
Chapter 1

NIRVANA - PRESENT *Day*

Ravi drives slowly towards the hospital leaving me to look out the window, watching as the rain slopes down the window. His words ricochet in my head. He wants me. Even after everything. He hasn't asked me questions, but I didn't really expect him to. He is usually the type of man who waits until you can no longer hold it in any longer.

And maybe I'll eventually tell him. When I no longer carry shame from it. But it wasn't going to be any time soon and I knew that. The drive to the hospital feels longer than usual, but I don't mind. It gives me time to prepare what I want to say to Aero, or to prepare for whatever it is I'm going to see. He pulls up to the hospital and parks, turning to me.

"Would you like me to come in or stay here?"

Glancing at the entrance, I sigh. "I don't know," I say honestly.

"We can sit here for a minute if you'd like," he offers.

I nod in thanks, gazing out into the distance. “I wish there were books on how to deal with watching your person die,” I mutter.

“Even if there were, I doubt it’ll be accurate.”

I smile softly to myself. “Why’s that?”

He shrugs. “People grieve differently.”

My eyes go to him. “How do you grieve?”

“I sign contracts for the military or become a firefighter,” he said with a serious expression on his face.

For some reason that shocks a laugh out of me. “Delaney would call that proactive though.”

His laughter joins mine. “I guess she would.”

When we stopped laughing, I grab the handle of the car door and turn to him, “Thank you for making me laugh. I’ll be back in a few minutes, okay?”

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.” I believed him too. He wore such a sincere expression that I knew he’d be here when I left her room. I lean forward and press a kiss to his stubbled cheek. “Thank you,” I repeat and climb out of the car, uncaring that it was raining. I walk into the hospital, go to the front, and get my visitors badge.

I make my way down the hall, shaking out my hands struggling to calm the nerves sliding through me. This feeling is becoming too familiar to me. Almost like a routine I’ve fallen into. And I guess in a way I did. Swallowing the nerves, I walk into Aero’s room where I see her lying there alone. The room is dark, and the sound of machines is loud, drowning out the sound of the rain. Or maybe it’s just overly loud to me, like a timer that consists of constant beeping. Counting down the dreaded day when she takes her last breath. And it’s soon. I can feel it. I can see it.

Her face is nearly gray, and her body is so much smaller than is healthy. Her hair is dry and brittle, and her lips

chapped and pale. Moving closer, I pull a chair next to her bed, sitting next to her and pulling her cold hand into mine.

When someone is dying, they never tell you how it would feel, how it would look or even smell. It was a sick feeling, almost as if you were stuck between life and death. The room was colder and had a sweet scent followed by the stench of disinfectant that somehow surrounded the room even when Isola brought flowers.

I don't say anything, I just hold her hand. Rubbing my finger over the top of her hand. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for," whispered a soft, hoarse voice.

Pressing Aero's hand to my face I stare at her. "If I am so strong, why can't I let you go?" I ask.

She smiles slightly. "Because I'm the best, duh."

"Yeah. Yeah, you are," I whisper, holding her to me until she falls asleep again. When her breathing evens out I stand and press a kiss to her warm head. "I'll be back soon," I promise. And I keep it, showing up every day.

Sighing softly, I run the sponge up Aero's arm, washing away as much grime as possible before dipping it into the basin again and going over it a second time. It's been two weeks since her wedding and over a month and a half since her diagnosis and she is declining more and more. I know the doctor had said only a few months, but I couldn't have imagined it being this fast. I hated seeing her in pain. I hated seeing her mind slowly lose itself.

I've been here every single day after I visited her that night of her wedding. Even then she was declining, but I didn't think it would progress at this speed. She's either forgotten where she was, who I was, or she was angry, lashing out at anything and everyone. She's been vomiting and

seizing a lot and I fear that I can expect her to be gone any day now. I've spoken to Isola, and she's confirmed that she and Aero planned the funeral after finding out and everything is set up. That knowledge weighed heavily on me, knowing my sister had to plan her own funeral broke a little piece of me.

Sighing again, I move to the other side of the bed and lift up her arm and begin washing it using soothing circles. Today she was being moved into hospice to make it easier for her, to decrease the pain, the torment it will likely be for her, so she can hopefully pass in peace. My vision blurs as I dip the sponge in water again. I force myself to take a shaky breath and start on her legs. It pains me that Isola isn't here with her, but I understand. I get not wanting to see the love of your life suffering, to watch as they forget you as if she were never in her life.

The signs were there, they probably always have been. At least this last year. Aero got more headaches and was told it was from stress and not eating enough. I guess we should've pressed more instead of taking it at face value. But there's no use in wondering about the what if's. Everything is done and there's no going back. I finish her bath and dry her before putting on some fuzzy socks to keep her warm. I dump the water and put it on the cart the nurse left before walking back into the room. Her breathing has been labored and choppy for the last few days and I can feel the life draining from her. Even with the oxygen moving through her with the help of the machine I knew it wouldn't be enough.

I step beside her and rub a hand over her head.

