



**Attack from**

**Within**

**KATHLEEN SALES**



*A gripping tale of recovery from war-induced stress, Attack from Within begins with Pete's return from Vietnam. Still struggling to remember his last mission, he fights with his Pa and leaves Tennessee. But once in Detroit, faced with violent riots and treacherous drug dealers, Pete teeters on the brink of self-destruction. As the action unravels a wartime mystery, the insight it provides into the mind of a survivor makes this story gutsy and inspiring.*

# **Attack From Within**

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# Attack from Within

*Kathleen Sales*

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First Edition

I dedicate *Attack from Within* to all my clients.

I enjoyed your company more than you'll ever know. Each of you taught me things I never learned in school. Thank you for helping me become a better doctor and a more compassionate human being. I hope my work, both then and now, improves your mental health and happiness.



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## Chapter 1

---

I waited in the lobby of a cheap motel on the poor man's side of San Diego, but it beat the heck out of anyplace I'd slept during the previous three years. I stared in confusion at my walking papers. No more uniforms, no guns, no bloody screaming bodies, no V-C with their booby-traps and mines. I was in the real world now, subject to civilian law, and I knew that would take some getting used to.

Key in hand, I found my room. Unlocking the door, I wrinkled up my nose at the reek of cigarette smoke, the wastebasket overflowing with crushed cans. Dumping my rucksack on the bed, I grabbed the phone, dialing long distance. The sound of her familiar voice made me grin.

"Hi Ma, I'm home—or at least in San Diego."

"Pete! You're back in the U.S.?"

"California. I'm due to catch a plane to Knoxville, through Atlanta, first thing tomorrow. I should land at sixteen hundred—sorry, four p.m."

"It's so good to hear you. How long can you stay?"

Obviously my discharge hadn't made their radar. I hesitated, unsure how to tell her. What could I say? I couldn't justify what I didn't understand.

"I'll be home for a couple weeks." I hedged.

"Your pa will meet you at the airport, and I'll call Sarah. Did you get my letter about her teaching license? I know she'll want to hear about the war."

I winced. The last thing I needed was to talk about *the war*. "Thanks Ma. Gotta run. See you soon." I slammed the receiver

back into its cradle, knowing I should have told her the whole truth. She could have told Pa and saved me the trouble. I almost called her back, but I couldn't.

*Coward.* The word hissed inside my brain.

"Shut up," I whispered back. Seeking a buddy more attuned to my world, I pulled a card from my pocket and redialed. "Red?"

"Goddammit, Doc! Where are you?"

"San Diego."

"You're here? On a ship?"

"No, I'm headed home."

"Home? What happened? You get hurt?"

"Not really. Are you free?"

"Yeah, 'til five. I'm working evening shift. You wanna grab a beer?"

"Sure."

"Tell me where you are—I'll pick you up."

I sighed in relief and gave him my location. Right now I needed a good friend. While waiting, I pictured the short, carrot-headed ex-Marine. A sniper shot him in the knee four months back. I was there. While the rest of our squad focused fire on the sniper, I stopped Red's bleeding, stuck both an IV and morphine in his arm, and slipped an inflatable splint around his leg. He flew off in a chopper as our buddies dragged a bullet-riddled Charlie from the bush.

Red wrote me from the hospital, said I saved his life. That was a huge exaggeration, but his writing it still made me proud. He'd settled right here in San Diego—started school. In 'Nam he'd played the straight guy, always reliable, an effective problem solver, and the person you turned to when you had a FUBAR mess. I counted Red as a close friend.

Opening the door onto a concrete walkway, I felt the midday sun blast my face. But it wasn't steamy hot, not like

'Nam. Over there you could drown in your own sweat. Suddenly uncomfortable, I forced my attention onto a flashing neon sign, onto paint peeling off the cracked adobe. Nearby I heard the steady hum of traffic, the rumble of semis, the whine of police sirens, and smelled the scent of exhaust fumes in the air. This was America, my homeland, and in spite of the sirens, this city was far safer than the country I'd just left. Picking up my sketchpad, I found an empty page and settled on the steps, calming down.

A half-hour later a horn blared, and Red's baby-face appeared, smiling through the windshield of an antiquated Chevy. Closing the sketchpad, I jumped into his car. We grabbed each other.

"Hey, Doc!"

"Hey, Red! How's the leg?"

He shrugged, gently patting his left knee. "I can walk, and it doesn't hurt too bad. Guess that's the best you can expect. Anyway, I'm jazzed to be alive!" He grinned.

Driving on the freeway heading north, Red pulled off near the harbor, parking close to a dilapidated bar. Once inside, I grabbed a beer and found a quiet corner that offered a clear view of the room. Glancing around, I saw locals at the far side, a loner at the bar, and a Latina barmaid. Another door, probably to the kitchen, remained closed.

Red snorted, limping over to join me. "You'll get over that."

"What?"

"Casing for Charlie. You won't find him here."

I dropped my gaze, and he admitted, chuckling, "I still do it in places I don't know." Wincing, he settled his butt into a chair and gingerly straightened his bad knee. "You here to stay?"

I laid my papers on the table. He picked them up and frowned. “What is this crap?”

I shrugged. “Things changed. When I joined you guys, we were crushin’ the V-C, but now they’ve turned the tables. On our last mission, we lost at least six men. Rog’ is gone.” I watched Red closely.

