

Chapter One

To Conquer Death

Minutes after noon, as Aiden McBride rummaged through saddlebags for a bite of grease-soaked biscuit to welcome mid-day, the big bay horse beneath him startled and froze.

Aiden looked up. The snowbound Bighorn mountains watched in silence as a grizzly stormed over a downed elk. Massive paws lurched the carcass to and fro, as skilled jaws peeled skin from flesh in broad, ruby stripes. Raw wind ruffled the bear's hackles. The creature startled at the horse's nicker—and looked straight at Aiden.

Learning from a hunting guide, no wisdom came in locking eyes with the wild, Aiden looked away, mind spinning. He'd been gunning for grizzly since riding the mountain. To a desk-bound Scotsman in eighteen eighty-eight, such a kill equated to taming the Wild West. At least that's how he considered the scheme when the whole affair lay as undeclared ambition. Squared off against the beast, some thirty yards away, the aim struck him as pure death wish.

A chill rivaling the subzero air gripped him at the prospect of taking the monster alone. First impulse was to flee. A choice his to make. Behind the bear stood slab-sided Cloud Peak. Hemming them in on the left, a wide creek rushed, and smoked into the cold. Escape laid in the direction he'd come. The big bay's shoulder quivered indecision. A warning growl set everything into motion.

Knee and shoulders, Aiden aimed the big bay at his prey. Yanked off his gloves, slipped his rifle from the scabbard on his saddle, and raised its salvation. "Bear, you're the only why in Wyoming."

His horse wanted nothing to do with the venture—hooves dancing on the ground, clatter echoing off the granite floor. Aiden sat deep in the saddle to steady the animal beneath him, but the big bay fought the reins making a clean shot impossible. He wrapped the reins around the saddle horn to free both his hands. The horse jiggled. Saddlebags and gloves slipped to the ground. Aiden's heart blasted into his ears as he braced the rifle to his torso. Aimed. Horse, side-stepping, snorted steam into the biting cold.

With the commotion the grizzly lost patience, leapt over the elk, and charged.

The big bay spun toward the creek. Aiden and his rifle hit the ground hard. He leapt up, grabbing for reins still fastened to the horn—he would not try to outrun the bear on foot. He

twisted one end of the tight leather once around his left wrist. Braced against the rocky bank. The frantic animal pulled back. Aiden dragged behind into the middle of the stream. His clothes sucked up the glacial water. The horse, unrelenting, stretched Aiden's arm to its limit. Aiden grabbed a hunting knife from his belt, lunging its blade in the direction of reins tight-wire taut. Missed. Leather skidded against his wrist, burning deep into his skin. Blood mixed into the ice-water on his hand. Again and again he swiped the knife toward his bond to free the horse. Release them both.

Two winners in the tug-of-war.

His shoulder gave up first. Deep within the muscle came a sickening pop as Aiden sliced through the strap and on, deep into his forearm. His fingers, shocked at what his hand had done, dropped the knife into the stream. The water was too deep and swift to grant any hope of retrieval. His two gloves, already well downstream. Aiden whirled around in searing pain, searching for the bear, his fingers limp with the dislocation of his shoulder, blood gushing from the knife wound. The big bay splashed across the water. Thundering hooves faded into the hoary storm of woods and underbrush, leaving behind the solitary whoosh of indifferent water pushing between jagged rocks.

The moose-size grizzly reared up in Aiden's footprints along the shore and sniffed the air. Aiden dissolved into the water, chin grazing the surface, hoping to become another stone in the stream. The gash on his arm was fire.

Rifle and saddlebags lay in a useless heap at the bear's feet. The menace fell to all fours, rocking back and forth as though swaying to a moronic rhythm of some distant dirge, then pawed the saddlebags.

Biscuits.

That, and a bit of desiccated beef the hunters called "pemmican," was Aiden's only food. The demon turned its rump to the stream and defecated into the water. A wolf howled somewhere up-mountain. The bear raised his head to the sound, then moved toward the elk to protect its kill. Aiden envied that. The fiend had better things to do than eat a few meager lumps of grease-soaked dough and tired flesh. With one long groan the grizzly rumbled upstream, disappearing over a rise in the bank.

Thanks to the pardon of a dead elk, Aiden would live, though miserably. He lingered in the glacial water. He wouldn't share the same shore with the bear until a good distance stood be-

tween them. His body numbed. He knew he had to take action while he still could. With his horse nothing but a memory, he moved back toward the shallows to retrieve his weapon.

