

REDEMPTION

BOOK ONE OF THE SPADES TRILOGY



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Chapter One

It wasn't actually the high-pitched, hysterical shrieking that woke Asher Maddox. It was the air. He knew right away that something was wrong because the air around him felt far too icy and sterile. Drowsily, since he was just waking up from a deep sleep, it dawned on Ash that it was much colder than he remembered; he usually preferred the cold, but not quite this sharp. That, and the smell. It smelled like the first night he slept in a dorm in college, many months and a lifetime ago. The brief sensory input of too-clean air, combined with the off-putting chill, was just enough to stir Ash's sleep-addled mind. He was blinking slowly when the screaming started.

Ash bolted upright in his bed. No, cot. A hotel-type cot. The screaming emanated from across the room, where a copper-skinned girl was shrieking at a pitch so sharp and high it sounded like the noise was coming from a wounded animal, rather than a person. Ash's eyes started to focus as the girl brought her hands to her mouth, as if trying to summon the courage to stuff her cries back into her larynx. Light spilled from a hallway on Ash's right. It cast a pale glow over the rest of the room, barely illuminating the girl's wide-open eyes.

It was with that dim illumination that Ash found his second shock of the past thirty seconds.

Two rows of cots lined the area. A quick look to his left and right revealed bodies of various shapes and sizes, all in various stages of awareness, and like Ash, various stages of shock.

Ash had definitely not gone to sleep in this room last night. He had gone to sleep in his own bed, in his room at home, hoping that when he woke up in the morning, he would be able to push through yet another day.

A second girl let out a high-pitched shriek, resonating with terror. A third voice, this one male, joined the growing chorus. Ash blinked a couple of times, trying to shake himself out of his bizarre nightmare, but he only succeeded in waking up further. That was fine; he needed to be awake.

Somewhere in Ash's head, the engine behind his brain turned over and started to function. *Okay. This is . . . very bad. But someone needs to do something here. Where the hell am I?*

Other people were starting to move. A glance in the dim light revealed ten beds in each row, for a total of twenty. In the far-left corner, a short young man around Ash's age swung his legs over his bed and rapidly scanned the room, his eyes tight and his fists balled. He looked more angry than afraid, and Ash felt his breath catch in his throat when he realized that the young man's name was shimmering off his shirt: "Anton" glowed in a garish neon yellow.

Two beds down from him was the original screamer, whose blanket had fallen to reveal her name shining as well: Exodus. Another girl looked like fear of embarrassment was the only thing that kept her from joining her neighbor in expressing her terror, this one apparently named Miranda. A blond girl with curly hair framing a small, fair-skinned face – Echo, Ash saw as he squinted into the distance – had a hand on the shoulder of a crying boy, and appeared to be trying to talk to him.

Ash looked to his immediate left, where a tall, dark-skinned girl was propped up on her elbows, looking completely confused. She made eye contact with Ash and lowered her eyes, her mouth forming a silent "O" of shock as she focused on his name. Mirroring her stare, Ash found the girl's name: Blondell. Eyes moving upward, they stared at each other for a heartbeat before the girl raised her eyebrows as if to say, *Well, what's this?*

Ash smiled for a millisecond before noticing a pale girl with raven hair and a million freckles, her eyes wide with concern, but not fear. She turned back to Ash, clearly disoriented, then scanned the room for some clue about what to do next.

The lack of helplessness shown by the two women were all Ash needed.

"Hey!" he shouted. To his own disbelief, that actually shut the room up. The panicked cries stopped on a dime and faces turned to him expectantly. It was not what Ash anticipated, and his mind stumbled for something to say that would make it sound like he knew what he was doing. "Anyone know how we got here?"

A chorus of shaking heads from the assembled mass.

“Anyone know where we are?” More heads shaking.

“The floor is vibrating,” said a freckled red-haired boy in a bed against the corner. “In fact, everything’s vibrating. I think we’re in motion.”

Tentatively, Ash touched the cold steel frame of his cot and felt the smallest tremor. The redhead was right. There was a hum throughout the . . . wherever they were. Ash nodded vigorously. It felt good to have some sense of reality, however tenuous.

“My clothes!” screeched a girl all the way at the left side of the room. There were other whimpers of terror at the raised voice. “I didn’t go to sleep wearing this! And these pants! They’re. . .”

