

Meat Loaf

HANG COOL TEDDY BEAR

CHAPTER THREE



Patrick found himself in the woods, gingerly scaling a slippery rock which was really more of a large boulder. Jenny was ahead of him. She spread her arms and she leapt off, giving a wail of exuberance just before hitting the water with a splash. Patrick jumped a beat later and was submerged before Jenny surfaced. The water was chilly for this time of year and it gave him a shock. He looked for Jenny under the dark blue water but could only see a shadowy blur a few feet away.

Their heads popped up at more or less the same time. Jenny looked for Patrick up on the rock but then noticed he was beside her. "You!" she exclaimed. "You were supposed to wait." She feigned annoyance but her glee was transparent.

"I'm a shape shifter," Patrick replied. "I turned myself into the wind and whoosh I was down here." He squinted as he looked up at the huge boulder jetting out over the lake. He'd jumped from that ledge a thousand times but today felt like the first time.

"Really?" Jenny treaded water as she surveyed his face. "Shapeshift this..." She pushed his forehead gently back then turned and swam towards shore. Patrick wasn't much of a swimmer -- Jenny obviously was -- but he kept with her all the way. She crawled out of the water and flopped over onto the sand. In a heartbeat, Patrick was lying next to her.

"That wasn't very nice." He moved the wet tussle of hair out from of her eyes. She smiled her appreciation for the gesture. "Maybe I'm not very nice," she suggested.

"Yes you are." Jenny leaned over and put her head on his shoulder blade. "You're the best man I know."

He closed his eyes and felt the sun on his eyelids. Everything was yellow and he thought about how much he loved the summer. He wished he could be there with Jenny forever.

Hollywood Boulevard was more seedy than it looks on TV. Dried up chewing gum and discarded fast-food wrappers on the sidewalks, too much noise and pollution from the endless stream of cars cruising up and down the strip, an army of costumed lunatics at every corner. Patrick fit right in, dried blood caked on his face, a brown paper bag clutched in his left hand, a make-shift bandage wrapped around his right.

He paused to admire something in a store window: a panorama for some movie that was coming out. It looked crappy. Corny. Probably the kind Jenny would like. You could take the country out of the girl, he mused.

"That looks like a piece of shit, doesn't it?" he heard her remark. But when he turned, she was nowhere to be seen.

Patrick stumbled up the street, winning the attention of the brightly-dressed prostitutes. He made his way past the redheads and blondes, fixating on a brunette under the streetlamp. She was looking the other way and, the way the light was hitting the side of her face, she had a strong resemblance to Jenny.

Patrick approached, stopping to stare at her while she finished her business. Finally she turned and engaged him, instantly warm. Up close and head on, she had none of Jenny's refined looks. But she offered her arm, he took it, and they strolled up the street. For an instant, Patrick was happier than he'd ever been.

A light rain began to fall. But Patrick didn't care. He watched as Jenny walked away towards a beautiful garden, one that seemed strangely familiar to him. He dropped down onto a bench as the drizzle intensified. Drops collected on his forehead and dribbled down his face, making it hard for him to see. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed to him that Jenny turned and whispered, "I'll see you soon?" Patrick nodded that she would indeed.

A faint noise brought Patrick back. Sweat poured down his face and his body temperature seemed to have caught up with the desert's. He was still in Afghanistan. The sun was going down and he was dying.

He heard the noise again. Like footsteps crunching in the dirt. He glanced at Tommy, God rest his soul, still lying there lifeless and disfigured. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a weasel or a sand rat.

Almost involuntarily, Patrick unfastened his belt and slowly pulled it off. He scrunched up his cotton camouflage hat and pressed it against his ribs in order to quell the bleeding. He secured it with the belt and rolled onto his side.

He crawled over to his rifle and, using it as a support, gingerly got to his feet. There it was again, that noise. Or maybe it was a different one. Patrick cocked his head and could identify it now: the growl of a diesel engine grinding its way through the desert.

With newfound strength, he inched his way across the divide and got up onto the ridge. He looked down into the valley below and sure enough, coming up from what he thought was the east, was a U.S.-issue Humvee.

He raised his rifle, waved it back and forth, and tried to yell. But his voice refused to comply. He squeezed the trigger on his M-16 and it shouted like a cannon. The report threw him to the ground.

Patrick passed out.