Strong currents battered his shoulder as he plodded one dull foot after another until he stooped on the bank, keeping his head hidden from the bear. Water rushed from his trousers and boots. His neck and head throbbed with cold. He grabbed a dripping, oversized kerchief from his pants pocket. With one end between his teeth, he pulled the cloth taut around his upper arm, and tied the ends off to stop his bleeding. He used the drenched neck scarf to wrap the knife wound, holding the arm tight against his body to lessen the excruciating pain.

God, the air was itself a beast.

Morning had taken a razor's edge. Ice crept up the cuffs on his pants. The collar of his flannel shirt stiffened with frost. His sheepskin coat, sopped. The ungodly weight of fleece pressing on his injury. He ripped the sodden coat from his back. Nothing must slow him. Again, the wolf cried, and the bear moaned in answer. An arctic breeze slapped the drenched shirt against his skin as he reached for his rifle. The weapon, too, had found its way into the water.

He wasted no hope on thoughts of rescue. Eager to win the prize of a grizzly, he'd left the rest of the hunting party behind to sleep away the pre-dawn and spend the final day of hunting in mountain meadows. No one knew his plan.

None knew his path.

He'd ridden up two thousand feet short of Cloud Peak's thirteen-thousand-foot granite tip, ready to punctuate his accomplishments: conquering a mountain and killing a great bear.

Warrior enough to provide meat to shepherd his sister through the brutish winter. Able to be the man she measured.

The man he wanted to be.

Aiden peered over the rise. The bear once again hunched over its prey, grumbling through its meal, protecting its quarry. The titan looked in Aiden's direction and gnashed its teeth as if to say, *watch and learn*.

Wincing, Aiden swung the saddlebags around his neck with his functional hand, and tucked the rifle under his right arm. He dragged the soggy pelt behind him a few dozen paces, his aching body faltering on the uneven ground.

Should he leave the coat?

The wool would freeze before ever drying. Slow him. No use to keep a piece of ice. He shook the idiotic idea from his mind. Even wet, the lambskin would hold some comfort—as long as his body had heat to grant.

Behind him, the crackle of bones between the grizzly's jowls peppered the mountain silence, and he knew his quest had changed.

To conquer death.

For that he must dry the clothes. Raise his body temperature. Fire. His one hope.

Chapter Two

When Sorrows Come

Eden Rose trudged the dingy pasture rim, she-goats bouncing along at her heels. The pair had no names. Such a thing would make them harder to eat if life came to that. Her husband had said so. And ever since Hugh had delivered Eden to the godforsaken Wyoming territory she feared that, in time, there'd be goat on the table.

But summer had seen them lean, not fatten, along with the pock-marked land around her. Eden doubted the goats had enough flesh on them for prairie flies stalking the living, depending on death. She swept a hand through the buzzing about her head.

What in Satan's name drove people west? The struggle to be different? To understand man's limits to grief or vigor?

Homesteading was little more than hanging from an unbridled noose over an bottomless canyon.

The wait for doom, endless.

Though, as God stood above, she'd not let the rope tighten. She adored the little creatures. Hugh bought them as a novelty on their way West a decade ago. The pair giving them plenty of milk and cheese until the drought had turned the flow to a trickle. But to Eden they granted much more: affection, laughter—and love. Hugh's paucities.

Every detail fit for an opera.

A mournful wind soughed through cottonwoods flanking the Powder River, stirring her anger along with the dust. The warm September morning had fallen prey to a chilling breeze from the west. The temperature, a good thirty degrees below the comfort of noon, was in an undecided fit. Eden flexed her fingers to warm them, and pulled the thick shawl around her shoulders, kneeling at a small break in the barb along an uneven fence-line. She grabbed a pair of canvas gloves from her pocket, and a short piece of wire from a leather pouch across her shoulder.

Her constant battle was to contain the mustangs. They'd broken through the rickety fence twice that week. Four mares, four foals, two weanlings, and a two-year-old colt that should have been separated last spring, but was too rank to catch, had scattered to the wind as soon as they were free. Rounding them up alone, a brutal job. The space between pronghorn antelope wanting in to eat the hay and horses wanting out to roam was her prison.

Wild things tested all boundaries.

The notion of freedom buoyed her for a moment before drowning in the sight of another fence-break.

