

60

**TRAVIS
STROUD**

4 AM

Fiction Excerpt

The crazy thing is that, out of the three of us, everyone assumed I would be the first to die. Hell, I assumed it too, but that's not what happened, which is why we're all standing around an open grave, listening to some local priest whose name I have either forgotten or never caught in the first place, dressed all in black even though it's the sort of sticky, sweltering day that can kill old people and babies that get left in cars.

Something moves in my peripheral vision and I turn to look. It's Martin, sweat pouring and gleaming on his puffy white skin. He's looking at me, and now I'm looking back at him, squinting because the angle puts the sun in my eyes. The way he looks is confused, like he can't remember where he put his keys. I imagine I look blank, same as always. Martin mouths a word I don't catch and I shrug. I turn back to the grave, and his clothes rustle as he does the same.

We're both staring at Peter, the priest's words buzzing around us like insects. We're actually staring at the box Peter is in, I guess, but when you haven't seen someone in years there isn't much of a difference. What's inside that box probably has nothing to do with the Peter I remember anyway.

Martin and I are silent, but a lot of people are crying. Peter's mom is screaming and pulling at her hair, his dad is holding his nose and clenching his eyes shut like he's in a pool with too much chlorine, and his sisters are holding each other, shaking. There are dozens of people, and most of them are crying, sniffing, sobbing; it's kind of like a chamber orchestra, but the people are instruments and despair is the conductor.

The fact that so many people are here, crying, makes me happy; it makes me happy for Peter, I mean. He always loved to be liked by people, and I can't think of a better way to show that you're fond of someone than crying over their death. After all, anyone can lie about liking you, but most people can't fake tears.

Sweat drips into my eye and I make a noise. I reach up to rub it, wincing, and suddenly a smooth, soft hand wraps around my own. I open one eye to see Zoe looking at me, her eyes red and her dark cheeks shimmering. Her lips are pursed, and I wonder if she's hiding lips like hers out of respect for the dead. I know I wouldn't want people thinking of violating my mouth if I were trying to mourn.

I consider telling her I'm not crying, that I just got sweat in my eye, but I decide not to. I rub my eyes instead, do my best to give her a comforting smile, and squeeze her hand back. We both win this way; she gets a companion in her grief, and I get to touch her. I feel a moment of guilt over enjoying the contact when I should be concentrating on Peter's grave, or the words of the priest, but it doesn't last. Peter is

dead, and he was always trying to get me to socialize more when we still talked. In fact, he tried to set me up with Zoe once. I used to be obsessed with her, and he did his best to help me get her, but I was too shy to follow through. I squeeze her hand again and wonder if he got his way after all.

I stop paying any attention to the proceedings and concentrate on Zoe's hand. The priest quotes some biblical passages that I don't catch, - and, heathen that I am, probably wouldn't have understood - Peter's mother screams and thrashes some more, and everyone starts to disperse. Zoe's hand is still in mine as we walk away. Either she decides to let me lead or I do it without thinking, I'm not sure. Either way, I make a bee-line for the nearest patch of shade. I sigh, close my eyes, and lean against a rough brick wall.

"I just don't understand," she says, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. It's wiped off a lot of her make-up, and I like her face more now.

"The last time I saw him, he was so happy. It just doesn't make sense. How could this have happened?"

I shrug, watching as the last of the mourners leave. In their black clothing, they look like identical blank shadows. That image bothers me like a forgotten name, so I drop it.

"I really don't know," I say. "I hadn't talked to him in years."

I could have answered her question truthfully, but I decided not to. I am a liar.

"That's sad," she says, taking my hand again. "You guys used to be best friends. I can't imagine what you and Martin must be going through right now.

I just nod and squeeze her hand.

It was almost four a.m. when my phone began to dance, buzzing and skittering across the table, desperate for my attention. I had only been asleep for an hour or two. Otherwise it would have taken something more extreme to get me up. It still took three long buzzes, followed by a yelp and a crash as the phone fell on my cat, for me to get to my feet and answer. I flipped the phone open and saw the name that I had considered deleting over and over in the three years since graduation. I mashed the green button beneath the screen and brought the phone to my ear.