His eyes widened, and he grimaced as reality hit home. Then he sighed hard and shook his head. “You know what happened?”

“We were out on patrol and the V-C came at night. Rog’ was on guard. Sometime around midnight, a series of explosions bounced me off the ground. I heard rifle fire—automatics. I jumped up and grabbed my medic kit. Before I got far, I ran into Cole—spurtin’ blood like a hydrant. I dug right in, closin’ off the bleeder, but when I turned around, I saw an AK pointed at me. After that, I don’t remember much.”

Red’s blue eyes narrowed with concern. “What’d they do?”

I shrugged. There was a gap in my memory you could drive a tank through. “The other squads moved in and cleaned house. They found lots of bodies, includin’ Rog’. Then the chopper flew me to Da Nang. When my C.O. came, he asked a bunch of questions, but I couldn’t remember what went down. They housed me in the brig overnight, but the next day they flew me to the Sanctuary ship. I worked there until I had a couple more blackouts. After that, they sent me home.”

Red frowned. “Cripes, Doc. You were a great medic—saved a bunch of lives. You must have gone crazy for them to send you home.”

I dropped my eyes, couldn’t bear to meet his gaze, and eventually he looked away.

“Whatever shit happened in that hell-hole, I’m just glad you’re here. When do you fly?”

“Tomorrow mornin’.”

“I’d take you on the town tonight, but I gotta work. Soon as you get home, give me a call. Promise?” He waited for my answer.

I looked up and nodded, searching his eyes for the truth he wouldn’t say. Red had put into words what I most feared, but what was his opinion of me now?

The next morning I woke early and caught the first bus to the San Diego airport. The flight to Atlanta left on time, and I spent the next five hours staring out the window. Normally I loved to fly, but that day I felt trapped, stuck in a time warp like a dream where you’re running hard but can’t seem to move. I wasn’t all that frightened, but I had a premonition that if nodded off, I’d wake up dead. Somewhere over the Rockies, I pulled out my sketchpad and examined the picture I’d begun at the motel. I started outlining Red inside his car, and settled down.

The plane landed in Atlanta, a warm, soft shower dampening the tarmac. I waited in the cabin with all the other civvies. Once inside the airport, I stood behind the crowd, searching through departures for a puddle-jumper into Knoxville. I had two hours to wait and bought pizza and a paper, but when I didn’t find any news about the war, I put the finishing touches on my sketch. Red’s smiling face brought a smile to my own. At least one of my buddies had survived.

Before long I boarded my next flight, back to the valley and hills where I’d been raised. Change seeped slowly through those foothills, thinning into nothingness over mountain passes. Admittedly we had electric power and TV, were even working on a freeway, but our pioneer heritage of stubborn independence formed a thick, protective barrier across the Cumberlands.

I worried most about my pa. After everything he lived through, he would be the least forgiving of my discharge, and

I'd grown up dodging his rage. Ma would support me, well aware of her own breakdowns. My sister Sarah, with her sharp wit and tongue, always saw reality more clearly than the others. She would definitely be okay. But Pa had his honor, an unbending moral code, and a Superman mythos to uphold. My general discharge would not set well with him.

Pa never met folks at the gate. I picked up my rucksack and went out to the entrance, waiting for him to bring the car. He'd traded in his Fairlane for a newer model Ford—a blue Falcon. About five minutes later, it cruised to a stop. He had aged since I'd been here, his brown eyes framed in wrinkles, his thinning brown hair streaked with gray. Is that how I'd look in another thirty years, except for lighter hair and blue eyes? Then he smiled, a rare occurrence, and greeted me with a formal handshake.

“Hi Pete. Great to see you.”

I squeezed his hand. “You too, Pa. How you been?”

Not one to share his problems, Pa started up the car. “Let's go home and see what your ma is cookin' up.” Putting the car in gear, he took the turn toward Knoxville.

“How's work?” I asked.

“Same old job, but it pays the bills. After you get out, you can join me, save on gas.”

*When hell freezes over.* I should have told him I was already out, but I feared triggering him while he was driving.

“Your sister has a college degree now.” Pa straightened up his shoulders with obvious pride, and I understood his need to brag. Aunt Kate had a teaching degree too, and she never failed to lord it over us. “When your enlistment's up, are you plannin' to stay in?”

I shrugged. “How's Mamaw?”

He snorted. "Same as ever. She's taken over Kate's house. Might be fun to watch the catfights, but it complicates life for your ma."

I puzzled over that. Back when I was ten, Mamaw lived with us, holding the pieces of our family together. She had a sense of fairness, of balance, that neither of my parents, nor my aunt, quite achieved. "How's Lee doin'?"

"Still in school and doin' fine. Always had more brains than brawn."

I nodded. Lee was half Chinese, very smart, and it pleased me to hear he was still in college. Maybe I should call him. He wasn't just book-smart—he also had more than his share of common sense. That was one reason I'd kept him as a buddy. I wasn't quite sure why he kept me.

After that we drove in silence all the way to Walnut Springs. I couldn't help smiling as the house came into view. Pa had painted it white since I'd been gone, and that day it stood out like a sculpture in marble against a forest background of iridescent green. As we pulled into the driveway, Ma came to the porch, as beautiful as ever with her long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. She wiped her hands on the apron, and her happy smile crinkled all the way to the corners of her brilliant blue eyes. I relaxed. There'd been a time when she couldn't bear to see me, but over the last ten years, we'd both changed—a lot.

