

PROLOGUE



Truce – Twenty One Pilots

AINSLEY

*B*EEP... BEEP...

FLOATING...I was floating. My body...weightless. For the first time in almost three years, the constant pain that had been pushing on me, threatening to suffocate me...lifted and was gone.

I felt...*free*.

Beep... Beep...

Finally, I was done and untied, drifting in this place that no longer held me in its terrible grip.

Beep... Beep...

I hovered near the edge, staring down at that empty shell as the doctor and nurses fought to save me. The scene should have sent more anguish through me. The ripped clothes, the chaos, but all I felt was peace.

The body left behind looked like me, but it wasn't, not really. It hadn't been me for so long. I had lost myself in that person ages ago.

Something tugged at me, pulling me down, away from the peacefulness I felt and back toward that cold, empty body. *My prison.* I grasped out around me but only caught handfuls of air. Nothing to hold on to. The pull got stronger. Dread washed over me as I realized what was happening.

I had to go back.

"Push a dose of ketamine, now!"

The weightlessness was out of reach, leaving me confused and exhausted. A new, heavy sensation pushed down on me.

No! I screamed, but no noise left my mouth. Even as the weight of my body and my illness pressed down on me, I longed for the weightlessness I'd felt, the brief glimpse of freedom. I wanted it back.

“Give me a laryngoscope.”

A sharp pain coursed through me, down my mouth, into my throat.

I tried to raise my hand, trying to yank whatever was there away. But it wouldn't move. The weight was pushing on my hand as well.

No! I screamed again, but no one heard me. It was pointless.

“I'm in. Tube her.”

Finally, I surrendered to the darkness as it closed in, and everything went completely black.

ETHAN

“FILL THESE OUT, PLEASE.” The nurse at the ER admin desk shoved a clipboard holding a stack of insurance forms into my hands. “Once we get your partner stabilized, I'll go find out about sending you in to see her.” She gave me a curt nod and disappeared behind the desk.

What had I been thinking? I hadn't been thinking. Not much beyond getting my neighbor here in time. I had been living next door to Ainsley for the last six months, ever since

the construction on my house was completed. And I had noticed her from day one. Who wouldn't, with her striking blue eyes, long blonde hair, and a body every man dreams of? But there was more. She had this frailty about her, if you looked close enough. And it drew me in, right from the start. But she never let me get further than a few pleasantries. Still, it didn't stop me from trying. And I had tried to be her friend.

When I found her earlier today... I shuddered as the memory washed over me.

I clutched the letter in my hand, secretly happy I had an excuse to ring Ainsley's doorbell. The mailman had messed up and I couldn't let the opportunity slide, noting her car in the driveway.

Walking up to the door, I rolled my shoulders and took a deep breath, aiming for cool and suave, not flustered and eager like she had me feeling each time I caught a glimpse of her.

I rang the bell and turned to soak up the bright rays of sun, feeling my stomach knot as the anticipation rose. A few seconds passed, but no one came to open the door.

I turned to ring the bell again, sure she was home, when I stopped dead in my tracks, my hand still suspended in the air. My heart started pounding in my chest as the ground beneath me felt like it was moving.

"Ainsley! Ainsley!" I pounded on the door, her lifeless body sprawled on the floor in the hallway just visible through the sidelights. My palms felt moist as I fought against the rising panic.

“Ainsley!!” My voice was hoarse as I belted out her name over and over.

Instinct took over. I ran to the back door and found it unlocked. I hadn’t ever let myself in, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

“Ainsley!” I fell on my knees next to her, taking in the full scene. Her chest was barely moving, her lips a faint shade of blue. An empty pill bottle lay on the floor beside her. I picked it up, already sure of what was going on but needing to confirm it. Time seemed to stand still as I pieced it all together, but the loud, ringing sound in my ears forced me to move and get help.

“Ainsley, what have you done?” I cried as I slipped my phone out of my back pocket and called 911. I hoped I wasn’t too late, that we still had time.

“What happened?” One of the paramedics loaded her on a gurney while the other got to work checking her vitals. I rehashed all I knew, which wasn’t very much.

They loaded her in the ambulance, and after getting the right info about where they were taking her, I sped over to the hospital in record time.

“What’s your relationship to the patient?” The ER clerk typed in Ainsley’s name without making eye contact.

“I don’t see how that’s important now,” I growled.