She pushed a few strands of her hair back underneath a headscarf, and focused on the task. Winding wire around one end of the severed line, she threaded an eye at the end of the other. The link was pulled as tight as her hands allowed while she searched the back corners of her memory for the things her husband tended in preparation for winter. Eight years had been whittled away by a sharp focus to her own duties: endless canning, mending, hauling wood, and patching never-ending gaps in the walls and ceiling of the sod cabin. Eden glanced at the barn. Besides putting up hay, Hugh's primary concern was the curing of meat and repairing the stable and fences. None of which she'd accomplished to his standards. Even if she had meat to cure, she'd not paid close attention to the process. She was unsure the task could be accomplished without producing poison.

A violent cough bent Eden in two. The goats scattered. She wiped the back of her hand across the corner of her mouth, and caught her breath. The illness in her lungs since August, though waning, had sapped her strength and shortened the time left to ready for the coming snow. She massaged her upper arms, hoping to reinvigorate them. Bones at her shoulders were little more than nobs, and the muscles at the base of her neck ached. Little strength remained to

lend to a bath, yet she didn't see how she could creep into bed without one. She'd not be claimed by the filth of homesteading. A warm tub kept her sane.

Barbs pressed into her palms as she finished securing a curl of wire back upon itself and twice around a post. She tugged with all her strength, knowing the mend was feeble, but it would have to do. Another load of feed waited to be hauled to pasture, and water to cart from creek to trough after fences were secured. Her fists clenched tight at the thought of splitting a section of log before nightfall. Ranch work was staggering. She damned Hugh for leaving so long.

He had left for Southampton in the spring with the last sound group of polo ponies, determined to raise more cash for their failing claim before winter's snow. In Hugh's absence, her brother had come all the way from Glasgow to help her. His arrival, the only good thing about her husband's departure. The first time Aiden had set eyes on her in five years, his face reflected a wicked truth: she'd grown haggard and frail. Yet his twisted clown expression of surprise made her laugh. She loved him for his spark. Aiden's willing grin always improved the climate of her heart.

And always been a constant savior. Aiden, all of ten, had ventured into a raging surf to turn her spaniel pup toward shore after the dog had gone too far to fetch a stick she'd thrown. And it had been Aiden to discover an abandoned stone cottage overgrown in the dale near their home of Lilybank. The magical chanty held a tattered library, left behind as though they'd been read too many times to bother packing—their owner longing for undiscovered tales. Surrounded by the cool of stone walls, the two read to each other long into balmy summer afternoons. *Canterbury Tales*, the entire series of Waverly Novels, and Aiden's favorite, Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, about a young man's family left penniless after the death of his father.

A novel written about them.

Then, her beloved Guarneri violin. A gift from her affluent parents when she turned twelve, the centuries old instrument had been sold in destitution to pay Aiden's first year of college tuition. Her most prized possession, gone. But Aiden's expression at learning he'd attend the University in Glasgow was ample re-payment for her privation. Still, she had pined for its return. Life went monotone without her music.

And Aiden knew.

He'd used his bagpipes as collateral to save it from being sold again, and worked two jobs to buy the instrument back. Graduation day, his gift to Eden: a gorgeous box she suspected held flowers, instead bore her cherished violin.

Dressed in finery as he stepped from the train in Sheridan two months before, Aiden was the most civilized thing she'd encountered since leaving Scotland. He played jester to her meager court, peppering their banter with Shakespeare as though he'd written the words himself. And his jig to the music of her violin, the dance of a God. He was a constant reminder: she'd once been as fine a thing as he.

Aiden to the aid. Rescuing dogs and deserted books—or an old woman from a pond. She shut her eyes to the quicksilver memories of a time long buried.

Yet his face, a mother's twin, startling Eden's heart with every glance, flooding her with the murky waters of guilt. Shame. A secret she could never share with anyone. Especially Aiden.

Yet Aiden was a darling, even though her spirit no longer found anything pure about beauty. Whether the face of her brother or the spectacular mountains beyond, both held caveats. Aiden's cheery countenance was all he had to offer. He didn't take to ranching. Raised an aristocrat, he'd never dabbled in anything less. Clueless to the threat of a destitute winter, he'd been too long behind a barrister's door in a big city, with coal for the fire on command and fine dining halls at every corner. He was game for any job, but lacked awareness. Never dealt with the wild. Yet Eden wouldn't shame him. He made her happy. And a nurtured spirit could deal with anything, even the double labor of covertly fixing a brother's mistakes.