Ma hugged me, but she stiffened, as if that encounter was a bit too personal. I released her. Shouldering my bag, I climbed upstairs. My room looked the same, except in miniature. The bedroom, house, and yard fit too tight, like a vise closing in on me until I couldn't breathe. I laid my discharge papers and sketchbook on the desk, stuck my clothes inside the dresser, and trotted back downstairs.

"No uniform?" Ma said. "I want a picture."

I found a newspaper lying on the table, settled on the couch, and hid my face behind the print. “I see they closed the coal mine in Kentucky.” I glanced up at Ma. “Any news from Ricky?”

She wrinkled her forehead. “I think he served his time and moved back home.”

I eyed the date—May 2, 1967. Ricky’s pa died in that mine ten years back, and even though Lee’s parents took Ricky in, he’d always found ways to get in trouble. His most recent fight sent him to Brushy Mountain. I’d heard ugly stories all my life about that place—feared it’d be as dangerous as ’Nam.

Comparing my current situation to my friend’s, I had to wonder if I’d done any better. Next month I’d turn twenty-one, and here I sat at home with no money, no career, no school, no job, and a general discharge that suggested I’d gone nuts. I put the newspaper down and walked outside. The porch steps beckoned, and I settled there, relaxing in the late-afternoon sun.

Supper ready, Pa called me inside. Ma had gone all out preparing food: deep-fried chicken, baked potatoes, green beans, and her best homemade biscuits with real honey. We’d barely said grace when the front door slammed, and Sarah bounced into the kitchen.

“Hey, Pete. Welcome home!” She gave me a quick hug, blond hair in her face, blue-green eyes sparkling. “Meet Bailey, my boyfriend.” She smiled up at a tall, preppy kid who’d followed her into the room. “Pete’s visitin’ us from Vietnam.”

I stood up to shake Bailey’s hand. He towered over me, although he lacked much muscle on his bones. He shook Pa’s hand as well and nodded toward Ma, who was hurrying to put more plates and silverware around.

“Sit down and join us, we have plenty.” Ma pointed to the empty chairs.



Sarah started loading up her plate. “We just came from a meetin’ outside Nashville. Martin Luther King spoke, and this time he didn’t draw a line at racial issues but openly came out against the war. Pete Seeger sang, and we raised a lot of money.” She glanced over at me. “Time for all you sinners to come home.”

I frowned, not because I completely disagreed, but because she had no right to comment on a war she had never seen, never fought.

“Oh, come on, Pete. You know I’m not callin’ *you* a sinner. You’re busy keepin’ folks alive. That’s great. But you shouldn’t have to risk your life to do it. I worry about you!”

That made me smile. “No need to worry, Sis. I’m fine.”

“What’s your take on the war?” Bailey asked.

Shit! I had my back to the wall with unfriendly fire coming from two sides and a strong option for a third. I picked my words carefully. “It’s a war. If you don’t kill your enemy, you die. Those are your options.”

Pa nodded at my comments and went back to his food, but Sarah wouldn’t take the hint. “What if the war is wrong? What if there shouldn’t be a war?”

“Soldiers don’t make political decisions.” I narrowed my eyes at her, warning her to quit, but even that maneuver didn’t work.

“They could if they wanted. Just stop fightin’! If everybody quit, there wouldn’t be a war.”

I rolled my eyes and dug into the chicken. She sounded like a two-year-old screaming at a storm—a natural disaster nobody could stop. Silence ruled while we finished up the meal.

“Delicious!” I looked up and grinned at Ma. That was one fact we could agree on.

“Superb meal, Ma,” Sarah said.

“Better than a restaurant,” Bailey added.

Ma blushed with all the compliments and started gathering dishes. Sarah hurried to help while I made a rapid exit to the porch. Bailey followed, pulling out a cigarette. He offered me one, and I refused.

“How long’s your leave?”

“Couple weeks.” I winced at the lie, but I couldn’t tell Bailey what I hadn’t told Pa. *Coward*.

“You’re a Navy corpsman?”

“Yep.”

“You like the work?”

Wrinkling my nose against the cigarette smoke, I stopped to think. “Yeah, mostly. When I was on the ship, I enjoyed it, but out with the Marines . . . it got tough.”

“You went out, like on patrol?”

“Yeah.”

Bailey wrinkled up his forehead, staring worriedly at me. “You shoot anybody?”

I frowned. “I’m still alive.”

He dropped his gaze, shaking his head in disapproval. “You’re breakin’ the Commandments. Why don’t you become a conscientious objector?”

I snorted and focused on the oaks, so thick with yellow seedpods you could barely see the leaves. “Ah-choo! Sorry, allergies. I’d better go.” I made a tactical retreat to my room and closed the door.

## Chapter 2

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The next morning I woke early, my sleep cycle completely out of synch. Dawn found me at the creek, bamboo fishing pole in hand. I practiced playing the line across the water. That was no way to catch a catfish, but I didn't want to fish—I wanted an excuse to be alone.

This creek had been my favorite spot since childhood. Now early rays of sunlight dappled through the trees, highlighting the red clay bank, dark waters, rough gray rocks, and deadfalls of driftwood left over from spring flooding. Deeper in the water, shadows lurked, mostly catfish and turtles, but an elegant blue heron took up fishing at the first bend, and I could see his silhouette tall against the green—still as a statue 'til he struck.

