

Meat Loaf

HANG COOL TEDDY BEAR

CHAPTER ONE



Shrapnel hurt. But not the way Patrick imagined. Not a sharp pain, like when he sliced his pinky to the bone chopping tomatoes at his old pizza parlor job. Or that time when he was exploring old man Feeney's construction site and a two-penny nail punctured his Converse. No, this was more of a burn, as if someone was pressing the business end of a branding iron into his ribs. It hurt like a mother. But Patrick was still better off than his pal, Tennessee Tommy.

Tommy's body was a stone's throw away, face down and still, unnaturally contorted upon the rocky floor. What was left of his camos was in tatters. A large bone -- his tibia, maybe -- jutted out into the desert air. It made Patrick want to puke.

Patrick didn't know how to feel now that his friend was dead. Not only did he like hanging out with Tommy -- they had become close this last tour -- but Tommy's wife was expecting a child. He was due to ship home in nine days.

The November sky was orange with a tint of war. The acrid taste made Patrick even more nauseous. No matter how many tours he pulled, the stench was the thing he couldn't get used to. He wondered, as he often did, what the place would be like without the tanks and the helicopters and the death and the destruction. He imagined what it would've been like two thousand years ago, when Alexander the Great invaded. Or two thousand years in the future... would camel-thorn still dot the dreary plains of the Kandahar tablelands? Most likely.

A crimson pool was forming below Patrick. Blood -- his blood -- seeped into the fabric of his fatigues, causing his boxers to cling uncomfortably to his skin. Patrick was not the squeamish type, yet he was a bit light-headed. Maybe the heat was getting to him.

His M16 was half-buried in a nearby ditch. Patrick remembered it was in his hand before the mortar exploded. Maybe he threw it. Maybe the rifle threw him. He couldn't be sure. While he had confidence that his training had been top-notch, he wasn't prepared for this sudden disorientation.

The lifers at the recruitment office talked up the adventure. Patrick liked the idea of upping the excitement quotient in his life, though it wasn't hard to do. He didn't mind working at a hardware store -- the pay was okay and, although it wasn't a real job, he could get there on the bus without changing lines -- but things had become banal as of late.

Patrick didn't want much out of life. Life willingly obliged. Looking forward to the minor league baseball season was about all there was. Tickets were cheap, he knew all the vendors, and the team picked up a couple of good hitters last season. Nothing wrong with that.

Sometimes Patrick wondered if he had a higher calling, a future. But the answer wasn't clear, and he became more and more sedentary. The military would shake him out of that, he figured.

Man, did that shrapnel burn.

This, Patrick thought, this isn't what I signed up for. Bleeding to death in the hot sun, waiting for who-knows-what to surface and squeeze the last breath out of you. Nothing around but broken earth and your best friend lying next to you, blown to bits. As they'd say back home, "this sucks."

Patrick made a hearty effort to turn his head. There was a ridge about fifty yards to the north. If he managed to get there, he might put himself within eyesight of a passing convoy. His platoon would soon notice that he and Tommy were missing, but without some kind of visual, they'd never find them. The sun was sinking fast so Patrick had to act.

He made a checklist: Lean over, and crawl along the ground. Get to the rifle, then use it as a crutch. Make your way carefully across the rocks to the promised land. Do it now, he told himself, before you're dead.

He had the strength, he thought. He just had to make that first move. But for some reason he couldn't.

As they also say at home, "Oh well."

Out of the blue, hunger set in. He would go to his grave without even a last meal. Fuck it, he thought, and a wry smile almost crossed his face. Patrick recognized he had finally found his calling: to die a slow and miserable death.

The blood continued to flee Patrick's head for places south, mostly the desert floor. His breathing was labored. It was hard for him to stay focused. His eyelids drooped.

He remained still for a moment; in a peaceful serenity, almost a sleep. Inside his brain, there was an imaginary beacon searching around, scanning all the deep recesses of his memory, looking for something -- anything.

Death was close. Patrick relaxed, anticipating the proverbial flashing of his life in front of his eyes. He waited, the beam seeking and scanning... but nothing materialized.

He drew a deep breath and his eyes popped open. Lucid, snapped to reality, he couldn't deny the bitter truth: He had no life. He had no signifying moments that defined him, at least not any that were going to manifest in the moment before his death.

He was a worthless piece of shit.

It should've been me, Patrick thought. I should be dead and it should be Tommy with a chance to get home. Tommy would drag himself to that ridge straight away and get his ass out of here.

He glanced over at Tommy's body. "Get up!" Patrick yelled in frustration. "Get up, you motherfucker!"

Suddenly light-headed again, he lost his bearings. He turned and looked back at the ridge. Still beckoning him, teasing him. Come to me, soldier. Come to safety.

His chin sunk into his chest and his eyes closed again.