“Only the next of kin can see the patient.” She looked up for the first time and took in my panicked state.

“I’m her...boyfriend.” Where did that come from? I didn’t even know her that well, but I couldn’t take it back now.

“I see.” The woman stared up at me over her wide-rimmed

glasses, pausing as she studied me. Did she pick up on my hesitation? Did she detect the lie?

“Please take a seat. I’ll have her paperwork ready in just a sec.”

I released the breath I held and dropped down in the vinyl seat, overcome by the events of the past hour.

I’d been waiting for over two hours, and I was frantic. I didn’t do so well in a hospital setting.

“Mr. Van Der Beek?” A doctor dressed in light blue scrubs walked into the waiting area. I stood up.

“Yes?” My heart beat double time, waiting for him to give me news on Ainsley.

“We were able to stabilize your girlfriend.” The word made me wince. The doctor luckily mistook it for the info he was delivering, and his expression softened, his eyes full of sympathy. “Ainsley experienced respiratory depression, and we needed to intubate her to ensure she was getting enough oxygen.”

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and nodded my understanding.

“We’ll keep her in the ICU until she gains consciousness.”

“But she’s going to be okay?” I pleaded.

“We’ll know for sure tomorrow. I think you got to her in time.” He patted me on the shoulder and turned to leave but reconsidered.

“Mr. Van Der Beek.” He stared into my eyes.

“Yes?” I felt the weight of the day settle on my shoulders.

“Your girlfriend is very sick. Even if she makes a full physical recovery, you have a long road ahead of you.”

I nodded, my eyes stinging. “Thank you, Doctor.” I sank onto one of the chairs lining the side of the waiting area. If anyone knew how long that road was, it was me.

CHAPTER ONE



How to Save a Life – The Fray

AINSLEY

I tried to kill myself. Correction: I killed myself, I just didn't succeed. It wasn't bad enough I screwed up everything else in my life, lost all I held dear; I failed at that as well. How pathetic could a person get? Seriously!

“Would someone like to share why they're here?” Carol, my group counselor at Ridgemont Psychiatric Hospital, searched the circle for a willing candidate. I'd been there for forty-eight hours of the required seventy-two, and I was counting the hours that stood between me and departure.

I squirmed in my seat, knowing I hadn't spoken since I'd

arrived. I was only required to stay my seventy-two hours, but I wasn't sure they'd let me leave if I didn't prove I was at least aware of what I'd done. They had to see I would be okay to leave this place. In other words, not try to kill myself again.

"I'll go." I raised my hand, feeling a dozen sets of eyes turn to me.

"Great." Carol offered me that typical counselor smile, the one that's too wide and encouraging. I fought off the irritation her bright demeanor evoked and swallowed before I found the courage to get this over with.

"I'm Ainsley," I started, noting several people that had looked up when I raised my hand sag down in their chair. I couldn't blame them. I didn't care about their sad tale; why would they want to listen to mine?

"Tell us why you're here, Ainsley." She prompted me to continue.

"I was done, so I tried to kill myself." I threw it out as emotionless as I could, because if I played numb, then I could remain numb. No need to open up that well of emotions. Last time I tried, I ended up making a compete idiot of myself in front of my ex-husband. Yeah, I wasn't making that mistake again.

Carol didn't even flinch. Years of experience, I guessed. "Why did you feel like you were done?" She turned it back to me.

"Too much pain." I kept my answers short. No need to let the volcano of emotions boiling under the surface erupt. If I

kept the mask in place, no one would know how messed up I really was.

“And when you woke up in the hospital?” Carol scribbled something in her folder before her eyes landed on me again.

Waking up in the hospital had been surreal. At first, I thought I was dreaming. It couldn’t be real, could it? But slowly, fragments of my memories came back. Visiting Jackson, his rejection—again, the alcohol, the pills. And it hit me. I had tried to kill myself. The pain of these past years became too much. But I hadn’t been able to get away with it. I was still here. Stuck in this prison of pain, confusion, and emptiness. I felt empty. All I had ever loved was gone—either cold and buried in the ground or lost because I made a monumental mistake.

God, I hated myself.

“Ainsley?” Carol called me back to the present.

“Huh?” I shook off the confusing thoughts and tried to remember what she asked. The medication they gave me made my mind a fuzzy mess.

“When you woke up in the hospital?”