Fishing brought back memories of Lee. I should call him. If he had the time and I could get a ride, maybe he'd meet me between classes. I needed to pick his brain, find a way to tell the truth without triggering my pa. With that thought in mind, I looked at the sun and realized the family would be up. I furled the line around my pole and jogged toward home.

As I entered the kitchen and washed my hands at the sink, the smell of eggs and bacon permeated the whole room. Turning from the stove, Ma studied me a minute. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Jet lag," I explained, slipping into a chair. "Scrambled eggs?"

She beat the eggs with milk, salt, and pepper, frying them into a savory yellow mash, which she dished onto a plate along with bacon. “Eat up.”

“Thanks.” I made short work of the food before I asked, “Do you know where Lee’s stayin’—school or home?”

“I have his phone number at UT. You want it?”

“Yeah.”

Ma rifled through her phone book and handed me his number. Dumping my dishes by the sink, I took her book to the telephone table. Overhead, I heard Pa tromping down the steps as I dialed and waited through the rings.

“Lee?”

“Pete! Where are you?”

“I’m home.”

“Cool! You okay?”

The sudden tension in Lee’s voice surprised me. “Yeah, I’m fine. What are your lunch plans for today?”

“I’m free from ten ’til two. Can you get here?”

I sighed, relieved that he wanted me to come. “I’ll try. Where to?”

Lee paused. “Ayres Hall on the Hill is the easiest spot to find. If you ask anyone, they’ll point the way. You hitchin’?”

“Yeah.”

“Just be careful who you ride with. The truckers have takin’ to beatin’ up on students who can’t pay.”

I snorted. After fighting the V-C, the thought of being mugged between here and Knoxville sounded silly. “I’ll be fine.”

“See you soon.”

I returned to the kitchen and saw Pa chowing down. “Can you give me a lift into Oak Ridge?”

He looked up. “Where you goin’?”

“UT.”

He glanced at his watch, gulped his coffee, and jumped up. “You ready?”

I ran upstairs for my wallet and met him at the car. He flew down the highway to Oak Ridge, stopping at a crossroads near a truck stop.

“If you need a ride home, call.”

“Thanks.” I waved, feeling guilty. I needed to explain about my discharge—soon. Maybe Lee could figure out a way.

The truck stop consisted of a couple gas pumps next to a dilapidated store / cafe. Inside, several truckers chatted at the counter. I chose a younger man seated alone. “You headin’ into Knoxville?”

He looked up from his coffee. “Sorry, I’m scheduled to go to Chattanooga next.”

I nodded, eyeing the other men there, but they showed no interest in a hitcher. I wandered outside just as a black guy drove his old Ford pick-up to the pump. Walking over, I asked, “Where you headed?”

“Knoxville.” He cased me up and down. “Ya need a ride?”

“To UT. I’ll pay a dollar toward your gas.”

He grinned, took the cash, and paid his bill. Climbing into the cab, he opened the far door. “Hop in. You a student?”

I slid onto the vinyl seat. “Not yet. I just got home from Vietnam.”

He nodded as he drove onto the highway. “My son’s over there, fixin’ trucks for the Army. He says the Viet-Cong are vicious, sneaky bastards—put explosives in the roads, in soda cans, even food.”

“Yeah.” I turned away, my mind picturing the outcome—the reduction of a human being into body parts. From the corner of my eye, I saw him glance at me and frown. He remained silent until we reached the freeway.

“Okay if I drop you off on Cumberland?”

“Sure.”

He took me to the strip. I got out, eyeing the line of shops and restaurants and wondering where Lee would choose to eat.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I turned and met his worried eyes. “I hope your son stays safe.”

He sighed. “Me too.”

As he drove off, I looked around. The business shops ran down the north side of the street. Across the way, the larger brick buildings dwarfed them. I had no idea which direction to go, so I stopped the first pretty girl I saw. “I’m new here. Can you point me towards Ayres Hall?”

She rolled her eyes and pointed down the street. Then with a disdainful flip of her blond hair, she marched off. I raised an eyebrow and followed, admiring her flowing hair and hips from a safe distance. A couple blocks farther, she pointed to a sign. I climbed the concrete steps to an elegant brick building overlooking Cumberland Avenue. Sitting on the steps with my back to a wall, I watched all the students come and go. They looked so young—straight out of high school.

I’d barely settled in when another guy stopped. He took in my buzzed head and walked over. “Been home long?”

I looked up, meeting friendly dark eyes above an easygoing smile.

“I’m Bruce,” he said. “You just get back?”

“That obvious?” I snorted.

“Only if you’ve been there.”

I remembered Red’s comment on my checking people out and realized I’d provided all the clues.

“Pete.” I reached over, shaking hands. “I just got home—meetin’ an old friend.”

“Where were you stationed?”

“Da Nang and Hue. Before that I served on the Sanctuary ship. I’m a corpsman.”

He grinned and took a seat beside me. “They stuck me on a riverboat down in the Delta. You come through in one piece?”

“More or less.”

He nodded, as if that remark made perfect sense.

You?”

“I’m missin’ a few parts.” He held up his left hand with no fingers. “Grenade.”

“Damn!” I studied the scars.

“At least this works.” He tapped his head with the stump.

“You a student?” I watched his face, wondering if he felt as relaxed as his expression.

“Yeah, engineerin’. Takin’ full advantage of the GI bill.” He met my gaze, and I saw both curiosity and kindness in his eyes.