And whatever she was trying to say was swallowed up by sobs, but it was enough to make Ash look down, revealing a pair of black track pants that Ash had also not worn last night.

At that, Exodus began to cry again. Echo moved from the boy, who was calmer, to Exodus. Putting a hand on her leg, Echo spoke in soft, soothing tones. Ash shook his head a couple of times, trying to clear the cobwebs. He felt increasingly useless.

Aside from the cries of the more emotional, the room fell into an awkward, vaguely sickening silence. Slowly, unsteadily, Ash swung his legs over the side of his bed. He looked again at the raven-haired girl on his right, who appeared to have somehow grown paler in the space of two minutes. Their eyes met.

“You okay?” asked Ash quietly.

“Fantastic,” she said wanly. A small smile crept over her face. “Couldn’t be better. Great way to start the day. Who the hell are you?”

Ash couldn’t help but smile as he tentatively swung his legs over the bed. “Ash. You?”

The girl patted her nametag, while nodding to Ash’s own. “I’m Alexis. Nice meeting you, Ash. And by nice I mean terrifying.” Ash laughed as Alexis continued, “At least someone is finding some humor in all of this.”

“I wish I knew what this was,” Ash said. The panic was abating and giving way to the sheer strangeness of the entire situation. Was he part of a science experiment? Hallucinating? Had an aneurysm exploded in the deep recesses of his brain, leaving him to die in the comfort of his own bed?

Realizing that Alexis was still staring at him, Ash spoke again. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Falling asleep, listening to music,” said Alexis. “I think I was out . . .” Alexis’ voice trailed off and her eyes focused on something in the distance. “Actually, wait. Now that I think about it, something weird did happen last night. The last thing I remember wasn’t listening to music. It was a . . . some kind of . . .

“Woosh!”

Ash turned around as Blondell joined the conversation.

“‘Woosh’ is what you are looking for. You felt like your stomach disappeared from under you. Like you fell into a black hole and the rest of your body followed.”

“Yes! Exactly!” cried Alexis. “Like everything was sucked out from under me, as if I was on some kind of roller coaster or something.”

Blondell cocked her head and scrunched her eyes while Alexis looked expectantly at Ash.

He closed his eyes and tried to recall his last memory, before he woke up in this . . . place. *Last night, okay, I was upset because I didn’t get as many hours at work as I would have liked. Facebook showed everyone partying in their dorms while I was stuck at home. And that’s . . . No.* That wasn’t the last thing he remembered. It came back to him; the last thing he remembered was feeling grabbed. “Woosh. Yeah, okay. This I remember.”

“Well, at least that explains something,” said Blondell.

Alexis nodded and peered around the room. Most were talking in groups of two or three, but two were simply curled up in bed, covers to their chins. A few beds down from Ash, he saw a

form, coiled under the blankets, completely unmoving except for a soft rise and fall of their chest.

“Someone should probably check on them,” said Ash, gesturing to the prostrate form hiding under the blanket.

Blondell followed Ash’s gaze and nodded. She walked over to the bed.

Ash turned back to Alexis. “So, I’m guessing you have absolutely no idea what happened or where we are?” he asked.

“None. You?”

“Definitely not,” Ash replied.

Alexis nodded, raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips and shifted her gaze downward, appearing scared for the first time. They lapsed into silence, punctuated only by the muffled cries of an assortment of terrified teenagers. Slowly but surely, Ash felt fear creeping into his lungs, filling them like black ice: cold and unforgiving.

From the back of the room, the angry-looking boy moved forward, toward the hallway light. “Hey,” he said to Ash. Ash looked up at the short, stout figure in front of him. His shoulders were as square as the buzzcut that crowned his head, and his face was locked in a scowl. Ash felt a moment of pity for him before spotting the angry tilt to his eyes. He looked like a kid who had tried out for the football team and hadn’t made the cut. Ash lowered his eyes to his nametag again: Anton. “Any idea what’s going on?”

“No. Nothing,” Ash responded. He didn’t even bother to ask the same question in return and was surprised to discover that there was no fear on Anton’s face . . . just a clenching of his jaw and a narrowing of his eyes.

Anton tilted his head and looked at Ash. “So what now?” he asked, an edge in his voice.

Gripped by an increasing fear, Ash shrugged and stood. “I have no idea, man.”

Alexis seemed to pick up on Ash’s mood and pulled herself up. “Maybe you want to help out Blondell?” she asked, tilting her head toward the other girl.

