

The bloom after the storm - Chapter 15 Chapter 14

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Three weeks. That was all the time left before the scholarship application deadline. For most people, it was just the time needed to stress themselves out. For Aurora, it was the time she would spend obsessing over it. Every free second, she spent searching online to research and writing and rewriting and questioning herself. Which meant the essay. The part she was asked to write that was supposed to say: "Why am I deserving of this opportunity?" Aurora hated it. She was one day in the library and had spent the last thirty minutes trying to write a single sentence. Which she eventually deleted five times after. She knew that wasn't how long it was supposed to take. She knew it wasn't supposed to be this hard. "This is too difficult." Noah looked up at her from her desk. "What is?" The essay," Aurora said. Noah looked down at her laptop screen. "Oh, the scholarship one?" "Yeah." "It can't be that bad." "You should have seen me at this page. It is literally blank." She turned her screen around to show him. The whole laptop screen was blank. Noah looked at the screen for a moment, then burst out in laughter. "Maybe it is that bad." Aurora grabbed a pen off of her desk and threw it at his head. "This is serious!" Aurora said through a frustrated sigh. Noah put the pen away and asked, "What is the problem?" Aurora shook her head. "I don't know what they want." "The truth." "I don't want to write the truth. It won't seem good enough." Noah shook his head. "The truth is good, but I think you're just afraid to write it." Aurora's eyes widened as it clicked. Noah had known exactly what she was struggling with. The truth involved dreams. Expectations. Disappointment. Fear. The truth involved a girl who wanted more from life than the path already chosen for her. And she was trying to write all of that in one short paragraph. She returned to her room that night to continue working on it. Sitting in silence while the rain tapped softly on her bedroom window. And as the words finally poured into her head, it wasn't as hard to write as she made it out to be. She wrote about what she was hoping for, what she was looking forward to having happen in her future, and how she was just hoping to seize her own opportunities because it is her life. For the first time in her life, she didn't have to stop and write, but it seemed like the whole time she was typing it the whole thing was just falling out of her head in front of her eyes. Aurora spent the whole night finishing writing and by the time the hour of twelve rolled around, Aurora had finished her first draft of the essay. The next morning when she went to school and saw Noah at his seat, Aurora handed him the printed-out copy. Noah picked up the page and read it over. One page. Then another. Then another. Aurora was watching every single movement of his head from left to right as he read. "Good?" She asked when he finally put it back down on his desk. It was quiet for a bit and Aurora

began to wonder whether it was good enough. He nodded. "Yeah, this is good." Aurora looked confused. "That's it?" "No, the essay is good. This is honest." Aurora sighed again. "How do you know when I say something stupid and how do you know what I actually need to hear sometimes?" Noah was always right about what she was struggling with. Aurora couldn't help the fact that she was always surprised that he was always right sometimes. The next week the entire school went crazy about who was going to get the scholarship. People were talking about whose grades were the best and whose essay was the best. Some people were confident they were going to get it, while some were terrified and didn't have high hopes. Aurora was feeling the two emotions in the exact same moment. Then in the afternoon, Aurora had the whole class sitting there when the principal came in. "Aurora Hayes?" Aurora straightened herself up. "Yes sir." He told her to meet him in his office. When the principal asked her to go to his office, she could feel everyone's eyes on her as she got up from her seat. Aurora was getting really confused. Had she done something wrong? What had happened? All Aurora had been thinking about all the way there was that she might've been sent there to get in trouble. She began thinking about what rule she broke and what kind of punishment she was going to receive for that rule she broke. She walked up to the principal's office and opened the door to his face. He smiled. "Hey Aurora. Just wanted to see how you were doing." Aurora looked confused. "I wasn't in trouble." She said. She was trying to think of what she did wrong to even be there for a reason. The principal looked like he knew exactly what was going through her head and was ready for her to start laughing. He said, "Just relax." Aurora took a deep breath and he handed her a sheet. "Your essay was selected as one of the strongest submissions in the school." "What?" Aurora said. The principal looked at her again and said, "The scholarship committee was impressed." Aurora could feel a smile spread across her face. She spent so much time writing about things that were important to her, and then worrying about whether they sounded like they were important to anyone else. Aurora began to walk out the door and when she exited she began to run all the way to where Noah was sitting in the hallway. She had seen that he was walking over to the library when she saw her and she stopped to talk to him. "Noah." Noah stopped walking. "Are you okay? Why are you breathing so hard?" Aurora said, "They liked my essay." "Oh, that's good! Good for you." Aurora was feeling happy about it again and for a moment she wasn't so sad about the way her essay had been so well done. Noah was telling her again that she was good enough. Aurora was just feeling happy that someone believed in her, and even though she thought she knew about that from Ethan and Noah, it was still nice. She shared the news at dinner. She expected congratulations. Maybe even pride. Instead, silence filled the room. Her father slowly set down his fork. "So they're moving you to the next stage?" Aurora nodded. "Yes." Her mother forced a smile. "That's nice." Ethan was the one who walked up to her room and knocked on her door and said, "I heard the news." Aurora smiled. "Yeah, they wanted me to come down to ask about being selected for it." Ethan nodded. "And I knew you

