

The Possibility of Somewhere

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Scenes from Ash's Point of View

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Chapter 1

An Exercise in Probabilities

Scene 2

My statistics teacher had reserved the empty desk beside me for the fifth person on my project team. I watched the clock uneasily, wondering who it would be.

As the bell rang, the final stat student strolled into the classroom and headed for the back row.

I stifled a groan. *Please. Not her.*

“Wait, Eden,” the teacher said, pointing to the empty desk. “Sit there.”

My throat thickened with dread. It was no secret that Eden Moore and I didn’t get along. Why had Mrs. Menzies put us together?

“All right, everyone. I’m glad that you’ve chosen to take Advanced Placement Statistics...”

I bowed my head, no longer listening to what the teacher was saying. This was a disaster. I was carrying my toughest course load ever, and the last thing I needed was to expend any energy battling Eden. Maybe I should talk to Mrs. Menzies after class—and beg her to move *me*.

“... Form into your teams. I’ll hand out your first project.”

Dev, Upala, Eugene, and I shifted our desks into a circle, but Eden stayed where she was, her face blank. She glanced at me.

“You’re with us, Eden.”

Rolling her eyes, she shoved her desk around, close but not quite in the circle. Not surprisingly, she remained emotionally separate from us too, brooding in silence while the rest of the team talked about our summers.

Mrs. Menzies stopped by our circle last and handed out instructions and supplies. Before she walked away, she gave Eden a hard stare. “I expect collaboration from everyone.”

Eden didn't acknowledge the comment. Instead, she tore open the bag of M&Ms and sorted them by color, each candy dropping into a paper bowl with a hostile click.

Fine. If she wanted to be left alone, I was good with that. I turned to the others with a smile. "Before we go any further, we should pick a leader for the team. How do we want to choose?"

The clicking candies paused. "Might as well cut the bullshit, Ash. You want the job. No one's going to fight you. Just take it by acclimation."

I side-eyed her. What was she implying? That I was being a jerk, hiding my grab for power behind a smile? I picked up a pen and drew squares in my notebook. Tiny, perfect squares.

The clicking resumed. "See. Done."

When I looked up, the others were watching me in shock. I cleared my throat and reached for the instructions. "Let's see when the first project is due..."

The next hour dragged by painfully, so it was a relief to hear the bell ring. In a flash, Eden had her desk back into place and was gone.

"Are you okay?" Upala asked as we exited the classroom.

"I'm fine." I scanned the chaos in the hallway, feeling restless. Ahead of me, Eden closed her locker with a bang and turned toward the cafeteria, unconcerned about the trouble she'd caused. It was disturbing how she never missed an opportunity to mock me.

Even more disturbing was that I let her attitude matter.

Although confrontation wasn't one of my favorite things, I couldn't leave this alone. It was time.

I chased her down. "Eden? Can I ask you something?"

She halted. "Sure."

"It's the first day of school. Did you have to take me on already?"

"Take you on?" Her blue eyes narrowed impatiently. "If I'd wanted to come after you, I would've done a better job than that."

"Then what was the point?"

"You were wasting my time on fake modesty. And while I don't care what you think, I would like to make a good grade in statistics."

My jaw clenched. It usually took a lot to get to me, but she'd managed it this year with the first thing she'd said. What was it about her that affected me so much?

I studied her from her scraped-back hair to shabby shoes. She always wore baggy jeans and ugly shirts, and why did I even notice that?

"Ash? Are you done?"

Heat crept up my neck as I returned my gaze to hers. "If you don't mind, I'd like us to call a truce."

"Why? We're not at war."

"It feels like it. You fight me every chance you get."

"I don't fight you."

I gave her a *really?* look.

"Like when?"

"You rewrote every one of our lab reports in freshman biology."

"You had just moved here and didn't know how to impress Mr. Tuttle. I did."

Wait. She'd done that to impress the teacher? Not the way it felt at the time, but I would concede the point for now. There were plenty of other examples. "On our project team in US history, you vetoed every suggestion I made."

"We were capable of more. You never took chances."

Ouch. Was that what she really thought?