But double-duty left her no time to finish the canning required for winter. Bacon had run out, and with it, the fat that bathed the biscuits. She'd not asked her closest friend, Maddie, for more. The request was hard enough the first time. Maddie already had ten mouths to feed. Hugh was due to send a letter that would certainly come with money. Eden could wait.

Wind caught a stand of cottonwoods beside the pasture. Rustling leaves cackled awake a few roosting hens. Eden peered at the branches.

So, that's where they'd gotten to.

Ravens had raided Aiden's poor patch of the coop. What chickens survived had scattered. Eden was left to forage an egg or two beneath the scrub—when she could find them. They had eaten the last bird they dared, a scrawny rooster, before Aiden set off to hunt the

Bighorn. Discussion over the skimpy meal centered on all the things that had gone wrong since he'd arrived.

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.” Aiden chewed a stringy thigh, smiling through his Shakespeare. “Act four, scene five—Hamlet.”

Humor in the face of starvation.

Eden eyed the chickens. Too high to reach, the birds fluffed their feathers and gabbled laughter as though they knew she was unarmed. Her mouth watered at the memory of meat. Henceforth, she'd bring along the rifle. A vow of desperation. Until that moment, a gun, the one thing she'd not touch. Murder might be the way of a necropolis called the West, and she'd done her share with her bare hands, but she'd not use lead. Killing that way was the work of men.

Or the way of a woman starved.

Soon, something other than dry biscuits and the occasional egg would have to appear. With the last money in the bank she'd bought only a ten-pound sack of flour, and spent the rest on a load of grass hay. Horses were the priority, and she'd tacked up flyers all over the small, nearby town of Suggs offering them for sale. Unpredictable at best, they'd as soon take a hunk of flesh than a bite of fruit, but they were trained to ride and drive. If kept up they had some value.

Hugh would be livid if he knew. He'd not yet given up on the polo pony enterprise. She imagined him now, in a Scottish bank, begging for a loan to bolster his delusions while she, dealt with the reality of an empty stomach.

Another cool gust confirmed the determined business of approaching winter. Eden turned to the west, scanning the top of the Bighorn range. As a rule, clouds were in scant supply until autumn broke, but they billowed up over the shoulder of the eastern slope with mid-September, tall and serious, laying claim to an eastward path straight to Rose Ranch. Their beauty took her breath away until the storm brewing settled in her heart. With no word yet from Hugh, she said a silent prayer to hold the weather until her brother returned with enough game to sustain them. Aiden was young and strong, but she knew the mountains to be relentless when gripped by snow. Few dared to cross them.

A crack crossed the air like a bullet. At the far end of the pasture, a solitary mare raised a hind foot to the rowdy young stallion. A fine horse sure to be a good stud. Tomorrow she'd have

to muster the courage to pull him from harm's way. One well-placed blow and he'd be nothing more than a gelding.

The angry mare kicked again, catching the fence instead. With a snap, the post shattered, wire coiling around the splintered wood like spun sugar. The goats fell to the ground, paralyzed in surprise. The herd of mustangs stampeded toward them.

Eden grabbed each goat by a hind leg. Pulled hard, and struggled her way under the fence, barbs snatching at her hands and skirt. Dragging the little animals to safety, her garment ripped through from waist to hem. She thrust one hand through the wire to pull her skirt from the barb, and caught her fleshy palm instead. Sticky blood trickled into the creases of her hand. She lay on the hardpan dirt behind the safety of the fence as the mustangs thundered past. Kicked-up earth hailed all around. Relieved, Eden closed her eyes and cried. She opened them to the goats licking a set of crimson scratches on one arm. She put a hand on each animal. Their cashmere filled in for winter. The rich feel of silken wool reminded Eden of the Scotland home she'd left behind. Woolen tartans and soft, delicate lace; a maid to bring cream tea at four.

Nothing but a dream in tatters.

She scratched their withers, reveling in a single remnant of comfort. One lifted a hind foot to its ear and scratched.

“Aye, you see? Better than a simple salt-lick, I am, even though I'm quite sure I look no better.”

She sat up to examine her ruined skirt, tore a piece away, and wrapped the cloth around the deep cut on her hand. Her little friends bleated an objection as she stood.