“School was never my strong suit.”

“Well you can’t be stupid, not and be a corpsman. Were you any good at it?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I liked it. What’d you do?”

“Fixed engines, drove the boat, kept it runnin’.”

I nodded approvingly. Good maintenance prevented many deaths.

He glanced all around and lowered his voice. “Piece of advice, for what it’s worth. Whatever happened over there happened in another world, or maybe in a nightmare. Leave it behind if you can. It won’t help—can even hurt you over here. Gotta run, but welcome home and hope to see you around.”

“Thanks.” I watched him walk away, puzzled by his visit and advice. Jake had always encouraged me to talk, but that was ten years back and maybe things had changed. If he were still alive, would he agree? Maybe my life would go more smoothly if I just shut my mouth and pretended I was fine.

The clock hands neared eleven before Lee appeared. He was as short and slight as ever, dark eyes as perceptive, smile as engaging. “Hey, Pete. Need some food?” He jabbed me in the shoulder, snorted, and rubbed his hand. “You’re like granite, man. Been workin’ out?”

“If sixty-pound backpacks and thirty miles a day is workin’ out.”

“Whoa!” Lee sat down, studying me with a serious gaze. “Tough, huh?”

I nodded. “But I’m home.”

“To stay?”

“Yeah, although no one but you knows it.”

“Why not?”

I almost laughed. He’d cut to the crux of my problem in two minutes. That was so typical of Lee. “They sent me home early—general discharge—pretty much ordered me to go.”

Lee frowned. “I thought you were a medic.”

“I was, until a few weeks back.” I glanced up at Lee. He’d put on his thinking face, paying close attention. I took a deep breath and forged ahead. “We were on patrol, camped for the night, when the Viet-Cong attacked. They killed the guys on watch and lobbed explosives where we slept. Somehow I survived and tried to help an injured buddy. I can’t remember all that happened, but I know it was ugly, and we lost a lot of men. After that my C.O. sent me to the ship. When I couldn’t do the work, they sent me home.”

I glanced at Lee, but his face remained calm, as if I’d been talking about a fishing trip.

“It’s the same as what happened years ago.” He pursed his lips. “You couldn’t tell me shit until Jake helped.”

I thought back and realized Lee was right. I’d seen a man tortured and shot, my mother raped, while another guy put a gun to my head, molested me, and busted out my eardrum. But



it'd taken a year to remember all that, and it came out hard, like shitting glass. Just thinking about it made me wince.

"It's how you handle stuff." Lee shrugged. "If you remember more and want to talk, I'll listen." He reached out and touched my arm.

I drew back, taking a deep breath.

"Let's eat." Lee led the way down to the strip, picking a small deli with a well-worn counter and cracked, red vinyl seats.

After a ham sandwich, my brain cleared. "My real problem now is explainin' things to Pa."

Lee sighed, still working on his food. "What does he know?"

"He thinks I'm home on leave."

Lee pursed his lips. "The longer you wait, the harder it'll be for him to hear."

"I know." I focused on Lee's face, but he went right back to eating.

"Just tell him tonight when you get home," Lee mumbled through a mouthful of honey ham on rye.

I sighed, realizing he didn't understand. "What should I say?"

My tone made Lee look at me and frown. "You can't make up a story, Pete. That'd be suicidal. Tell the truth."

The word *coward* hissed inside again, and my eyes burned a hole into the floor.

Lee raised one eyebrow, his slanted eyes narrowing and peering into mine. "What's wrong, Pete? You really think he'd hit you?"

I nodded, seriously considering that scene. "And if he tries, it could get ugly."

"Would it help to have somebody there?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't want you gettin' in the middle."

“No way!” He rolled his eyes. “Tell you what. I’ll drive you home and stick around for supper. When your pa’s all relaxed, you can tell him.”

“I don’t want you missin’ classes . . .”

Lee pinned me with his no-nonsense stare. “You plan to lie? To him?”

I didn’t need Lee calling me a coward. Leaping to my feet, muscles bunched, I walked away. Lee let me go, but I felt his eyes following as I left the counter and trotted down the street. After a block, I’d calmed enough to turn around. Seeing him waiting by the deli, I walked back.

“You ready?” Lee’s voice sounded calm.

Envyng his composure, I nodded. He led the way across campus to a crowded parking lot and unlocked a green VW bug. I climbed inside. As Lee followed the traffic west, I started to relax and look around. I hadn’t been to Knoxville in years, but I was pretty certain the buildings here were new. “It’s growin’ fast.”

“Yeah. They call this new area Cedar Bluff. No cedars and no bluff, but it’s growin’.”

I snorted. We had a standing joke about Walnut Springs. Maybe back in history, but not in my lifetime, could you find walnut trees or springs.

As we cruised up the highway, Lee asked. “How’s your Pa?”

I shrugged. “He’s okay, much as ever.”

“If you could remember more, it’d help. He went through enough in World War Two that he might get it. The gap in your memory makes it sound like you cracked up.”

I glared.

Lee’s eyes softened. “I know you, Pete. There’s a good explanation in there somewheres.”

We reached home around three. Ma met us on the porch, greeting Lee like a long lost son. I loved that side of Ma. She never learned the meaning of the word “prejudiced.” Lee and I snatched sodas from the kitchen and headed down our trail through the woods. As we passed the barn, I grabbed a couple fishing poles—mostly for show. At the creek, we found our favorite rocks and stretched out lazily in the dappled sunlight. Dropping lines into the water, we stayed quiet for some time until I asked, “How’s school?”