Of course it was. Eden might be a pain to be around, but she wasn't a liar.

I stepped closer, blocking her from my friends' view. "You propose insane ideas just to stir things up."

"Not the reason at all. An idea has to be insane to make an A-plus."

An A-plus was the goal? It wasn't worth the risk to me. But if she was willing to jeopardize her GPA for a little glory, she was welcome to do that all day long—by herself. "Insane is more likely to crash and burn."

"Students like us do not crash and burn, Ash. You play it too safe."

Easy for you to say. You've got valedictorian in the bag.

She gasped.

Holy crap. Had I said that out loud?

She considered me for a long moment, then gave a slight shake of her head, her expression softening with sympathy. “I don’t care about being valedictorian. Do you?”

“My parents—” I bit off what I’d been about to say. My parents were disappointed, but they’d accepted that I would probably rank second. Not something I wanted to discuss with Eden.

She looked around and back at me, her brow creasing in confusion. “Why is this so important to you?”

“I’m not sure. Why did you punt control of the project to me?”

“You were the best person for the job.”

“Wow.” Was she mocking me again?

I searched her face, but all I found was sincerity. She’d actually given me a compliment. “That was not what I expected you to say.” I really did want to be a good project leader. To listen and include everyone’s ideas and be...*the best person for the job*. It amazed me that Eden had noticed, even if she’d masked the praise behind harsh words. “Thanks. I think.”

Her lips curved into a sweet, beautiful, tentative smile.

Damn. I’d grown used to Eden being bored or aloof or grumpy. But a nice Eden? I couldn’t help smiling back.

With a nod, she continued to the cafeteria. I watched her go, trying hard to take in what had just happened. And trying even harder to ignore a shiver of awareness.

Chapter 2

The Tackle or the Save

Scene 3

As my friends and I walked to our first period class, they joked around about something that had happened at Dev's house last night. Since I hadn't been there, I only half-listened.

Even though students jammed the senior hallway, my attention locked on Eden. She stood by her locker, looking away from me, smiling with delight.

It intrigued me how different she seemed this year. She'd always been prickly or detached in class, ducking her head, not saying much unless she had no choice. Were her smiles new? Or had they been there all along, and I just hadn't paid attention?

A Nerf ball soared past her in a perfect arc, with Damian Smith—our school's star wide receiver—in pursuit. The football landed in Eden's open backpack. The football player landed on Eden.

It was as if someone had pushed Pause on a video. Noise muted. Movement ceased.

"Sorry," Damian said, not sounding the least bit sorry. "Didn't see you."

From beneath his body, she groaned, "No shit."

Her words took the scene off Pause. Everyone went back to whatever they'd been doing, except Damian, who was wiggling his jaw to make sure it still worked.

"You can get up now," she said.

"Oh, right." He jumped to his feet, retrieved the Nerf ball, and strutted away.

Eden lay on the floor, motionless, while people strolled past.

Really? Neither Damian nor anybody else could stop long enough to check if she'd been hurt? Jerks. I crossed to her, glaring at my classmates in disgust.

Someone else had started toward her, too. Sawyer Atkinson. The captain of our baseball team. A guy that everybody liked and nobody messed with.

I gave him a nod. I had this. He nodded back grimly and detoured to the huddle of football players, retribution tightening his face.

“Here, Eden,” I said. “Let me help you up.”

She stared at my hand with widened eyes, her utter shock clawing at my heart. What must her life be like—that she hadn’t expected simple decency?

When she reached for me, I lifted her as gently as I could. But it must’ve been too swift, because she swayed on her feet. I placed a steadying hand on her waist, my fingers brushing warm, soft skin. She flinched and looked up, her face clouding with something vulnerable. Wounded.

Protectiveness surged through me. I wanted to –

“Ash?” Dev called.

I shuddered, so absorbed by her that I’d forgotten where we were. “Just a second.” Kneeling, I scooped pencils, coins, and keys into her backpack, then rose.

Averting her gaze, she took the backpack. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” I rejoined my friends and continued to first period. But I tuned them out. It took all of my energy to think about Eden.

