

The bloom after the storm - Chapter 9 Chapter 8

Čöldhéärt6-7 minutes

In the week that followed, Aurora and Noah ended up spending quite a bit of time with each other. Not that they wanted to. Well, at least that's the justification they both clung to. The deadline was getting closer, and there was still so much to be done. So, every single day after school, they met in the library. And every day, Aurora learned another little something about Noah. For one thing, Aurora had realized almost instantly that Noah never wasted time. There was no point in him just sitting around at lunch, playing on his phone or chatting about the latest gossip; Noah was always occupied. Reading. Studying. Writing. Planning. Aurora saw how much she and Noah had in common. And it was why, even when they were talking, it felt like he always understood. One day after school, while they were going over research notes, Aurora noticed that Noah was staring blankly at the same page for several minutes. "Haven't moved on yet?" she finally asked. Noah slowly lifted his head from the book. "I know, I was already over it." "Then why are you looking at it still?" Noah inhaled deeply. "Nothing." Aurora raised a single eyebrow. "'Nothing' is a weird answer when nothing's wrong. It's actually the one people usually say when something is wrong." Noah didn't respond right away. And then he closed the book. "My mom has taken on extra shifts at work." Aurora stayed quiet while she waited for him to continue. "She's just so worn out." Her surprise was clear on her face. "Did you pitch in?" she asked. "Whenever I can," Noah replied. Aurora nodded, and in that instant, everything finally started to make sense. The tattered old backpack. The battered old umbrella. The fact that he never bought anything from the cafeteria. And yet Noah was never complaining. At the end of that day, Aurora and Noah left the library together. When they reached the school gate, Noah suddenly stopped. Just a few meters from the entrance was a local grocery. No word was exchanged, but Noah walked across the street and walked in. Aurora had to follow to get a clear view. "Hey! How's it going?" Noah asked when they saw the shop's owner. "Not so bad, I see you arrived at a different hour than usual." "Oh yeah. Got the school work finished up a bit earlier than planned," Noah explained. *Finished school work?* Aurora looked puzzled. Suddenly Aurora realized what was going on. And she saw Noah walking past the shopkeeper's counter. Aurora's eyes nearly popped. That was Noah's second job. On that night, Aurora simply couldn't stop thinking about Noah's day. Noah went to school all morning, did school work the whole afternoon, and spent the evening working. And despite that, he somehow found time to help her with their project. She felt rather guilty. Aurora was always complaining about her problems. And Noah had so much more than a lot of the teens in his age group ever could.

But yet he never complained. The next afternoon, Aurora came to the library carrying two sandwiches. Noah looked slightly puzzled. "What's that?" he asked when Aurora put one of the sandwiches in front of him. "Lunch." "Haven't you just had lunch?" "No, you haven't, have you?" His expression changed quickly. Aurora folded her arms across her chest. "Again? You skipped lunch, didn't you?" Noah looked away from her. Aurora started laughing. "I knew you had." "You didn't have to buy that for me." "Well, maybe I did," Aurora shrugged. The two didn't speak for a second. And then Noah took the sandwich. "Thank you," he said quietly. Aurora smiled softly. A simple moment, but one of the first times they had done something for another without even asking them to. The moment mattered. When Aurora got home on that evening, she saw Ethan waiting for her in her room. "Finally," he said when Aurora stepped through the door. "You never cared before how late I'd be home," Aurora noted. "No, I don't. But Mom did." Aurora's smile faded. *Of course.* "What is it?" Aurora asked. Ethan shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but they've been asking about where you've been every day since last week." Aurora leaned against the doorframe. "The library. I told you already." "I just let them know." And Aurora looked over at her brother. It was clear to her that Ethan felt no need to be curious about her as long as her parents didn't. Ethan didn't ever judge her. He made Aurora feel less guilty about having a different life. She had to think she would have no idea what to do without Ethan at her side. "Ethan?" she asked finally. Aurora looked over her shoulder. "Yeah?" Ethan stood from his desk. "You look different today. You look like you're in a better mood." Aurora smiled. "Have I?" "Yeah. Whatever it is that's doing it, you need to keep doing it." And with that, Aurora grabbed a pillow and tossed it at him. Ethan ducked and dashed right out of the room. That night Aurora opened up her notebook to a clean page. For the first time in weeks, she didn't feel alone. The feeling between Aurora and her parents was still strained. And the pressure she was feeling didn't stop there. But now she had Noah. She even had Ethan. Two people who had helped her cope with her problems a little bit easier. Aurora smiled. Sometimes the right people just come around exactly when they're needed. And just a little longer, she added. Even when you don't even know that you need them.