Lee turned his head and smiled. “Love it. If I had the money, I’d stay a student all my life.”

“What’s your major?”

He grinned. “I’ve tried several: math, psychology, pre-law. Guess I’ll stick with pre-law. Might become a lawyer. That opens up a lot of other options.”

“Cool!” I could picture Lee in a business suit and tie or even in judge’s robes someday. “You’ll make a super lawyer.”

“You think so?” His eyes sought mine.

“Yeah, really.” I smiled. “You’re smart and fair and levelheaded. I think it’s an excellent fit.”

“You want to go to college? Didn’t Jake leave you money?”

“Enough to pay tuition for a couple years.”

“What would you take?”

I shrugged. “I never much liked school.”

“You never were that interested, but when you *chose* to learn, you did fine—like the project you finished on homeless veterans. Remember?”

I thought back. “But that was personal.”

“So pick a major that’s personal. What do you love?”

My sinker moved. I jerked up and hauled in a medium-sized catfish. “Fishin’.” I unhooked my catch and dropped it into a pail.

“Be serious.”

“I am serious.” I poked him, but when he didn’t smile, I dropped my head. “I liked bein’ a corpsman. Guess I fucked that up.”

“Maybe. Don’t damn yourself until you know what happened.” Lee narrowed his eyes. “That’s like rulin’ on a case before you’ve heard it.”

“Pa won’t see it your way,” I growled back.

“Yeah, I know.”

## Chapter 3

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The sun had slid into the western sky by the time Lee and I hiked to the house. I cleaned the fish, Lee wrapped them for the freezer, and we washed up in the kitchen sink. Ma was busy with supper, so Lee and I settled on the living room couch.

Compared to Lee's home, ours was old-fashioned with two overstuffed chairs, a broken down sofa, and a braided rug covering the old hardwood floor. There were no drapes or shades in the windows, which faced west, and the brilliant sunlight forced me to turn my head. I didn't see Sarah and Bailey arrive until they opened the front door.

Lee stood up and shook her hand. "Congratulations, Sarah! You'll make a great teacher."

Sarah grinned. "Thanks, Lee."

"He's majorin' in pre-law," I said.

Her eyebrows rose. "Impressive, but if anyone can master law, it's Lee."

"What's your major?" Lee asked Bailey.

"Paleontology."

I drew a total blank, and even Lee looked puzzled. "A study of prehistoric times?" he guessed.

Bailey's lanky body hunched over Lee. "Study of fossils. The real question is *why*." He glanced at Lee and me, but we were stumped.

"It's all about oil," Bailey said. "Energy! Certain fossils co-exist with oil. So where you find those fossils, you find black gold. It's a huge business, and they'll pay you big bucks if you're willin' to go scoutin' for deposits."

“Like off Vietnam,” Sarah added. “A few years back, they found oil off the coast. Some people think that’s why we’re there.”

My eyebrows rose. “Oil? In ’Nam?”

“Bet the Navy never told you that!” She smirked. “Most wars are fought over natural resources, like land, food, energy, and water.”

“What about politics?” I asked.

She shook her head. “That’s just a cover, along with all the talk about ideologies. It’s all greed. That’s why we shouldn’t be there.”

Bailey took a seat, smiling up at Sarah, obviously supportive of her views. Lee squinted out the window. “Your pa’s home.” I turned quickly as Pa came in the door. Lee caught my gaze and made a hands-down sign. I nodded back.

All through dinner, Sarah pushed her topic. She’d always been certain she was right, and now she was busily joisting against war, specifically the one in Vietnam. I wondered what she’d say if she’d actually been there, and it grew harder and harder for me to keep my cool. Pa focused on his food, but I could see the creases deepening in his forehead. Not wanting him to blow, I spoke first.

“That’s rubbish! There’s a civil war in Vietnam, north versus south, like we had a hundred years ago. Brother fightin’ brother, and you never know for sure which side they’re on. No one over there is talkin’ peace, love, and charity. Even the children blow you up.”

That brought silence to the table. Ma and Sarah rose to clear away the dishes, and Ma filled her glass bowls with homemade ice cream and fresh berries, which settled the argument—for now. After supper, Sarah and Bailey said goodbye and headed back to Knoxville. Ma started washing

dishes, and Pa found his favorite chair. Lee nodded as I cleared my throat.

“Pa?”

He lifted his head and looked at me.

“There’s somethin’ I need to say.”

He put down his paper and looked me in the eye.

“I’ve been discharged from the Navy.”

Pa frowned as if he’d heard me wrong. “Discharged? Your enlistment ain’t up.” He tilted his head, forehead wrinkling as he thought it through. “What happened?”

I met Lee’s gaze, and his look encouraged me, but I still feared Pa’s reaction and kept my description brief. “They said I did a good job as a corpsman, but I couldn’t be in the Navy anymore.”

Pa stared at me. “You get court-martialed?”

“No! We were out on patrol when the V-C came at night, took out a large part of my squad. I was tryin’ to save a buddy . . . when they caught us.” I paused, unable to explain what I still couldn’t recall.

Pa looked down, as if trying to digest the information. So far he’d taken it better than I’d feared, but now I saw him frown. “If they killed most of your squad, why not you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe ’cause I didn’t have my gun.”

