Dangerous Redemption

Chapter One

Dallas

Getting into the convention center was easy—the security guard smiled and held the door for me.

Hiding my rifle is the tricky part.

I stride through the noisy trade show, retractable banner case slung over my shoulder, as I wind through a hundred vendors breaking down their displays. As soon as they're out, security tightens for the next event—a political fundraiser for Congressman Townsend. The man I'm here for.

Another dirty politician. One of hundreds. Thousands maybe. This one just happened to piss off the wrong people. The mafia maybe. Someone on the other side of the aisle. Possibly another country.

Don't know.

Don't care.

Staring down my scope at so many, their faces started blurring together anyway. That's when I realized I needed out. I don't enjoy what I do. It's a contract with money attached. At the end, I've removed the worst of the worst from humanity and walk away with a clean conscience.

Or at least I tell myself I do.

All I really feel is tired. Of the faces. The travel.

The dossiers of vile acts next to a picture of civility.

One last job, and I'm done.

I step into a service hallway at the back and navigate corridors until I'm near the exhibit hall where the fundraiser will be held. I find an unlocked janitor's closet with easy access to the stage and enter unnoticed. Shelves of cleaning supplies line the walls, and mops and buckets are stacked haphazardly against them, all smelling of lemon disinfectant.

Just like the hallway, it has a drop ceiling. I pop one of the tiles up, slide my rifle onto the metal support grid, and drop the tile back into place.

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Quick, easy, and clean.

Two minutes later, I leave the convention center at the back of a group of tired businessmen.

The oppressive heat and humidity of late summer slide beneath my jacket, making me sweat. August in New Orleans can be brutal, when the river is slow and smells like decay, and the breeze isn't blowing. Thank fuck I'm only in town for another day. I don't know how anyone lives here.

But then, I don't live anywhere.

I peel off from the businessmen who never noticed me and circle the building, scouting one last time for alternate escape routes.

Nothing can go wrong tonight.

I eliminate the target, collect, and disappear. This time for good.

I'll have enough money set aside to retire and quietly fund my parents for the rest of their lives. When Dallas King dies, they'll inherit the trust I set up for them. Perfectly legal. And I can disappear knowing they're taken care of, even if I won't be there to see it.

After all the things I've done, going home has never been an option. There's no reconciling the man I am with that kind of love. I don't regret this life. I chose it.

The cost is one I gladly pay. If some innocents are spared by the removal of another, it balances out.

I move down the alley, sticking to the shadows where it's cooler. I pass an open door that smells like Dim Sum and hear a couple squabbling inside. There's an orange tabby sitting next to a blue bowl by the door, licking his paw while he waits. Jazz music plays from one of the apartments above, mixing with the honk of cars on the next street.

It could be any alley in any city if it weren't for the jazz and the scent of the river.

I cross two more streets, seeking fresher air and more shade. There's a park in this direction, and I have a couple of hours to wait.

At the end of the next alley, something prickles at my awareness. I stop in the shadows and scan the street beyond. There's normal pedestrian traffic as people finish their shopping or stop for dinner. No one seems out of place.

A burst of giggles rings out as a few kids bounce out of the ice cream shop across the street, followed by a couple with weary smiles. The man scoops the youngest into his arms, sets

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him on his hip and wraps his arm around the woman, pressing a kiss to her temple. She leans into him, a soft smile on her lips as she takes the hand of a little boy. The oldest is trying in vain to lick an ice cream cone and laughs when he ends up wearing most of it.

The domestic scene sends a shard of inexplicable sensation through my chest. Almost like pain, but that's impossible. I don't feel emotions like that.

Still, I watch them for another few seconds, unable to name the odd feeling.

The bell over the door to the ice cream shop chimes as it opens again. This time a young woman exits, holding a stuffed animal. She calls to them, and the mother turns back to take it. I can't hear the exchange at this distance. Not that it matters. It's just... the uncomfortable shift in my chest is stronger.

The mom takes the dingy pink bunny, hands it to the little girl in the man's arms, and they slowly walk away, faces full of smiles.

The young woman watches them a moment, arms crossed over her waist, before she returns inside.

I'm not sure how long I linger watching that door and the people who come out. Five minutes? Ten? Every person who leaves is smiling, and beyond the glass, I can just make out the young woman behind the counter. She laughs with them, leans down to the same level as the children when she talks, and sneaks an extra helping of sprinkles when a parent has their back turned.

I rub my chest where that... that *ache* has settled. Is it the ice cream? Is that why everyone smiles? I can't remember seeing so much happiness in one place.

