

Wise Words

Cassidy Magick (2022)

As I open the door, the dust of the old house greets me. Friday afternoons suck. On this afternoon every week, Mum forces me to come and visit Grampa when I could be doing something more useful with my time, like practicing my soccer skills. I mean, it's not like he's not going to be here forever. The only interesting things in the whole house are his medals from the Vietnam War. I'm examining them, admiring their shape, and wondering how he earned them, when Grampa speaks up from behind me.

'Want to hear a few stories?'

'Sure.'

I turn and take a seat in his floral rocking chair. Half expecting to doze off with boredom, I get a surprise at his next few words.

'I received my deployment orders on the nineteenth of November, in nineteen sixty-two. When I arrived in Vietnam, I was ordered to arrange my supplies in a long, wooden building. The barracks were basic and had metal woven beds hanging one above the other with thin, straw mattresses and no blanket. I was only nineteen, and I had no idea I was about to face the most violent experience of my life.

The following day, we set out in our camouflaged gear, with helmets with rifles strapped across our bodies. The distress of people screaming, bombs going off, and guns firing surrounded us the second we stepped onto the battlefield. The worst thing, though, was being soaking wet all the time due to monsoon season. As everything went mouldy, we experienced a different kind of hell. Months passed in a blur of fighting. Troops were injured and many were killed. Although, it wasn't all bad. During the occasional downtime, I'd write letters home to your grandma and pray that I would make it back to see her again. I never included the negative stuff; I just told her about food, which wasn't the most delicious, and my mates, especially Robert, and the crazy experiences we had. We entered Vietnam together, and we intended to leave it together.'

There was a long pause. The fear in his voice struck me and, when Grampa began to speak again, shivers shot up my spine.

'On October twenty fourth, nineteen sixty-three, everything went wrong. Robert and I, along with many other men, were directed to set out to the most dangerous part of the battlefield. There wasn't much shelter, though some did manage to take cover in the trenches,

where many of our own were killed. The flaming explosion of a bomb going off nearby caught my attention. Looking over, I saw Robert lying flat, with a piece of shrapnel piercing his chest.

With my heart pounding, I made the decision to enter the firing line. Although I was shot, I made it to my best friend. Knowing we couldn't stay there any longer, I pulled the gruesome piece of metal out, trying to stop the bleeding as I decided to make a move. Tightening my belt around Robert's chest, I placed him over my shoulder and ran across the field, not seeing the blood pouring out of my own leg.'

'What happened next?' I asked.

After another pause, Grampa continued, the pain in his voice deepening. 'I was so focused on getting Robert out safe that I didn't see the Viet Cong soldier rise out of the grass. Moments later, I saw the grenade in his hand, but it was too late. Next thing I knew, I was in a military hospital, and Robert was nowhere to be seen.

Panicking, I asked one of the nurses where he was.

'Robert is in a stable condition, and he's being flown home to receive the medical attention he needs.'

After I arrived home, I expected to be met with joy but, instead, pain filled my body when my family informed me Robert had died before he made it home.'

Looking up at Grampa, I realised how much pain he had endured. He had lost his best friend and experienced all the horrors of war, but before I could say anything, he began to speak.

'I became depressed and angry with the world. I never left the comfort of my bedroom, sitting on my bed, wishing it was a horrific dream. Six weeks passed, then one day, I woke up and decided that something had to change. After being presented with my war medals, I spent many months working on myself and mourning Robert's death. After all, he would have wanted me to live my life to the fullest.'

Just as Mum walked through the door, Grampa looked at me and smiled. 'Never take anything for granted because nothing lasts forever.'

I smiled in return, as I realised that visiting my grampa wasn't so bad after all, and walking out the door after giving him a goodbye hug, I decide to keep his wise words with me forever.