Hesitating by the classroom door, I glanced back down the hallway. She was leaning her head against a locker and listening to the girl at her side. Eden flashed a smile and responded.

Reassured, I wandered into English, sank into my desk, and mentally reviewed the scene in the hall.

Eden and I never spoke with each other outside of class, yet this week we’d done so twice. Both times, I’d learned something unexpected about her, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I had years of practice at being her rival. I didn’t have a clue what to do with an Eden who was wounded and nice.

Chapter 32

Burst of Glory

Scene 2

Mrs. Barber told me before Thanksgiving that the Honors Committee had endorsed Eden for the Peyton. I was glad. No other choice would've made sense.

Eden had worried anyway. Even though she knew she was the top candidate, she'd been afraid that the shiny parts of my resume might distract the committee members. That was a legitimate concern. While Coach Parsons was guaranteed to vote against me, Mr. Applewood and Mrs. Lee had been harder to read. They liked me. The decision hadn't been a slam dunk.

It didn't matter anymore. They'd done the right thing.

I would've let Eden know how I felt last week, but she hadn't been at school. Today, she was back from her holiday break. I'd tried to intercept her at the end of English and statistics, but that hadn't worked. And she'd shown up late for lunch.

I was standing outside the cafeteria with my friends when I saw her coming through the doors. The opportunity had finally arrived, but this location was too public. The entire senior class seemed to be leaving lunch at the same time.

"Ash?" Upala touched my arm. "Don't do it."

"Do what?"

"Don't talk to her. There are too many people around. Someone might tell your parents."

"Let 'em." Eden was weaving through the crowd, picking up speed. I was about to lose my chance. "See you in third period."

Dev blocked my path. "She's not worth it."

Frustration had me on edge. I'd done as my parents demanded, putting aside my feelings, avoiding Eden as much as I could stand. But the yearning for what we'd had still lingered. If speaking to her meant consequences, fine. "My parents will understand."

“No, they won’t. This is crazy, Ash. What kind of hold does she have over you?”

“Enough, Dev.” I pushed past him and hurried down the hall, unable to contain my eagerness. “Eden, wait.”

She froze in her tracks, facing straight ahead.

I stopped at her side and smiled. Being this close to her felt familiar. Safe. Right. How did my family and friends not see how happy I was when I was part of her world? “Congratulations on the Peyton endorsement.”

She looked up, her expression carefully blank. “Thanks.”

Her indifference hit me like a slap. Here was the first real chance we’d had to talk in over a month—and all she could say was *thanks*?

Had she gotten over us?

No, that had to be wrong. She was just surprised. I would keep trying. “When do you go to the interview in Chapel Hill?”

“In a couple of weeks.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, but I wasn’t ready for the moment to end. Since our break-up, Eden had been the perfect ex. Other than the one time we’d bumped into each other in the hall, there had been no physical contact. No whispered words or secret smiles. I’d been grateful at first. She’d understood the risk to me. Her silence had been proof that she loved me.

But here I stood, drinking in the sight of her. Dying inside because she didn’t want to be around me. Even knowing that, I couldn’t bear for her to go.

Eden pursed her lips. “Have you heard from Stanford?”

“Not yet.” I shot a glance at my friends, who hovered nearby.

Her gaze flicked their way and back again. “How is Raj?”

“Great. He still asks about you.”

“Tell him I said hi.” She nodded vaguely. “See you.”

“Yeah,” I said, although it was a waste of breath. She was already gone.

Wow. That had been...agonizing. I’d loved having her eyes on me and hearing her voice. But Eden herself? She’d been disinterested, not showing the smallest hint that she missed me as much as I missed her. I could’ve been anybody.

I wished now that I hadn't spoken with her. Life had been better before I realized that one of us had moved on.

Chapter 34

Sweet Promise

Scene 0.5

The first thing I noticed when I entered the kitchen was a vase full of deep pink roses on the island.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Mom murmured from the stove.

“Sure, but I’m surprised that Dad remembered it’s Valentine’s Day.”

She chuckled as her gaze swept down me, taking in the dress shirt and new jeans. “Will you be out tonight?”

“Yes.”

“With your friends?”