“Oh, quit pestering yourselves. Hugh'll be bringing a trunk full of treasures when he returns. I'll have a new skirt.” A goat nibbled at the base of her bloomers laid open on one side by the wire. “A few china bowls and a bolt of linen lace for the windows, too.” Eden scanned the dilapidated ranch spread out in the glen below and brushed her hands together. “Finery for the hell hole.”

The goats followed her to a gaping hole at the fence post. They yanked at her flagging skirt while she repaired the damage with the last few pieces of wire in her pouch. All too short for a proper fix, but the light was fading. She'd mend her paltry effort come morning. She prayed the horses not test its muscle.

Dry leaves rustled, and she glanced behind her, uneasy at the sunset. Truth be told, she sensed being watched.

Ah well, who would hear a cry for help?

The fence could be mile high iron and not keep out the one thing thriving on the hateful ranch: her fear. Dread had moved in, made itself at home, and found plenty on which to feed. Imagination was the barbwire she used to keep such devils out. Her best hope, a soothing memory of time, long passed: her fine home across the sea, flanked by broad green meadows and jagged hills, the Firth of Clyde tossing its head beyond, between a bonnie wee island and the Glasgow shore.

And the dream of a beautiful man. One she'd seen only in her visions but was sure existed, somewhere. A loving man—a man she loved.

With one more nervous glance around, she told herself that watching eyes belonged to the chickens, and that she'd yet have her way with them. She stood tall to show herself capable, packed her tools, and walked the fence line up and over the modest rise toward her sod home. Yet trepidation laced her, tight and uncomfortable as an old, brittle, undersized shoe.

Dust from a passing rider was no more than a pale swirl at the road's horizon, as she crossed the wagon-wide bridge above Crazy Woman Creek. She dropped the tools in the barn. The goats pushed through a narrow stand of willows flanking one side of her cabin to forage for their supper. A short picket fence marked the edge of grass dried to dust under the weight of a long drought. Passing three heartrendingly small graves, Eden muttered a prayer for the souls of her lost babes—dreams denied. Each inscription, sharp edged and sore, carved into her heart.

The soil, taken so much, returned so little.

Overhead, the willows arced in the breeze and Eden stopped cold at their miracle: autumn leaves speckling the trees turned to branches full of roosting chickens. She gentled her breathing, and inched her way across the hardpan yard. Keeping her eyes on the birds, Eden pushed open the door to the cabin, and reached for the shotgun. Pulled its weight through the doorway. Lifted its power to her breast. She drew the hammer back, bracing her feet the way Hugh always did. No need to fret about perfect aim, she knew the shot would scatter. Her targets blinked cold poultry eyes as though disbelieving Eden had the mettle in her to squeeze the trigger. She clenched her teeth. They couldn't fathom her driving hunger. She held her breath. Closed her eyes tight. Fired.

The blast was a mule kicking her shoulder. Back she fell, into the doorway. A fracas of chickens moved to higher limbs in a whirl of feathers and disgust. Not one took a hit for her famine.

She beat the ground with a fist and clenched her teeth. "God be damned."

Cursing came as much a surprise to Eden as the feel of the gun. Both shocked her, as though executed by someone else. Fear was capable of things overlooked by the unharmed heart.

She picked herself up to find a she-goat at the base of her cabin door. Upturned by the shock of gunfire, the wee brute's teeth clamped tight to the edge of an envelope. Eden shrieked, yanking the casing from its mouth. The goat stood again by the time Eden pushed the cabin door open and collapsed into a rocker.

Slipping the headscarf from her hair, she let her hand rest under the date on the piece of crumpled mail: twentieth of July. Two months ago. She tossed her scarf on the mahogany dining table, the only piece of furniture to follow her across the Atlantic, and opened the rest of the torn envelope with care. She didn't want to damage the bank check she would find. Inside was a single sheet of flimsy paper inscribed with fine handwriting.

Dearest,

I will be brief in the recounting of my journey, for what occurred is no longer of concern. I say only that the ocean passing was cruel and the landing more so. The little sorrel, Jess, could not get to his feet and died on the ship. The passage was much longer than usual due to foul weather. All were so weak from starvation they had trouble setting one foot in front of the other. I slung the roan, trying to save him, as he could not stand. Four ponies were lost in the end, dying like rotten sheep in the ship's hold. I fear a good forty-percent of the remaining horses will not live. To cap the blow, I was badly hurt, dragged by a pony during the offload. I am recovering, but the mend is slow. In hospital for near a month, I have been released to the mercy of the bank, where I sit writing a letter. I received a mere fifty pounds for each head surviving passage. Credit is at an end. Doctors say I should attempt no travel until spring. As my mind is set, I am afraid, even then, my injuries may prevent me from laboring at the ranch. So, with a heavy spirit, I propose the remaining stock be sold, Rose Ranch be closed up, and the funds used to join me.