When was the last time I had ice cream? The army before I entered sniper school?

Another couple leaves the shop, and a quick scan of the windows tells me Sweet Scoops ice cream is empty except for the woman behind the counter. It's close to five. She's probably getting ready to close.

I watch the door another minute. Sweat slides down my back beneath the suit jacket.

Ice cream might be nice. Sort of a celebration of my last job. Proof that I can have something in my life besides cold metal and gun oil.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I cross the street and go for an ice cream.

Cool air meets my heated skin, bringing my body temperature down a notch. The shop is empty. The woman must be in the back.

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The walls are loud, with bright pink stripes and pictures of ice cream cones. A cooler hums at the end of the long counter, where candy toppings and a cold case of dozens of ice cream flavors sit in containers.

I take another step in, clocking the doors and scanning the wide windows once more. I feel exposed here. There’s too much light and space. What the fuck am I even doing? I'm a grown man. I don't need ice cream.

I turn on my heel and have one hand on the door when a soft voice behind me says, "Oh! Hi. Sorry, I didn't hear the bell over the door. Welcome to Sweet Scoops."

Her voice is as sweet as the ice cream she sells.

That strange feeling in my chest is back, stronger than before. I'm tempted to leave anyway.

I turn to tell her not to bother and instead am snared in the kind of smile that makes a man rethink his life choices. Swallowing over the sudden lump in my throat, I release my grip on the door.

"What can I get you?" she asks.

Her smile never dims. Not even when I approach and only the counter separates us. Most people only meet my eyes once. Something about my presence makes them uncomfortable.

Not her.

I glance down at the name tag pinned to her dark pink dress. It says Gemma in gold letters with a little hand-drawn pink heart beside it. It’s pretty, like her, and I feel a flicker of recognition with her name that I can’t place. With her standing this close, I don’t try.

She looks like a kindergarten teacher—pure sunshine and sweetness. Curvy in the best way, with honey-blonde hair in a ponytail, smoky gray eyes, and plump pink lips that... I am not thinking about.

When I don’t respond, she leans closer, eyes sparkling. "I promise not to tell anyone you were here. You can whisper your order."

The warm scent of vanilla surrounds her, teasing my senses and drowning out the sugary-sweet ice cream scent.

I draw it deep into my lungs, unable to look away. Jesus. This isn’t me.

I force myself to look at the menu and say the first thing I see. "A single scoop."

"Wise choice. In a waffle cone, sugar cone, or bowl?"

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"Bowl." I'll draw attention to myself if I walk back into the convention center wearing ice cream on my black suit.

She reaches for a small bowl, looks me over, then grabs the medium one instead. "Now, the most important question. Which flavor?"

"Flavor?" Her tongue swipes her lower bottom lip, and I can't help but track the movement. A single word slips out. "Vanilla."

She laughs, and my dick pulses in response.

What the fuck? I haven't... I scrub a hand over my face. I haven't felt attraction in *years*.

"I will humor you with a *small* scoop of vanilla if you insist, but you are not a vanilla man."

"I'm not?"

"No." She leans over the ice cream case and puts a quarter scoop of vanilla in the bowl, then studies me. "Something dark and silky. Rich and not too sweet. The kind that commands a room and a person's taste buds. Meant to be savored late into the night."

I swallow hard. With every soft word, the ice cream shop fades away, until there's only Gemma, the scent of vanilla, and the odd feeling in my chest.

"You're a decadent chocolate caramel truffle, I think. The kind of flavor that lingers in your memory." She puts a big scoop of ice cream in the bowl next to the vanilla, another smile teasing her lips as she holds my gaze.

I reach for the bowl.

She holds it away, looking personally offended. "You can't have naked ice cream."

The image of licking vanilla ice cream off the soft skin between her breasts suddenly hits me full force, and my cock hardens so fast that my head swims. Jesus Christ. I can't afford this kind of distraction. Not tonight.

And yet, I can't walk away.

Gemma adds some chocolate chips and a light drizzle of caramel to the bowl. "Whipped cream?" she asks, then shakes her head. "No, that would make it too sweet."

She holds the ice cream out.

I stare at her a beat, then slowly reach for the bowl. Our fingers brush, and I hear the slight hitch in her breathing. Her cheeks flush beneath my gaze.

I can't forget the job or that I'm only here for one more night. But for this one moment, I

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let myself pretend I'm the kind of man who would be worthy of breathing the same air as Gemma.

It'll be a memory to take with me when I disappear from this life.

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Read the book here: https://geni.us/ASH-Dangerous

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