

Meat Loaf

HANG COOL TEDDY BEAR

CHAPTER FOUR



Machines whirred and beeped, syncopated in a rhythm as they kept Patrick alive. Groggy, he wondered how long he had been asleep. It didn't take him long to get his bearings: a hospital room somewhere overseas. He'd been hurt, in the desert, by a mortar blast. They rescued him, brought him here. He felt like he'd been out cold for a week, but it was probably only a day or so.

What about those dreams? About Jenny. Were they even dreams? Maybe this was a dream. He couldn't think straight. He couldn't possibly be tired -- he just woke up. But he was beyond fatigued. And more than a bit confused. Maybe he was still asleep. He thought about this for a moment, just long enough for him to drift off again.

Patrick peered up at the doctor standing over him. He was asking questions but Patrick couldn't answer. This wasn't a doctor, it was a psychologist -- a shrink. He might as well have been speaking Farsi. Patrick ignored him, deftly maneuvering to avoid eye contact.

He'd been here for at least a couple of days now, asleep most of the time but unable to dream. He was worse off than he could ever remember. They'd taken his youth, his soul, and now they'd robbed him of his dreams. He rued the day he'd ever enlisted.

It wasn't helping that whatever they were feeding into Patrick's veins had his RPMs red-lining. Jenny. Jenny. Jenny. The more he tried to focus on her, the less he could make out her face.

Why couldn't they have left him there in the desert? Only twenty minutes away from darkness... If his injuries didn't kill him, the night creatures would've finished the job. Or maybe a bogie patrol. That was his fate -- to go out with a whimper. Why did they mess with destiny?

And what now? He'd be shipped back home to become another PTSD statistic. Therapy he wouldn't want, sympathy he wouldn't deserve.

All this contemplation made him tired. He strained to see the clock but couldn't make out the time. It really didn't matter anyway. His eyes closed.

There he was, running through the ferns with a renewed enthusiasm. The garden was bigger than he could've guessed. He kept catching glimpses of Jenny but every time he rounded a hedge to overtake her, she was gone.

Creatures lurked at every turn. Patrick couldn't quite make them out -- they hid in the shadows -- but he could feel their presence. Though unseen, they were demonic, dangerous. Patrick feared for his life.

Undeterred, adrenalin coursing through his soul, he continued to run until his legs gave out. He dropped to the dirt and caught his breath. He was empty -- spent -- his spirit dissipated. He wanted to break down and cry but he didn't have the strength. He wept dry tears.

He curled up into a ball, surrendering himself to the fate of the creatures. He was ready now. Ready to die. Darkness swallowed him.

Patrick's eyes slowly opened. His vision was sharp now and he could make out the details in the stark hospital room. There was a television up on the wall. On a nearby table was a remote control but Patrick would never muster the energy to get it. Typical. How long would this hell go on?

The door opened and Patrick braced himself for another round with the shrink. But in she walked. Jenny.

If he wasn't already laid out, he would've fallen to the floor. He had memorized every inch of her and she was exactly as he envisioned, except for now she wore a nurse's uniform. And she'd done something different with her hair, pulled it back out of her eyes.

Patrick soaked up the creases in her freshly starched white blouse. She looked like a goddess. She noticed he was awake and a smile crossed her face. "Good morning. How are we doing today?" Her voice sounded a bit different.

He nodded, enamored. She moved effortlessly across the floor, stopping at his bed. Patrick could make out her nametag: J. Turner.

"Jenny?" No, she smiled. "Julia." Patrick was confused. It was her -- wasn't it?

"And you're Patrick." She made an adjustment to his I.V.

"Have you been to California?" he asked, his voice weaker than he remembered it. Julia shook her head. "No. But I've always wanted to." Patrick's heart soared.

"You okay?" she asked. Patrick gave a slight groan of affirmation. As Julia came closer, he tried to ask her one of the million questions that jumped into his mind, but his vocal cords wouldn't comply.

Julia gently grasped his hands in her delicate palms. "Shh... don't try to talk. We can chat later. You've got your whole life in front of you."

Patrick closed his eyes. As he drifted off again he recognized that for the first time in years, he looked forward to tomorrow.

THE END