Blondell was gently rubbing the shoulder of the cot's occupant, but whoever was under the blankets was holding tight.

Anton shook his head violently. "She doesn't need help." He turned to a corner where three scared figures – two girls and a boy – huddled together. "I'm gonna go talk to them, see how they are feeling." He looked directly past Ash and at Alexis. "Want to come?"

Alexis almost looked offended. "I'm good, thanks," she said.

Anton shrugged and walked away, leaving a perplexed Ash and Alexis behind.

Alexis looked back at Ash, appearing more confused than scared. "Wonder if anyone else here has an 'A' name," she said with a smile.

The little joke made Ash chuckle. "Wonder if anyone else has issues like that guy," he said.

"Oh, relax," Alexis responded, lightness creeping into her voice. "Not like this is a situation that any of us have ever experienced before."

"Fair enough," Ash responded.

The fear in the room was palpable, thick like fog on a humid day. Others were in bad shape: barely stifled sobbing, bewildered looks and some borderline catatonic teenagers.

"Come on. Let's see what else is going on. That guy in the corner seems to have a vague idea of how to figure this out," Ash said.

Alexis nodded. "Better than any idea I've got."

The two stood up and walked to the end of the room, toward the redhead who had noticed the vibrations. They passed a dozen kids along the way. Ash tried to take mental snapshots of who else seemed to have fallen through the looking glass with him. There was the Hispanic girl who had started the screaming, still being comforted by Echo. The short, tanned, black-haired girl, huddled up in the bed, knees covering her name tag, looked absolutely terrified. She kept groping behind her, like she was trying to grab something that wasn't there. A thick African-American boy, with a closely-cropped haircut, stared mindlessly into the distance, not looking ready to move just yet.

Ash and Alexis reached the redhead. He had been standing at the foot of his cot, scanning the room, a look of quiet concentration on his face. He nodded when Ash and Alexis walked up.

“I’m Jameson,” he said. Ash and Alexis introduced themselves.

“What makes you think we’re moving?” Ash asked.

“It’s not like I haven’t done this before,” said Jameson. “There’s a slight pressure, a push that’s almost unnoticeable, but this feels different than anything else I’ve ever experienced.”

Before Ash could quiz Jameson further, Blondell walked over to them.

“Sorry, no luck with that kid,” she said. “At one point I tried to pull the cover back, and I’m pretty sure he actually growled at me. And I mean that literally. He actually growled.”

Ash and Alexis shook their heads.

“This is really bad, and I’m worried about him. And a couple of others. Everyone here looks like teenagers, but whatever is happening is making a bunch of them act like scared little kids, and I don’t blame them.” Blondell looked back over her shoulder, where Echo continued to comfort the increasingly hysterical young girl. “We’re going to need to do something.”

Ash felt a flash of indignation. “Do what?” he snapped, a little more irritated than he intended. “None of us know what is going on, or where we are, or how we got here, or . . . well, pretty much anything. Let alone how to comfort people who are hysterical. It’s a small miracle there are a few people who are even functioning right now.”

“You’re not asking the more immediate questions,” Jameson said, with a frost that spurred the rest of the group to face him.

“What?” asked Ash, trepidation seeping into his voice.

“If we are in motion, what are we on, and where are we going?”

That was a new concern, and one that was at least three steps removed from Ash’s thoughts. He looked at Alexis. Her eyes started to widen as the floor shook from a massive explosion.

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About the Author

Mike Schlossberg has been a writer since he wrote his first short story in eighth grade, a Star Wars fanfiction. While he claims it was terrible, the creative passion followed him into adulthood.

Serving as a State Representative in Pennsylvania, Mike has had the chance to make a difference. The problem closest to his heart is mental health, where he strives to break the stigma surrounding those who suffer from mental illnesses and give them hope. For Mike, this issue is personal, as he has been treated for depression and anxiety related disorders since he was 18. It was this desire to help which drove him to write Redemption, his first novel, but not his first book. That honor goes to Tweets and Consequences, an anthology about the varied ways elected officials have destroyed their careers via social media.

When not writing, Mike plays video games (both modern and old school), watches anything related to the Muppets (specifically Fraggle Rock!), reads, attempts to get to the gym, and calls his constituents on their birthdays.

Mike lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with his wife Brenna and his two wonderful children: Auron, born in 2011, and Ayla, born in 2012.

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