

The bloom after the storm - Chapter 13 Chapter 12

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Then on a Wednesday afternoon, it happened.

Aurora was halfway through her meal when he suddenly said, "Who is Noah Carter?"

She nearly dropped her fork.

Ethan, across the table, went still.

Her mother said nothing.

He said nothing.

She said nothing.

Aurora looked up.

"Just a friend."

He was stone-faced.

"Just a friend?"

"Yes."

It wasn't a lie. Not yet.

Dinner proceeded in an awkward silence.

By the time Aurora was back in her room, she was exhausted.

Ethan knocked a few minutes later.

"You made it out."

"I almost didn't," she admitted.

He sat beside her. "They've been asking about him all week."

Aurora stopped smiling. "They were?"

"Yeah, I heard them."

She let out a long sigh.

Obviously they were.

It took all of Aurora's willpower to pay attention the next day in school. Her parents knew Noah's full name. They must have been asking questions. They must have been digging for more information about him.

Aurora found herself distracted in the cafeteria.

Noah was the one to notice first.

"You got that face again."

"Which face?"

"The overthinking one."

She let out a half-laugh. "I didn't know you were this observant."

"I know."

She told him the truth. Not all of it, but enough.

"My parents asked about you."

Noah seemed shocked. "Why?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

It wasn't long before Noah broke the awkward silence.

"Maybe it's only natural, what parents do."

Aurora wished she'd believed that.

That afternoon in the library, they lingered. The project was all but done, so there was no real reason for them to be hanging out. They didn't seem to mind though.

"We're going to be great," he said.

"Obviously."

"Noah."

She laughed.

"Just saying."

They talked, then. About their day, and their books, and what their futures could be.

"What's your dream?" Aurora asked eventually.

His attention snapped to her. "My dream?"

"You know what mine is."

He paused, then grinned. "My mom doesn't have to worry about bills."

It wasn't the answer she expected. It was so very Noah, simple, genuine, selfless.

"And then what?"

A flash of determination ran through his eyes.

"I want to build something."

"Like, what, a company?" She grinned, "See? We've got dreams."

His laugh was loud and clear, and Aurora felt a weight lift.

But her life was faring no better at the time.

Aurora passed the kitchen one weekend afternoon when she overheard the conversation.

She was trying to walk away, but her dad's voice drew her in.

"...he works at a store."

She froze in her tracks. Her mother followed.

"And he works there, too."

And then he was back to work. "Well, that's not something she needs right now."

Aurora went into shock. They'd done their research. And the more she processed this, the more she grew to hate that. Not because Noah was poor. No, because her parents had clearly already written him off, regardless.

Ethan found her later that night, by the window.

"You heard them."

Aurora nodded in agreement.

They were silent for a moment.

Then Ethan sighed.

"Not fair."

Aurora looked at him. "How is it not?"

The way they're treating us."

He said something for the first time that she'd been thinking for weeks. That maybe there was something wrong with her. That maybe she'd become too different, too disappointed in the eyes of everyone around her. But Ethan saying that out loud, it made her realize something.

She was right.

On Monday, Aurora walked into school with a spark of rage. She wasn't sad, exactly. She was angry.

Her parents had started crossing those lines. Lines that separated who they wanted her to be from who she was becoming, and Aurora wasn't sure she was sure she wanted to stay there.

Not anymore.

And truth be told, she was never sure she wanted to go back.