“Ethan was there,” I acknowledged. I remembered opening my eyes and staring into tired, grayish blue pools of sorrow focused on me. I still hadn’t figured out what he was doing there. My neighbor. At least, that’s what I thought, right? Man, those meds were messing with my head.

Ethan sat by my bed. His hand was clasped in mine, and he looked like he had been there for days. It didn’t make sense. And the doctor kept calling him my boyfriend. What

was that about? I tried to interrupt, set the record straight. But he cut me off.

“It was the only way I could be here. Stay with you,” he whispered, once the doctor had left.

Whatever that meant. Honestly, I was too out of it to protest. My mind was a jumbled chaos in the aftermath of all the stuff I took and whatever else they gave me. So I went along with it.

“You were lucky he was there.” Carol made another note, distracting me. *Lucky* wasn’t what I would call it. In the two days I’d been at the hospital, I hadn’t felt lucky at all.

“All right, everyone, that’s all we have time for today.” Carol indicated the end of our group session, and I let out a sigh of relief. Another step closer to leaving the place.

As I walked back to my room, my mind drifted back to those moments I wasn’t sure were memories or my mind playing tricks on me.

“Please, don’t let her die.” The hand tightened around mine.

“I don’t think I can do this again.” I felt the hand loosen and return a few seconds later. Something felt different, though. The light touch from before seemed off. What was it? My mind tried to break through the haze to help me piece the puzzle together. What was that I felt?

The finger that stroked my arm now was wet. Could it have been a tear? And were those soft sounds a person crying?

Waking up had been the worst shock. Then, seeing that

hopeful face had thrown me. As I lay there, trying to piece together what happened, one thing kept bugging me. Why was Ethan there? And why did he care?



“BEFORE YOU LEAVE HERE, Ainsley, I wanted to talk to you.” Dr. Mitchell dropped my file on his desk and steepled his fingers in front of him. His dull blue stare rested on me, making me squirm in my seat.

“I had a long chat with your boyfriend.” My hackles raised. Each time anyone referred to him as that, I felt defensive. He wasn’t even a friend. But I played along, hoping it got me out of there sooner.

“Okay,” I replied, eager to end the session and go home. I’d done my time.

“He has agreed to take care of you.”

“What do you mean, ‘take care of me?’” I wasn’t sure his and my definition meant the same.

“After an attempted suicide, it’s important to have a support system in place. You already told me your parents aren’t around, right?” I thought of Mom and Dad, on one of their cruises for months on end, and shook my head in the negative.

“No siblings, either?” I’m sure he knew that; it must be in my file. Again, I shook my head no.

“Mr. Van Der Beek is willing and able to be there to help you get through this.” The mention of his full name brought

images of him to my mind. His longish wavy dark blond hair, those dark blue-gray eyes, and that beard.

“Ainsley.” Dr. Mitchell’s voice broke through my rambling thoughts. “Are you comfortable with that?”

I couldn’t imagine why anyone in their right mind would want to commit to something like that, but if it got me out of here, I was willing to play along.

“Okay,” I replied. I didn’t know what else to say.

“Perfect. He’ll be here in twenty minutes to get you.”

ETHAN

I DROVE up the long drive of Ridgemont Psychiatric Hospital and heaved a sigh. The last week had been like a bad dream. Waiting for Ainsley to wake up in the ICU and breathe on her own had been torture. Sitting next to her, holding her hand... My blood still ran cold remembering the feel of her lifeless hand in mine.

When she finally woke up, she was a mess. She looked up, and her blue eyes that used to be bright were dull as they bore in mine. I read the question there as they filled with tears. *Why am I still here?* I didn’t have any words for her. I didn’t even have an explanation why I was by her side. But I was. And I held onto her hand as she awoke, and I didn’t let her go. Not until they made me.

Even Dr. Mitchell’s words hadn’t chased me away.

“You realize the responsibility you’re taking on by agreeing to have Ms. Wright stay with you during her recovery?” Dr. Mitchell studied me as I shifted in my seat. I hated lying. My mom had raised me to always tell the truth. Yet there I sat in Ainsley’s doctor’s office, agreeing to overthrow my whole life because of one lie I’d told in the ER.

“Uh...yes.” I hesitated.

“Mr. Van Der Beek, I need you to be sure. The situation is serious.”

No kidding.