"Peter," I said, closing my eyes and lowering myself back onto the bed, "do you know what time it is?"

There was silence on the other line, and for a moment I thought he had hung up right when I answered. I pulled the phone away to check but it said the call was still active. I only caught the last part of something he said as I put it back to my ear.

"-for bothering you," he said. "I'll let you go back to sleep."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. "No, I'm awake now. It's alright."

The line grew silent again, but I didn't bother to check the phone. He would either say what he had called to say or he would lose his nerve. I wasn't angry at him, but if he thought I would do small talk that early in the morning, after three years of silence, he didn't know me as well as either of us had once thought.

"Hey," he finally said. "This is going to sound weird."

"I've yet to have a call after two in the morning that didn't."

He might have laughed, or maybe he coughed. I wasn't really sure.

"Ian, I'm dying."

"Wow," I said, wondering if that sounded wrong. "That's terrible. How long do you have?"

"I don't know. I went down the vein, which I heard is the way you're supposed to do it, but I never really looked up how long it's supposed to take. I'm starting to get pretty cold, though, so I don't think it will be much longer."

"Oh," I said, my eyes opening to stare through the darkness at my ceiling.

"Yeah."

Water was sloshing in the background.

"Aren't you going to say anything," he asked. I realized I'd been quiet for a couple of minutes.

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't know. I just want someone to talk to while this happens. I'm not afraid of being dead; I want that. It's the dying that's scaring me."

"Well, I don't really know what to say." I sighed. "Why me, I guess?"

There was a long silence, broken by a few faint splashes. "You're the only person I could think of who wouldn't make me feel bad about this."

"Why are you doing it?"

"Because I don't want to be alive anymore."

It was a perfectly acceptable answer, but it wasn't something I had ever expected Peter to say.

"And you're sure?" I said. "You're sure this is what you want? It isn't too late to call an ambulance."

"Yeah," he said softly. I wasn't sure if he was just calm or if he didn't have the strength to be any louder. "Yeah, this is what I want."

I nodded even though he couldn't see it.

"Well I'm here," I said. "You can talk to me if you've got anything to say, but otherwise I'm just going to be here. Is that alright?"

"Yeah. Thank you," he whispered, and I was sure he was getting weaker.

I kept the phone pressed to my ear, listening to the ways his breathing changed. Every now and then there was a splash as he shifted in what I assumed was his tub. Then his breathing got slower and there weren't as many splashes. Then, after a while, I stopped hearing anything. My ear was hot under the phone, so I pulled it away and closed it. I placed it on my nightstand and lay there, staring at the glowing numbers on my clock until I drifted out of consciousness.

I'm holding Zoe's hands again, and we're both slick and shiny with sweat even though the room is air-conditioned. We're sweating because we're excited, and she's holding my hands to help keep her balance. She rises on the balls of her feet, the muscles in her thighs shivering beneath her skin. Her hands press down on mine and her head rolls back. I watch the curve of her throat as she cries out and her body grasps at mine, desperate to plunge back down.

My eyes close and my toes curl as she swallows me again. She pants and whimpers, exhausted. She has already climaxed twice and, the way her legs are shaking, I'm not surprised when she doesn't lift herself back up. She moves her knees down to support herself instead and begins to grind. Her body rolls like a serpent, with waves beginning at her dark brown hips, curving over her soft stomach, drawing my eyes over her round little breasts, cresting at her swan's neck. Her head bobs with each wave, loose and delirious.

Maybe a minute passes, maybe five. Eventually something slips and my body wrenches itself from me.

It's like realizing the brakes on your car don't work.

It's like the lurch in your stomach when you lose your balance.

It's like when the breathing on the phone stops.

I quake and groan. My teeth clench and I clutch her to me like I need her to live. I pour myself into her, gasping and, for just a moment, forgetting everything.

Her cheek rests on my chest, slick and wet, and her breath rushes across my skin in warm little bursts. One of my hands is still resting in hers; the other drifts up to touch her hair. She purrs and her face shifts on my skin. I assume she's smiling, and I am as well. I don't love her, but I don't think I would like her as much if I did.