"I'm not ready for you to go. Not yet. It shouldn't be like this." I press a kiss to her hair, swallowing hard. "Do you remember that one Christmas, the one with just me and you? I was nineteen and you were fourteen. You were so excited

because you had saved up money to go shopping and we went to our very first Black Friday sale.”

“You... tripped... into that... old lady,” Aero slurred out, coughing with each word. It’s the first semi-coherent sentence I’ve gotten out of her.

I sob softly. “Yeah, you wanted that new Game Boy. We almost got kicked out of the mall fighting with her.”

Aero’s dry lips lift up at the corner but she doesn’t open her eyes. “Best... Christmas... ever.”

I nod, pressing my head against hers. “Yeah, it was. I have never seen you so happy.” And it’s sad that one gift made her so happy. The only gift I was able to afford after spending nights working in a small diner by my dental school. But just seeing her smile made all those long nights worth it. “I’m so sorry, Aero.”

“Love you,” she whispered. It sounded like goodbye. There was a finality in her tone that sent my heart dropping before speeding up. I pressed another kiss to her head and stepped back, looking at her one last time before I left the room. I just needed to get out of the room to breathe. The smell of death hung so heavily in the air that it was slowly choking the life out of me. I leave the room, closing the door behind me, and lean against it. Taking a deep, shaky breath.

“Hey,” a voice says beside me. I glance to the side and see Marcy standing there, twisting her fingers together.

“Why are you here?” I ask, my tone sounds more tired than I would’ve liked but it is what it is.

Marcy swallows, places a hand on her throat then says, “Can we talk?”

“We are talking.”

“I mean, in private.”

I shake my head. “No. If you want to talk you can do so out here.”

Marcy sighs then looks at me, her dark eyes trailing over me. “I wanted to apologize. For what happened back then.”

I scoff. “What? You mean when you kissed me on a dare, had me sent away to absolve me from my sins at a camp, then proceeded to shout at me when I got back for your phone being taken away for the summer and having no privacy? Oh, and then you slapped me. That’s what you’re apologizing for?”

Marcy rolls her eyes. “It was a camp, Nirvana. A stupid Bible camp. We’ve both been to them.”

I step closer to her, anger filling me, blinding me with a burning rage that was slowly boiling over. “It wasn’t a Bible camp, Marcy. It was a fucking conversion camp. Where we were put through therapy that was traumatizing. I still get headaches from the fucking shock therapy. I still remember the time I was forced to watch a heterosexual couple have sex in my first ever porno. It wasn’t even good porn. It was weird 80s porn with the pizza guys and bad acting. It sure as fuck wasn’t Christian fucking Gray.”

She pales. “What? I was told you were sent to a Bible camp.” Her eyes widened, but I didn’t care. I sure as fuck didn’t want her pity. It was her fault. I was good at pretending, I could fake being straight, I liked dick as much as the next person. But if I could’ve pretended for the next few years I could have explored when I was a legal adult. I could have come out when I was good and ready. But no, it was stolen from me, like everything else. My life wasn’t my own for years, my mind, my body. No, that belonged to a camp that was supposed to fix me “for my own good”. But the fact that Marcy stood here in front of me, thinking it was like some lame Bible camp that we were forced to attend for a week every goddamn summer was laughable.

I scoff sarcastically, “Who told you that? My father? When was that? When you were on your knees for him or

when he stood behind you?” I shudder dramatically, just the image made my stomach turn and bile form in the back of my throat.

Marcy flinched. “Don’t be so vulgar. He’s your father.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh sweetheart, I wasn’t vulgar when you had your tongue down my throat. Don’t apologize to me. You and I both know it’s only to help you feel better and to help you get over your guilt. Just because you give a half-assed apology doesn’t mean I have to give you half-assed forgiveness.”

Marcy stepped closer placing her hand on my chest. “Nirvana, please. We used to be so close.”

I grip her hand and push it away. “*Used to* being the operative words. Touch me again, and I will defend myself.”

“I’m pregnant. You wouldn’t harm a pregnant woman.”

“You may be pregnant, but your face isn’t. And we both know how much you enjoy slapping people,” I say, stepping back. Not that I’d actually touch her, but I’ll be damned if she comes at me trying to touch me. Not after what she did to me. Not after everything, especially not in front of my dying sister’s hospital room.

Marcy throws her hands up, tears filling her eyes. “Nirvana, I’m trying here.”

I turn away, taking a breath. I needed to get this out of my head. I look at Aero’s room and press my hand to the door, forcing myself to speak. “Why are you married to him? He’s old enough to be your grandfather,” I finally turn to her and ask.

She doesn’t answer, just looks at her feet. “Is it even his baby?” I ask when she doesn’t say anything for a prolonged amount of time.

Marcy shakes her head. “No. No, it’s not.”

I burst into hysterical laughter, “Oh my god! This is too good! The preacher’s new precious wife is an adultering

whore. Well, good luck there mommy dearest. You're going to need it."

"Have you always been such a bitch?" she snaps, all pretense of making amends gone. Not that I believe she had good intentions to begin with. I was used to her fake ordeals, used to being told that I should forgive and forget. But she could bite me.

I shrug and reply, "I'm what you all made me."