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Opening extract from

War Hero Bear

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Chapter 1

‘Buy a bear? No way!’

1942. The world was at war. A convoy of soldiers from the Polish 2nd Corps travelled across Iran on mountain roads with desperate bends. Cold winds tugged at the canvas covers of the army trucks, but none of the soldiers complained. Only months before they had been prisoners deep in Russia. Despite the discomfort, they were glad to be free and on their way to Palestine, where they would train with the British Army. All they wanted was to win the war and go back home to Poland.

But would they make it as far as Palestine? These rickety trucks were old army issue and the brakes were not the best.

Most of the soldiers held their heads in their hands, staring at their knees to avoid looking out over the cliff edge along which they were driving. But some of the soldiers couldn’t take much more, and tried to attract the driver’s attention. ‘Stop! Halt!’

‘Prrrr! Woa!’ Private Piotr murmured, just like back home when he drove his farm cart and horse. He kept his eyes closed.

Suddenly the driver, a local man, jammed the brake down hard. The truck skidded to a halt on the very edge of a deep gorge. Far below were the crashed remains of trucks that hadn’t made it.

For a while no one spoke. Piotr's face was chalky white. Some of the other men looked green.

Finally somebody took command. 'Comfort stop!'

They all climbed out of the truck.

At once a crowd of barefoot children swarmed round the soldiers, chattering away. One of them tugged at Piotr's sleeve.

Piotr jumped, startled, but his face soon creased into a smile. 'You kids just pop up out of nowhere like mushrooms after rain.'

He spoke in Polish, and so the boy couldn't understand him.

The driver lit an American cigarette and inhaled deeply. 'He hungry,' he said. The English words came out harshly, like a cough. 'They all hungry. Tell them, go away.' He flapped his hand at the child.

Piotr looked blank, unable to understand the man's broken English, but one of the other Polish soldiers understood and translated.

The boy nodded enthusiastically and rubbed his stomach. '*Hangree*.' He tried to imitate the foreign word.

'So we'll have to find you something to eat,' said Piotr.

His mate, Stan, grinned. 'No problem. We've got plenty of tinned meat.' He turned to go and collect food for the children out of the truck, but something caught his eye. 'Take a look at the sack that kid is carrying, Piotr. There's something alive in there.'

The boy had dropped a shabby old sack on the ground. Something was moving inside, something that whimpered like a baby.

Piotr crouched down and tugged at the knots that tied up the sack. A black nose appeared.

'A puppy?' Piotr pulled the sacking open.



A furry face looked up. A black snout, sharp white teeth and two scared but alert eyes.

Piotr laughed. 'No, it's not a not a puppy. Look, Stan, it's a bear. A little cub. Poor little fellow! He's terrified.'

'My bear.' The boy tapped his chest proudly and pointed up the mountain. 'Men with guns kill mother. *Bang, bang.*'

'Let's have a look.' Piotr lifted the cub out of the sack. The little creature uttered sharp yelping sounds, but he became quieter as Piotr took him gently into the crook of his arm.

The boy said something and the driver translated. 'He ask if you want to buy.'

'Buy a bear cub? No way,' Stan said, laughing, but Piotr perched himself on a rock at the roadside and started to smooth the tangles in the bear's matted fur. 'Poor little fellow, poor *Misiu*,' he said softly in Polish.

'Watch it, old man,' Stan warned. 'Those little teeth look razor sharp. You don't want to get – what's it called? – rabies or some other awful disease.'

The boy interrupted. 'You buy?' He crouched down next to Piotr, his eyes bright with hope. He held out a hand. 'You buy?' he repeated.

Piotr sat for a few moments. Then he nodded. 'I buy. Here, have this!' He handed the boy his army knife with multi-purpose blades. The boy's eyes sparkled as he examined his payment. When Stan handed him a tin of meat and added a bar of chocolate the boy's smile couldn't have been any wider.

The cub lifted his nose, curious to find out where this new smell came from, and Piotr laughed. 'He's a bright one, that's for sure!'

'You're just a soft touch!' Stan joked. He handed the boy some coins. 'That's for your next meal.'

Unable to believe his good fortune, the boy slipped the money into a pocket, picked up his sack and ran off. The other children drifted away too, proudly showing each other the goodies the soldiers had given them.

The driver had started on another cigarette. 'You boys give too much,' he growled.

'Mister,' said the soldier who spoke English. 'We have come out of Russia. Hungry? Yes, and worse than hungry.'

But the driver did not know what the soldier was talking about.

'Back in truck.' He gestured towards the vehicle, stamping his cigarette stub into the stony ground.

'Wait a minute,' Piotr said. The bear was whimpering, trying to nibble Piotr's sleeve. The other soldiers gathered round to have a closer look.

'We've got to give this little chap his dinner. He's starving. Do you think he'd eat tinned meat?'

Stan opened a tin of meat but the cub turned his soft nose away. Next Stan tried a biscuit, but the cub did not want that either.

'Oh, mother! What a mess! We've rescued him, just to have him die on us.' Stan scratched his head. 'This isn't a good idea, Piotr.'

But Piotr went on stroking the cub's fur. 'He's so thin . . . Perhaps he'll take milk from a bottle.'

The soldiers rummaged around and produced an empty bottle. Stan opened a tin of condensed milk.

The sweet sticky milk smelt good and the cub raised his head, his nose twitching.

'That's got him interested,' Piotr smiled. 'Come on, little cub. Try this.'

Piotr stuck a piece of rag in the top of the bottle, making sure it soaked up some of the diluted milk inside. The little bear wasn't sure what to do at first but as soon as he got the rag between his teeth and tasted the milk he sucked away with such contented noises that the soldiers laughed. 'Well, we know what to feed him with, so that's one problem solved,' said Piotr.

But Stan shook his head. 'There's a war on, Piotr. We've got seriously hard training ahead. Soldiers can't keep pets.'

'Some do . . .'

'A small animal, perhaps, a hamster or a mouse, but not a wild animal. Not a bear, Piotr.'

'He'll die if we leave him here. The eagles will make short work of him if hunger doesn't get him first.'

'We'd better ask permission then,' said Stan. 'Like, *Hi, Sergeant Byk! Permission to keep a bear cub! Yes, sergeant, a real bear cub. He'll be no trouble. And bears don't eat much . . .*'

'All right, all right!' Piotr heaved himself back into the truck. It was a bit awkward with a bear and a bottle of milk in his arms.

The driver started the engine.

'Listen, guys,' Piotr said, looking round at his friends. 'It's going to take four days to get to our training camp in Palestine. Let's keep this little bear under wraps for now, shall we?'

Piotr was older than most of the other soldiers. He was a popular member of the Corps, and never raised his voice, so the men were surprised at the urgency of his tone. They nodded as the truck lurched forward. Slowly they headed down the mountain, the brakes shrieking as the driver negotiated each treacherous bend.

It was hard to talk above the roar of the engine, but after a few minutes Stan laid his hand on Piotr's arm. 'Once we get to

Palestine you'll have to report this little bear. Don't be surprised if the Army sends him to a zoo.'

Piotr fondled the bear cub's fur. 'A zoo would be a sad place for a little cub, born in the wild.' The cub's ears twitched and he got to his feet as if he knew they were talking about him. Once he was sure the bottle was empty he circled on Piotr's knees and settled down with a grunt.

'Good boy,' Piotr told him, stroking his little snout, sticky and milky now.

'You old softie,' said Stan, smiling. *Piotr's fallen for that little bear big style,* he thought. *It will be hard for him to give him away to a zoo*.

But he decided not say anything more and very soon they had reached the edge of an ancient town called Hamadan and pulled up inside the military camp.