“You weren’t *armed*?” His eyes widened in shock and disbelief.

I felt my chest tighten. “I laid my rifle by my feet so I could close off a bleeder. Didn’t have an extra hand.”

“You’re a fightin’ man *first*.” Pa glared at me.

“I tried to save a life.”

“And killed the others. You shoulda dropped all that stuff and shot the bastards!” His face distorted into an angry mask. “You can’t play Boy Scout in the middle of a war. No wonder they discharged you—you *let your buddies die!*” He sprang to

his feet, eyes glazing over as he screamed, “You’re such a coward!”

Furious, I stood facing my pa. We glowered at each other, nose to nose, fists clenched. Lee spoke, but I couldn’t hear his words. I wanted Pa to hit me first, give me an excuse to level him.

His strong left hook smashed my nose. I yelped, pain doubling me in half. Quicker than a snake, I sunk my fist below his belt. He went to his knees, gasping for breath.

I stepped back, appalled at what I’d done but still so pissed I nearly kicked him. Ma came running to his side as I escaped onto the porch. I collapsed there, hands covering my nose.

Lee followed. Closing the front door, he stared down at my blood-covered hands. “Did he break it?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll drive you to the ER.”

Standing, I felt woozy and grabbed at the rail. Regaining my balance, I followed slowly to Lee’s car. As he drove to the highway, putting distance between Pa and me, I relaxed.

“Is Pa okay?”

Lee shrugged. “Your ma’s with him.”

At the Harriman hospital, they rushed me to the ER while the nurse called their doctor at his home. A few minutes later, she introduced a large man with a mane of graying hair. Assessing the damage with his flashlight, he nodded. “Yep, it’s broke.” He placed both his hands against my face, thumbs on my nose. “Best thing to do is set it straight. Hang on.”

I grabbed the table but yelped loudly when he snapped the bone back into place.

“All done.” He examined his handiwork with pride while the nurse gently washed my nose and face before taping a splint across the bone. “I’ll pack it now, stop the bleeding.” He used a hemostat to stuff gauze up my nose. “You’ll have to



breathe through your mouth the next few days. She'll give you an appointment, and when you come back, I'll remove the packing and make sure you're healing up. Don't be surprised if your nose swells a bit and you develop bruising. Ice will help."

I paid my bill, a sizeable bite out of my severance pay, and picked up a prescription of pain pills. Back in the car, Lee asked, "Where to?" That stopped me. I couldn't go home and glanced hopefully at Lee.

"You want to sleep at my place?"

I nodded, and Lee drove us back toward Knoxville. "You got plans?" he asked as we traveled down the highway.

"Find a job."

"School?"

I shook my head. There was nothing pushing me in that direction. We rode silently through a sea of headlights, stopping outside a multistory brick building. Lee led the way up several flights of stairs and into a small studio apartment. I sank into the nearest chair while he brought water for my pill.

"Let me know if you need anythin'. I have to study," he explained, pulling out a pile of books.

Silence suited me well—I had nothing left to say. The chair faced a window, and I gazed out at the city with its Christmas tree buildings, their windows all alight. Car headlights flashed past like a swarm of fireflies. But as I peered inward toward the darkness of my past, the world outside just disappeared. Lost in memories of home, memories of 'Nam, I saw no lights leading to my future.

That night Lee piled up blankets on the floor, but even with the pain pill, I couldn't get to sleep. What would I do? I'd liked working as a corpsman and wanted to go back, wanted to stay there on the ship. Why hadn't I argued? Why hadn't they explained what I'd done wrong? I punched the pillow, remembering other times I'd fought with Pa. He'd first

whipped me when I wasn't yet eleven, but I'd made it all the way the Nashville.

Of course I was trying to find Jake. He'd promised to take me on trips around the world, and he wouldn't let a fistfight slow him down. As I pictured Jake's bearded face and crinkly blue eyes, my mind cleared. I needed to go home and pack my rucksack. I needed my map and the bankbook Jake had sent. Then I would leave—this time for good.

How would I travel? Jake had taught me to ride freights, but over the last ten years, the rules had tightened up. I'd need a car. That would take a big part of his savings, but with a car, I could drive anywhere I chose. For the first time that day, I felt relief. Having reached that decision, I took another pill and finally slept.

Lee woke me the next morning. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"I've gotta run. After my class, I'll take you home to get your stuff."

With effort, I opened up my eyes and saw Lee, dressed for school and frowning down at me.

"Go back to sleep," he said. "Or if you're hungry, raid the fridge. Just don't look in the mirror, and don't leave. Promise?"

I grunted, closed my eyes, and fell asleep. Lee woke me again when he returned. That time I managed to sit, leaning up against the bed. He brought me coffee, which I sipped, gradually recalling what he'd told me earlier.

"I look that bad?"

"You're a real head-turner, my friend. Can you get up?"

I stumbled to my feet and made it to the toilet. Back in the living room, I collapsed into a chair. Lee brought me Pop-Tarts, which I nibbled. My head throbbed, and the simple act of chewing made it worse. But as I stayed upright, the intensity eased off.

Lee narrowed his eyes. "How about I go and get your things. What do you need?"

I would have objected but doubted I could climb stairs or carry anything. "My bag's beneath the bed. Stuff everything inside the dresser in it, take the map off the wall, fold it up, and get Jake's bankbook from the top dresser drawer. Oh yeah, my papers and sketchbook are sittin' on the desk. Bring them too."