were going to do well." For a minute Aurora had a smile on her face. She was happy to know that someone believed in her again. Noah and Ethan always believed in her, and it was hard for Aurora to know she was good enough sometimes.

The list for the scholarship interview came out on a Friday morning. Before the students had even reached the school grounds, the announcement board was already crowded. Aurora managed to push through. She stared at the page, her heart hammering in her chest. First time. Second time. Then, Yes. Aurora Hayes. She took a brief pause. She was in. "You made it." Aurora turned and Noah was right behind her. A smile broke across her face. "Guess you did." Noah's name was just a few lines below hers. It was the first time they were both really happy. It meant months of hard work were finally paying off. The day moved on from there in a haze. There were congratulatory handshakes. There was advice for her interviews. Even Maya kept coming up to her about it. "Wow. That's huge, Aurora." Aurora laughed. "Like I won already." "You might." The thought made her anxious. Winning the interview meant possibility. And it meant change. The kind her parents hated. Aurora brought up the news at dinner that evening. "I made the interview stage for the scholarship," she said. A quiet followed. Her dad looked up at her. Her mom almost dropped the fork she'd just lifted. "Well, congratulations, then," he replied. He said it like he had practiced the sentence, like it had been on his mind all night, like it was a formality. Aurora felt a slight chill. Her mom cleared her throat. "Which university will the interview be held at?" she asked. Aurora didn't know how long it would take to come up with an answer. "The university hosting it is in another city," she said. Immediately her mom's face hardened. The two of them exchanged a look. It was that look again. The one she hated. She went to her room in the evening, ready to study. A knock came at the door. It was Ethan. He came over with his notebook, his eyes wide. "You look anxious," he said, taking a seat next to her. "I am anxious." "You're going to do fine." "How do you know?" Aurora laughed. "Because you always do." Ethan could be the most convincing optimist ever. Sometimes she felt like Ethan believed in her more than she believed in herself. The next week, Aurora was too preoccupied with preparing for the interview. Questions. Answers. Reading. Study guides. Everything she did was spent in preparation. Noah had been too busy doing that himself, too. They'd often end up studying together after class, with both of them trying to give each other pointers. "What are you scared of?" he asked her one day. Aurora's brow furrowed. "You mean, during the interview?" "Uh-huh." She gave it a moment's thought. "Failure." "Sounds normal to me." "What about you?" Noah looked over at her for a moment. "I get the scholarship but I still won't be able to afford the tuition," he said. It hurt her heart to know Noah had such a financial concern. He was so smart. And he never made excuses like that. "Listen, you know what?" she said. "Uh-uh." "I think you're going to do great, too." A tiny grin came across his face. "Thanks, dude." There was no point in arguing with his self-assuredness. It didn't matter. It still helped. In the days

leading up to the interview, Aurora could feel her parents getting closer and closer to an edge. They were getting more and more reserved and tense. Everything was a discussion, about Noah or the scholarship or her life plans. That's when she realized that there was no way around it. On the second to the last day before she was to go in, her dad asked her to come over to his study. Aurora's stomach clenched instantly. This was not what she had been expecting. They were never alone together. They would always sit down with her to chat over the phone or to go for dinner together. But not in their study. He motioned for her to take a seat. She did, as usual. For a moment, all he did was stare at her. She waited. Finally, he spoke. "Aurora," he began. "Yes?" "If you don't get this scholarship..." He paused. "...You will go to school nearby." Aurora stopped breathing. It wasn't a question. It was a decision. That was made, and she wasn't part of it. Her throat felt like it was closing up. She couldn't breathe. "And if I do get it?" Her dad didn't say anything immediately, but she didn't need him to. It was that long, long pause that told her everything. It was that one long moment when she realized something frightening. The battle hadn't yet started. It was ongoing. And neither she nor her parents knew when either of them would back down. That night, she lay in bed awake. The scholarship interview was only a couple of days away. Her future was just in front of her. And so was the gap between her and her parents. And the darkness that fell on her bedroom wasn't enough to clear away what was on her mind. What if I win, she thought to herself. What will that mean... She wasn't sure she wanted to know.