest locked.

Looking up at the woman who’d been my mother, father, friend, and savior, I shook my head.

“Brain tumor?” My words were a harsh whisper.

Mama pressed her lips together and nodded.

No. *No*. Mama was the glue in our little world. I looked at Kaylee, swallowed, then met Mama’s dark gaze.

“So, what’s the treatment? Chemo?” My stomach lurched at the thought, but whatever we had to do to get her well, we’d do it.

“It’s...” Mama cleared her throat. “The doctor said chemo won’t help.”

“What?” Panic was slick and ugly in my throat. “So, what, then?”

“Nothing, my child.”

Nothing. I looked at the letter blankly and saw what it said. “Six months?”

Mama shifted in her chair, her eyes covered with a sheen of tears. “No one can say for sure. The Lord always has a plan.”

“Screw that.” I stood up and saw Kaylee jerk in surprise. “Sorry, Kaylee.” I snatched up another sheet of paper, and Mama tried to grab it. I sucked in a breath. “There’s an operation.”

Mama straightened. “It’s experimental, Remi. There’s no guarantee it would work.” A pause. “And it’s very expensive.”

I looked down. When I saw the dollar amount, it felt like my feet had fallen through the floor. I gripped the edge of the table.

“Mama—”

The front door slammed, followed by the sound of running feet and young voices.

“Mama! We’re home from the park.”

Two boys raced in, dumping their backpacks on the floor. Charlie, who had a sturdy body, a mop of red hair, and freckles. Jamal followed one step behind. He was skinny, dark-skinned, and had a shy smile. The two were thick as thieves.

“Charlie. Jami,” Kaylee called.

The boys hugged Mama, me, then Kaylee.

Naomi came in at a slower pace. At fifteen, she was too old to run and play like the kids, and she was surgically attached to her phone. She did well at school, stayed out of trouble, and loved to cook and bake.

“Mama, I’m making cookies,” Naomi said.

“I already did, child.”

“I see Remi’s been into them. We’ll need more.”

I poked my tongue out. Naomi was five foot seven—all the height that I’d once dreamed about.

“I have to run.” I hugged Mama, a little harder than usual. “We’ll talk later. Everything will

be okay.”

“I love you, Remi Solano.”

“I love you, too.” I fought to keep my shit together and headed back to my loft. I managed to avoid Steve.

Dropping into my desk chair, I sat in front of my laptop, staring blankly at the wall. I thought of the kids, Steve and Kaylee, me.

We couldn't lose Mama.

It was so unfair. My face twisted. She'd given *so* much. Was so loving and selfless. I wanted to scream, or throw something.

Without stopping to think, I opened my laptop. I tapped quickly, heading into a dark part of the Web.

I was a white-hat hacker. I legally hacked to test client systems. White hats were usually employed by the government or security companies.

Okay, I was a white-hat hacker with a dash of gray. Gray hats had no agenda, and hacked for fun.

Black-hat hackers on the other hand...

My stomach coiled. I left a note on a black-hat message board.

Rogue Angel available.

I couldn't let Mama die.

Mav

Maverick Rivera finished tying his bowtie and shrugged into his tuxedo jacket.

He headed for the door, sending one last glance at the naked woman lying facedown in the bed, sound asleep.

He didn't leave his number. He never did. He'd met her in the bar downstairs. He only hooked up with women who wanted exactly what he did—a few hours of no-strings attached sex.

Heading out of the hotel room, he made his way down to the ballroom.

He scowled at the din of the crowd.

Another damn party to go to.

This shindig was for some veterans' charity his friend Liam supported. Mav would prefer to be home with a glass of scotch, or in his lab. Still, as his friends liked to remind him, he had to be social sometimes, and at least this one was for a good cause.

He stepped into the ballroom. It looked like half of New York society was here.

The room was bathed in golden light. Huge, gold candelabras adorned the circular tables.

Outside, snow was falling. He scanned the space, looking for his two best friends. Usually, the three of them would sample the scotch, make a donation, and avoid the society mamas out to marry their daughters off to billionaires.

But things had changed recently.

His gut clenched, and he nabbed a server to order a scotch on the rocks. "Macallan, if you have it."

The man nodded. "Right away, sir."

When Mav turned back, he spotted Zane on the dance floor. The King of Wall Street was smiling down at the woman he held tight in his arms. Monroe wore a long, silver dress that sparkled, her long, black hair loose over her shoulders.

Mav had met Zane Roth and Liam Kensington at college. They'd all become friends, brothers. Each of them had gone on to make their fortunes: Zane in finance, Liam in property and development, and Mav in tech.

Unfortunately, that also painted targets on their backs.

Another couple whizzed past, laughing with Zane and Monroe.

Liam had some smooth moves on the dance floor. He came from money—he could dance, hobnob with perfect manners, and wore a tux like he'd been born in one.

He held his new girlfriend, and the love of his life, tucked against him. Aspen's platinum-blonde hair was up tonight, leaving her shoulders bare. She wore a column of black that hugged her athletic body, and flared out at her knees. Liam's tailor was having a grand time dressing the woman.

