

****Content note: This story addresses themes of veteran trauma and suicide. If you or someone you know is struggling, support is available 24/7. Call or text the Veterans Crisis Line at **988**, then press **1**.*

****The COPE Line, **262-377-2673** (COPE) offers crisis intervention to people in Ozaukee County and four other counties in the Greater Milwaukee area, the COPE Line is available 24/7.*

Maroon Beret

by

Jack Sul

A sharp yellow ray from the morning sun slanted through the study's window and slipped its way across the tiled floor. In the corner it crept up the front of a square metal safe and obscured the numbers on the analog clock sitting on top. The clock vibrated against the metal; each tick seemed to last longer than it should.

In the center of the room, a grey-haired man sat alone. Arranged in front of him were his awards and mementos from his time in the service.

The man leaned forward in his chair and picked up his Purple Heart. He squeezed it. The medal's edge bit into his palm until a heart imprinted itself against his palm. He set it down next to a faded photo. Cracks had split the image, making it impossible to differentiate the group of young men from the jungle behind them. The only color that remained came from the maroon berets slanted atop their shaved heads. The man

picked up the photo and traced a finger along the cracks, stopping at each man's blurred face. They had all played at being fearless. Now it no longer hurt to look at them.

The man set the photo down and leaned back in his chair. His forearms were crisscrossed with scars from his service. When he had returned from the war, he would scuff the ridges of his scars, causing jolts of pain to shoot straight into his brain, forcing him to remember. The pain had been his debt to them, but now even that had dulled, and the numbness had become his failure.

The study door was closed. He had considered keeping it open, but he knew closing it would muffle the sound better.

His grey eyes shifted to the safe in the corner.

He inhaled deeply.

Held it.

Longer.

His heart thumped in his chest.

In his ears.

Then he exhaled quickly through his teeth and waited until the room was quiet again.

"Well, let's get this over with," he muttered to the young men in the photo.

The chair rolled back as he got up and made his way to the safe. He spun the dial three times to the right and stopped on 22. He spun it to the left twice and stopped on 1. He welcomed what would come next. He spun the dial to the last number.

The study door banged open.

The smell of bubble gum and apple-scented shampoo flooded the room.

“Grandpa!”

He spun the dial in the wrong direction, forcing the lock to reset.

He turned around.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing here?”

He pressed his back tighter against the safe.

“Mom’s going shopping with Grandma.”

“Yes, I was aware of that.”

The dial dug into his back.

“So, we get to spend the day together.”

“But not of that,” he finished.

She dropped her backpack on the ground and skipped around to the back of the desk.

Her long, strawberry-blond hair flew out behind her as she spun on his chair.

“Hey, what’s all this stuff, Grandpa?” she asked as she picked up the faded photo.

“Those...”

“I see you, Grandpa,” she said, squinting at the image.

He took the photo from her without looking at it and placed it face down on his desk. He brought his hand up and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, that’s...” he started, suddenly out of breath.

“What do you want to do today?” she asked as she spun in his chair.

“First, we can stop spinning,” he said. “You’re making your grandpa dizzy.”

He walked around the desk and picked her up and placed her on his lap. She leaned against him and laid her arms on top of his. He could feel the softness of her arms through the ridges of his scars.

“Is this your red hat?”

She traced her chipped sparkly pink fingernail along the beret’s angel-crested metal flash.

“I like the angel on the button.”

“That’s the symbol of my unit.”

She put his beret on. Her hair spilled out in wild tangles beneath it.

“You saved people, right? Mom told me you did.”

He glanced at the facedown photo then back at her.

“Some.”

She picked up his Purple Heart and bounced it between her hands.

“Were you brave, Grandpa?”

“Sometimes. Most times I was scared,” he said.

“Are you scared now?”

He adjusted beneath her weight.

“Yes, sweetheart, a little.”

She pressed back into him and placed his Purple Heart back on the table. She picked up the photo and pointed at the young men in the image.

“Are those your friends, Grandpa?”

He forced himself to look.

Each man’s face held steady under sparkly pink nail polish.

He closed his eyes.

Waited for the words.

Looked for the pain.

Nothing.

Then the familiar urge rose.

To scratch.

To force the pain.

Force the memories.

But her softness was there instead.

He patted her arm and opened his eyes.

In her grey eyes, he saw himself.

He patted her arm again.

His gaze drifted back to the photo.

Slowly, the smell of the jungle returned. Heat and dampness and mud but now mixed with bubble gum and apples.

He started to speak, tentatively at first, one name then another. His stories. And theirs.

Eventually, his wife returned and called through the door, "Time to go, dear. Your mother is waiting outside."

His granddaughter got up and left the photo face-up on the desk. She paused in the doorway and turned back towards him.

"Grandpa."

"Yes, sweetheart." He smiled.

"I'm gonna be a hero too, someday."

He straightened his shoulders and looked at her.

She still wore his beret.

Before he could respond, she skipped out, leaving his study door open.

Across the room, the ray of light descended from the clock and settled on the safe, washing out the numbers on the dial.