"You got a coat, hat, gloves?"

"Downstairs in the closet. And grab my bamboo pole, if you have time."

"No problem," Lee said. "Your pa will be at work. You need another pain pill?"

I shook my head very carefully. Lee nodded and took off. As soon as he left, I stumbled back into the bathroom and stared at the mirror. My eyes had swollen almost shut, the lids turning purple, and the bruising extended to my lip. I couldn't see my nose but imagined it looked worse. Not trusting myself to stay upright in the shower, I swallowed another pain pill and slept sitting in the chair.

Lee nursed me for three days before I went to see the doctor. When he pulled out the packing, it *hurt*, but with the gauze gone, I could breathe and that felt great. The doc said to keep the splint on for at least six more weeks. I nodded, paid my bill, and left.

After the appointment, Lee drove me into Knoxville, to the Bank of America downtown. I pulled out Jake's savings book and asked the pretty teller to withdraw all my funds. She took my ID and disappeared.

When she returned, she shook her head. "This was deposited in our Alaska branch, and they won't open until mid-afternoon. Check with me then."

Lee drove us to UT, and he was right—just walking across campus, I turned heads. Over lunch Lee asked, “What you plannin’ to do with all that money?”

“Buy a car.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You leavin’?”

I nodded, munching slowly on my pizza. “I’m gonna drive around the country, startin’ with Detroit.”

“Detroit? The murder city?” His eyes narrowed into slits.

“They have jobs.”

Lee shook his head. “That’s like another war zone, Pete. You don’t need that now. Why don’t you stay with me and use Jake’s money for tuition?”

“Maybe later. Not today.”

Lee’s eyes fixed on mine. “I’ve been readin’ up on battle stress. They say there’s a tendency to repeat the trauma, maybe as a way of mastering the past, but it leads survivors into danger—like Detroit. You could visit the VA and talk to a counselor. Even your friend, Jake, saw a shrink.”

*Coward!* As that word hissed in my mind, my fists grew tight beneath the table. Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. “I have to get far away from Pa. I can’t stay here.”

Lee didn’t argue. We drove back to the bank, and they took another hour clearing up the details. Finally they counted out my cash—a thousand dollars plus! I’d never held that much money in my life. I stuck the bills into my wallet as Lee drove down Kingston Pike, stopping at the first car lot we saw. Under other circumstances, I’d have asked my pa for help. Neither Lee nor I was a mechanic.

A red VW Beetle caught my eye, and I walked around it, examining the paint. There were a few scratches but no dents.

“That car is a fantastic deal.” The salesman smiled wide. “Only fifty thousand miles, good tires, new clutch, and great gas mileage, for a mere five hundred ninety bucks.”

“Does it burn oil?”

In answer he pulled a key off his ring, unlocked the door, and started up the car. It purred happily with not a hint of smoke, but I knew there were many ways to cover up that fault and asked to take it for a spin. He agreed, provided that Lee leave his car behind.

I drove the red VW out onto the highway, pushing up the speed while testing the brakes and steering. Next I stopped and let it cool, starting it again—still no smoke. I climbed underneath, looked for oil, and checked for water leaks in the radiator and hoses. Every part of the engine appeared clean.

I drove back to the car lot and haggled the salesman down to five hundred even. The license and title would be sent to Lee’s apartment. Once I’d taped the temporary license in the window, I grabbed hold of Lee’s hands.

“Stay out of trouble, buddy,” Lee said, his dark eyes staring worriedly at me.

“I will, and many thanks. Ace your test today, and I’ll talk with you real soon.”

Back at Lee’s apartment, I picked up all my gear and then drove my car to Walnut Springs. Ma wasn’t home. I sat gazing at the house and barn and finally chose to walk down to the creek. It was drizzling, but I didn’t care.

Standing by the water brought back memories: Lee and me sliding off the rocks into the creek, Pa teaching us to fish, Jake and I talking about my time in Memphis, and me praying hard after his death. Sadness washed over me as I prayed again, asking Lord Jesus for his guidance.

Calmer, I walked back to the house and saw Ma’s car. She was bringing in the groceries, so I helped. Back in the kitchen I said, “I bought a car.”

She nodded, having seen it, and looked up. “Are you okay?”

I realized she was staring at my nose. "I'll be fine."

"You leaving?"

I nodded.

"Where to?"

"I'm headed north. There are lots of jobs up in Michigan. I'll hang out there for the summer, maybe come back in the fall."

"Where will you live?"

"I'll let you know." I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

She rechecked the grocery list, hiding her tears. Eventually she raised her eyes to mine. "You know your pa's not really a bad person."

"Yeah I know, but he needs time to think it all through. So do I. It will work out better if I leave."

Ma nodded, finishing up her groceries. "Can you stay for supper?"

I tried to raise an eyebrow, but that hurt. "You know I love you, Ma, and when the time is right, please tell Pa I love him too."



*A gripping tale of recovery from war-induced stress, Attack from Within begins with Pete's return from Vietnam. Still struggling to remember his last mission, he fights with his Pa and leaves Tennessee. But once in Detroit, faced with violent riots and treacherous drug dealers, Pete teeters on the brink of self-destruction. As the action unravels a wartime mystery, the insight it provides into the mind of a survivor makes this story gutsy and inspiring.*

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