“If you’re not sure, I need to consider keeping Ms. Wright here while she recovers from the trauma she’s been through. She’s very fragile at the moment. She needs around-the-clock supervision and a good support system in place. The next weeks—months, even—are going to be rough.” He stared at me, waiting for a reply.

“I understand,” I replied, not sure what else I could say. The full impact of the situation dawned on me as I contemplated all the implications of taking Ainsley home with me. I’d need to take leave, shift some of my duties at work over to one of the senior partners, get rid of all the medicine at home...

“Can I count on you to be there for her? To be that person?”

The responsibility seemed too much for me to take on. I couldn’t handle all of that. But something tugged at me deep inside, convincing me I had to step up. I was all Ainsley had right now. I couldn’t let her down, and I knew I couldn’t live with myself if something went wrong. I couldn’t go through that again.

“Here is her prescription for her new meds and her appointment schedule.” The nurse stuck the papers in my hand, bringing me back to the present. My attention drifted to Ainsley. She shifted from one foot to the other, not meeting my gaze. I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t know how to act, either.

“You got everything?” I reached out to take the bag she clutched to her middle, but she didn’t release it, hugging it even tighter to her.

“All set.” She gave a fake smile and walked out of the place. I followed behind after signing us out.

“Thanks for picking me up,” she started, walking out to the lot, unsure of which direction she was going. I caught up to her, pressing the fob of my keys, unlocking my BMW, and tipping her off to veer to the left.

“No problem.” I didn’t have a better reply. How did one act in situations like this? I didn’t know.

After reaching the car, I held out the door for her. “Thanks,” she answered automatically, before sliding into the passenger seat, still hanging on to her bag for dear life.

“Sure.” I closed the door behind her and inhaled a deep breath. What did I just get into?



“YOU CAN JUST DROP me off here.” She stared in front of her as we drove up to our cul-de-sac on Chestnut Drive, not glancing over as she spoke. Her hand was on the handle,

ready to bolt. I pulled into my driveway, and her eyebrows drew together. Her eyes risked a peek but pulled back when she met my full stare.

“Thanks again for all your help,” she breathed out, clutching her bag to her middle as if it were her lifeline. Her knuckles were white as she twisted the handles even tighter. Her hand made another move for the door. On instinct, I reached out to stop her. She pulled back, inhaling sharply. My hand grazed hers, skin meeting skin. The contact sent electricity coursing down my fingers all the way to my toes. I looked over at her and gulped.

“Wait.” I cleared my throat and started again. “I promised I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.” I ran a hand through my hair, struggling with what to say next.

“I know.” She twisted sideways, setting those icy blues on me. My stomach tightened, surprising me. I knew she had a physical effect on me. I’d known that for the six months I’d lived next to her. Being this close to her, though, took things to a whole new level.

“I can’t let you go home.” I pulled my hand back, noticing it was still too close to her personal space. Her eyes narrowed, and she took a deep breath. Seconds ticked by before she answered, and I felt my heart rate speed up.

“You did more than enough,” she replied, her voice flat as her eyes chilled.

“No.” I fought back the memory of finding her barely breathing, her lips turning blue. My eyes closed, and I swallowed the rising pain. “I did what anyone would do.” I

kept my voice even, warm, trying to let her know I did care. Didn't she need to feel that now? That someone cared?

"No, you didn't." She laughed bitterly. Her eyes, they told a different story. She blinked, but I saw the unshed tears, the pain that she tried to hide.

"I can't leave you." I barely heard my own words.

"Yes." Anger took over. "You can. And you will. You don't owe me anything." Her voice rose with each word, packed with more and more emotion.

"Maybe I don't," I conceded. "But I'm not letting you go." She stared at me, speechless. "You are coming with me. No arguing."

I got out of the car, but she remained seated, the bag still plastered to her. I walked over to her side and opened the door.

"Please, let me do this for you." I hated the desperation in my voice.

"What's in it for you?" She took on that challenging stance, one I'd seen so often in her in the time I'd known her. One that told me she didn't let people get close.

"The opportunity to right a wrong," I admitted. Why did I let that slip?

Her eyes studied me as she chewed her bottom lip. Seconds dragged as she stared, likely weighing her options. I saw resignation in her eyes when she finally gave in. "Okay." She released the breath she held as she took my outstretched hand and slid out of the car.