Loving, Hugh

The hope of returning to Scotland took her breath away until anger found its legs. One page. Twelve uses of "I". Not a single word given to her. As ever, all about Hugh. It wasn't

possible to do what he bid before winter, and she had no cash to grant her fare. The Crazy Woman held her for ransom. She had no strength to chuckle at an irony that would have had Aiden rolling on the plank floor.

She looked back across the words on the linen paper. *Dearest*: an expected salutation; the obligatory “how are you?” one expresses to an acquaintance on the street. And, *Loving*: Hugh didn’t know the meaning. The word was used in hindsight—just as she did.

Eden wiggled loose the simple gold band on her finger and contemplated the prudence of selling such a thing. Wind blustered through one of the open windows and she set the ring on a dresser, rushing to stop the raw air. Frayed woolen curtains billowed in the breeze, reminding her of the bolt of linen lace promised to replace them. Another pledge broken. She batted the frame hard, unmooring one of its small panes. Glass shattered on the hard oak floor. Hugh’s missive fell into the shards.

A life, in pieces.

Eden picked up the letter, walked to the corner kitchen, and laid her husband’s charge on the table next to another bill recently arrived. She unwrapped her bloodied hand, and reached for the last bottle of Scotch whisky in the cupboard. Using her teeth to pull the top free, she poured what remained into her stinging palm. She yanked clean linen hanging at the side of the stove to sop up the rest, examined her wound, and licked off the excess alcohol dripping from her fingers. Eden cupped the palm to her nose and inhaled the peaty scent, a dank cloud surrounding Hugh every evening, as he sipped a jigger of Scotch and peered at the fire in silence. The odor turned her stomach.

With no details of his injury offered, she questioned the severity of his condition. Had he taken a shine to the luxuries of civilization? Old habits died hard. Rounders only go round and round. The way of a career military man: falling as easily into bed with a different woman as he did a foreign war. She imagined him getting to London and attaching himself to a dollish nurse tending his wounds. How long had he contemplated leaving and not coming back? Doubtless the idea was in his mind, as one thing after another went wrong on the ranch. God knew the notion was in hers. She shook her head. Life had laid opportunity in his lap and yanked away her every option.

Eden’s fist banged the table hard. The china in the adjacent cupboard rattled. Her fury fought her hunger for first place. She could take no more. If she had to do a man’s work, she’d

slog along without feminine trappings. She ripped remaining shreds of skirt from her waist and headed for the barn in her bloomers. The goats were curious kittens prattling along beside.

From a wall full of tools she grabbed the shovel, pulled an oilcloth coat from a hook, and headed for the overgrown garden behind the cabin. Crickets lauded the arrival of dusk as she stomped across the yard. A solitary hen clucked a muted taunt from a willow.

The garden lay picked clean, but Eden held out hope for buried fortune. She dug up the mounds of withering potato plants with the deep thrusts of a gravedigger. Three stunted russets the size of a big toe appeared in the discarded dirt. She was quick to push them into her coat pockets before the goats overtook them. Eden continued turning earth to no avail. At the end of the fourth row she quit, tears streaming at the refuse her life had become.

The garden, finished.

A scraping of earth brought her attention to the goats. Bickering over something scavenged under a broad plant in the next row, they grunted like piglets. A squash, gold amid the ruin, disappeared in large bites. Eden screamed. One of the beggars ran, the other fainted. She leapt across the garden row, sobbing as she landed next to the disabled goat. Eden blinked through her tears. The helpless beast lay as if in rigor-mortis awaiting burial.

Without a name.

Its terrified eyes tracked her movement as Eden, thankful for the blurry vision of her weeping eyes, raised the shovel above her head. She grimaced at the impulse forcing her hand as she acted to end the life of something she adored. But the circumference of her love had dwindled over the years and she'd been taken only once before by such hopelessness.

Through the veil of Eden's despair her mother struggled for breath beyond the same bars of a cage Eden had shared with duty so many years ago. She smelled the rotting flesh of the vegetables beneath her, tasting a vague and bitter truth.

Desperation: the iron fist of survival.