Yeah, the billionaire bachelors of New York were no more. There was only him now, and he'd never get married.

"Your drink, sir."

He lifted his chin at the server, and accepted his drink.

Mav had long-ago learned that trusting a woman was a fool's game. They wanted all kinds of things, but mostly they wanted money.

He glanced at his friends and their women. He'd had his doubts about Monroe and Aspen at first—but it hadn't taken him long to like them. And what they brought to his friends.

The couples were in love. Mav sipped his scotch again, grudgingly admitting that they were

the exception that proved the rule.

Love was for idiots.

He had Hannah to thank for that lesson.

His final year of college, he'd met a smart, pretty, girl-next-door. She'd been blonde, blue-eyed, tall and slim. She'd fallen for him, and he'd fallen for her. In truth, she'd fallen for his first billion dollars.

He'd just sold his first invention—a new computer chip. Money had been about to come pouring in, and there'd been articles about him.

He'd never suspected Hannah wasn't the real deal. That pretty face, the earnest smile, the good sex. Fuck, he'd bought her flowers. He tossed back the rest of his drink.

Ancient fucking history.

He should be thanking Hannah. She'd taught him a valuable lesson.

"Mav." The dark-haired Zane appeared and slapped Mav's back. Monroe leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"Hey," Mav said.

"The great man emerges from his Batcave," a female voice drawled.

He shot Aspen a scowl, and the private investigator just smiled. Liam kept an arm around her and reached out to shake Mav's hand.

They were both healing up well after being trapped in a burning warehouse. Liam and Aspen had been embroiled in some trouble recently.

"Hey, any luck stopping those hacks on Rivera Tech?" Liam asked.

Last week, the system at Rivera Tech had been hammered by a string of hacking attempts. It lasted for a few days, and kept Mav and his team busy. Then it had stopped.

The hackers had either given up, or they'd hired someone better.

"They stopped. I've been busy increasing system security since then," Mav said. "How are things with you?"

"Well, Aspen's sisters text me at least twice a day, giddy about having her apartment to themselves," Liam said.

Aspen snagged a glass of champagne from a server. "Hey, I have a multi-million-dollar penthouse to call home now. I'm not complaining. I do miss Mrs. Kerber, though. My old neighbor. I've asked Juno and Briar to help her if her bird, Skittles, escapes again."

And there it was. Aspen was good, down to her bones.

"And," Liam said. "My personal PI managed to track down the girls in the photographs with my father." The man's lip curled.

Mav's fingers tightened on his glass. Liam hated his father. The elder Kensington was an asshole with a predilection for underage, teenage girls. That, mixed in with some white-collar criminals and a blackmail attempt, was how Aspen and Liam had met.

Aspen leaned into her man. "One of the girls has agreed to press charges."

Liam's smile was grim. "My father will finally pay for his crimes."

Mav lifted his glass. "I'll drink to that."

"Well, my billionaire boyfriend is driving me *nuts*," Monroe declared, in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood.

Zane rolled his eyes.

Mav raised a brow. "He can be pretty annoying at times."

Now Zane shot Mav a narrow look.

"He wants to invest in Lady Locksmith and help me expand the stores," Monroe said.

Aspen swiveled. “And that’s a bad thing?”

Liam nodded. “Sounds like a good investment, to me.”

Monroe, daughter of a career thief, ran a locksmith shop, specializing in providing female locksmiths to the women of New York. She was also a pro at cracking a safe, which was how she’d met Zane—when she’d cracked his.

“I know, but it’s mine.” Monroe’s nose wrinkled. “He owns the rest of New York.”

Zane tugged her close. “I just want you happy.”

She cupped his cheek. “I am happy.”

Mav had to look away. The song changed.

“Oh, I *love* this one,” Monroe said. “Come on. We’re dancing.”

Liam groaned. “Chandler here has two left feet.”

His woman elbowed him. “You were warned.”

“But for the chance to hold you in my arms, darling, it’s worth the pain.”

The couples headed off and Mav felt... It sure as hell wasn’t envy. *Relief*. Yeah, he was too smart to get tangled up with that.

“Maverick Rivera,” a voice drawled.

He turned and hid a grimace. *Oh, no*.

Mrs. Randolph, one of New York’s most prominent socialites, bore down on him.

“I want to introduce you to my *lovely* daughter.” The woman tilted her coiffed head.

Mav saw the tall, slim blonde nearby. She smiled coyly at him.

“No,” he growled.

Mrs. Randolph missed a step and blinked. She probably didn’t hear that word often. “Well, I think there’s no harm in—”

“No.” Mav held up his empty glass. “I need a drink. Have a nice evening.”

He headed to the bar.

Yeah, Hannah had taught him a lesson, and his heart was too scarred to ever let anyone in again.

He loved his family.

He loved Zane and Liam, and now their women.

But Mav was never, ever falling in love again.

He leaned against the bar. “Scotch. A double.”