My hand tensed around my keys. If she objected to my plans, we would have a fight, and I really didn’t have the time. “I’ll be with Eden.”

“Oh?” Mom’s eyebrow arched. “To study?”

“To babysit.” Although my father never mentioned it, he accepted that Eden and I were a couple. But my mother? No. She preferred to maintain the myth that we were nothing more than good friends and study partners. And if that got Mom through the day, then I would go along with it.

So, yeah, it was true that I’d be helping tonight with Kurt and Marta. But once the kids were in bed, Eden and I would be celebrating our first Valentine’s together.

I had every detail planned. The coffee-and-dessert picnic. The iPod loaded with a playlist I’d worked hard to get exactly right. The response I would give to Eden when she protested over how expensive the gift was.

I’d planned how to channel the passion of her protest, too.

My mother stirred something in a pot, then set the spoon aside. “How often does Eden babysit?”

“Whenever Mrs. Fremont works a graveyard shift.”

“Heidi Fremont? The physician’s assistant in my emergency department?”

I nodded.

“Does Eden sleep there three nights each week?”

“Yes.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed. “Heidi has glowing things to say about her babysitter.”

I smiled. Not surprised.

Mom picked up her spoon. “Enjoy your evening, son.”

The kids had been in bed for an hour. Eden and I were sitting in the den, a fire blazing in the fireplace, the remnants of our dessert on a low table.

Eden rose to her knees and cupped the back of my head.

“Thank you,” she whispered against my lips.

Mmm. She tasted like coffee and chocolate. “You can tell me thank you all you want.”

She kissed me again and eased away. “The cupcakes were perfect.”

“There’s more.”

“What?” Her eyes gleamed, half excited, half wary.

I reached into the picnic basket for the gift. She took it and sat cross-legged on the carpet, her knees pressed to my thigh.

“You’ve already given me a phone.”

“It’s not a phone.”

Her gaze met mine. “It looks too beautiful to open.”

“Go ahead.”

She peeled the tape and slipped off the ribbons and paper.

Sucking in a deep breath, she cradled the iPod in her hands.

“Ash...”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Too expensive. I shouldn’t have. What was I thinking?”

Her lips twitched. “Everything you said.” She held one of the earbuds to her ear and pressed Play. Her body stilled as she listened. A few seconds later, she touched Off and set the iPod on the couch. Snuggling closer, she dropped her head to my shoulder. “I didn’t get you anything.”

Saving for college meant she couldn’t spare the money. I understood that. But I also understood that I *needed* to give to her.

“You’re the only gift I want.”

“That’s not much.”

“It’s more than you know.” I wrapped my arms around her waist and hauled her onto my lap. Right where I wanted her.

She pressed a kiss to my neck, then popped open the top two buttons of my shirt. I shuddered at the assault on my senses. Her soft, focused breathing. The lime scent of her hair. The slide of her fingertips over my skin, making me ache in ways I could do nothing about tonight.

I captured her hand with mine, ending the torture. “I’m the winner here, Eden. I can hardly believe what you’re willing to put up with. You’re always patient and polite with my parents. You don’t push. You never make me feel guilty about the pace or the pretending.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get.”

“And I love you for it.”

She wiggled around until she could straddle my hips and link her hands behind my neck. “I’m ready to make out.”

“I’m good with that plan.” My hands gripped her butt.

“So, um, ...” Her brow creased apologetically. “We have to keep it PG.”

“Understood.”

“Tomorrow night, though—”

I kissed her, mostly because I wanted to, but partly because I had to. Talking about—or even thinking about—tomorrow night was a bad idea.

She took control, and damn, I was happy to receive. I might be the only guy she’d ever kissed, but like with everything else that Eden tried, she excelled.

After several minutes of hot, sweet kissing, the intensity began to slow. Her lips brushed my cheek, my jaw, the spot below my ear.

“Ash?”

We’re not done yet. Right? My eyes slowly opened. “Yeah?”

“Will we make it?”

“Yes, baby.” I groaned and pressed her tightly to my chest, feeling her everywhere. Wanting her always. “I can’t imagine a future without you.”