"You know," she says after a few minutes, "the last time I saw Peter, he gave me something."

"When was this?"

"A couple of months ago," she says. "It was this box full of notebooks he said you wanted me to have."

"Oh?"

I catch myself starting to squeeze her hand too hard and release it. She turns, resting her thigh on my groin, her breasts on my chest, and her chin right below mine. She smiles and the ball of ice in my stomach melts a little.

"How much of it did you read?"

"All of it," she says, rubbing her body on mine as she scoots a few inches closer.

"So you read," I begin, only to be cut off as her lips clamp onto mine. She pulls back after a moment, looking at me with half-lidded eyes and lips too sensual to be seen near the dead.

"Ian," she whispers. "I had no idea you felt that way. Those poems were beautiful."

She closes her eyes and nuzzles her head into my shoulder.

"You're beautiful," she adds. I consider saying the same to her, but after the pages and pages of obsessive writing she's read, anything I might say will sound cheap. So I lie there, I stay silent, I smell her hair, and I rub the perfect skin of her back as it rises and falls with sleepy breath.

My last thought before drifting off to sleep is that I could probably manage to love her without hating her, if I try hard enough.

"You're flat," I said without looking up from the page.

Peter smiled and shook his head as his hands went back to tuning.

"How can you tell without paying attention?" he said, plucking strings and tightening them. Each note he struck bent as it left the guitar, curving away from the horizon to shoot downward.

"My dad was a musician," I said, my pen still moving.

"Well," Peter said, fixing the strap back over his shoulder, "you seem to have a knack for it. Why don't you ever play music?"

I looked up at him and grinned.

"Because my dad was a musician," I said again.

He answered by striking a simple chord and working into a song he'd been trying to learn. I could tell he was getting better because it was starting to sound like music instead of noise.

The bleachers began to shiver and ring with heavy, stomping footfalls, causing my pen to slip and gouge three lines of verse with a thick black mark. I closed my book and looked up as Martin approached, his face red with exertion and his jersey tucked under his arm. The rest of the team was dispersing from the field; some of them drifted to their cars, some lived close enough to walk home, and some were running up to other sections of the bleachers, to other groups of friends. In the failing light they all looked like copies of the same blank shadow.

"How was practice?" Peter said. He put his guitar back in its case and scooted to the side, making space between us. Martin sat down and leaned back on his elbows, panting loudly. He smelled like dirt and sweat, and I wanted him to go away or take a shower.

Really, both would have been ideal.

"It was bullshit," Martin spat, wiping his face. "The new coach doesn't know a goddamn thing. If he keeps up like he's been doing I might not be able to get a scholarship."

"Couldn't scouts still see that you're a good player even if the coach makes the team lose?" Peter said.

"Not," Martin snarled, "if the stupid fuck never puts me in a game!"

"Yeah," I said, "it would be terrible if you had to do your work or read."

I opened my book and started writing again. Martin punched me in the arm and laughed, leaning over my shoulder. I considered shoving my pen in his eye, but decided to close the book instead.

“So what’re you writing?” he asked, sneering in a way I was sure he thought was playful. “Is it another faggy little poem about that girl you’re too chickenshit to talk to?”

I was about to tell him to go jump off a bridge when Peter spoke.

“You know,” he said, “I have a bunch of classes with her. I could talk to her for you, if you’d like.”

“You mean Zoe?”

Peter nodded and smiled.

“I, well,” I said, suddenly finding something down on the field very interesting. “Thanks, but I don’t know. I’d rather, you know, let it happen if it’s going to happen, I guess.”

Martin snorted and rolled his eyes. “I figured you’d puss out,” he said. “Anyway, it’s for the best. If she found out about all that shit you’ve written, she’d probably just think you’re a creepy stalker.”

I didn’t say anything. I just kept staring at the grass as I twirled my pen between my fingers.

“That’s not true,” Peter said. “I think Ian’s poems are beautiful.”

I blushed and couldn’t help but smile. Sometimes I wondered what I had done to deserve a friend as good as Peter.

“Really,” he said, “I wish someone would write things like that about me.”

I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that Peter was staring at me as he said that. I never really thought about it, but Peter always seemed to be staring at me.