

GATES OF EDEN

The Gates of Eden Trilogy

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PROLOGUE

A SON OF ADAM

*Lines etched on scrolls of time.
Watching, sheathed for eternity.
Man, mortal paths walked
In the valley of shadows.
Now, The gift imperishable
Guardian of Life without end.*

I had been chosen by the President of the United States, although suggesting that choice was involved carried only an element of truth. Ordained is more accurate. No one else could do the job and the greater truth appealed to the Divine.

A civilian hire by the Pentagon, I had been thrust into a god-like role as Commander of the Lunar Habitat Project. Oh, this entrusting sounded innocent enough. “Look, honey, they’re going to build a habitat on the moon.” Truth be told, we had polluted our environment and abused our resources to the point of painting ourselves into the proverbial corner of self-inflicted extinction.

The innocuous title LH-ProC followed my name in all current government documents. Far less kind was the name used by the outstanding young men and women I had dismissed from duty as unsuitable. An imprimatur of “national security”

kept quiet and pretty much invisible more than two decades of my unpublicized and often secret work in the disciplines of sensory deprivation and isolation dynamics.

My work remained invisible outside of select circles, but its far reaching consequences around the globe indelibly impacted every citizen of every nation, bar none. One select circle, the inner ring at the Pentagon, the infamous E-ring, knew me well. From fox-holes to manned orbiting platforms, from space walks to security insertion teams, my work guaranteed 93 percent of those selected would return home in one piece, alive and well, and more importantly on the security front, no one would be the wiser.

My *last* work for the U.S. government, the ill-fated Habitat Project, required that I determine the suitability of three uniquely skilled professionals - two men, one woman - in an epic move to stem the hemorrhage of energy from our world. Their job: to initialize the U.S. Lunar Habitat and prepare it for mining ore in the dangerous environs of space. One of the men I owed my life to, twice over. The others I met that special Thursday after New Years, the last New Years in the Common Era. An auspicious occasion. Our lives before that day had been woven into the universal fabric so tightly it was difficult to see the pattern. Afterward, the pattern became unavoidable.

Let me tell our story as I know it now, looking back and looking in - the final pages in the true account of mortality and the hour it got swallowed up by Life.

GATES OF EDEN

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

TANNON MACNEIL

The cornice topped the ridge like a huge wave, cresting, ready to sweep bare the powdered slope below. Cannon teams would soon eliminate the hazard as the sun began to peek over the high rim of the world. A marker with ropes closing the run stood sentinel in the dawn light high above, one set of ski tracks caught glistening beneath the ropes in the morning rays. Tannon MacNeil, young, taut, strikingly handsome, hugely over-confident, smiled to himself seeing all his limbs still where they belonged as his infectious laughter broke the silence in the chilled shadows below, his staccato breath patterning the air. He eyed the full-bodied sitz mark near the base of the wave where an inelegant and dangerous back-breaker had just ended a fifty foot freefall. From the hole a deep powder trail waded down the slope to where he stood. Across the valley, his disarming laugh echoed from vertical rock walls.

He knew danger. Already this season he had survived two self-started avalanches, swimming clear each time as adrenaline powered him to top the flow. Safety stayed a risky but precise calculation. Kicking the skis he'd chosen this morning over

his snowboard back down the fall line, he took in the magnificence of the scene dawning around him, powering through mammoth silhouettes looking every bit like snow monks lumbering toward the valley floor and the hot breakfast he knew was almost ready.

San Moreno, known for its year-round beauty, a magnificent creation made specially for winter's deep powder. Soaring to almost 15,000 feet, the Saint held the best known secret of the Colorado ski world. What made it special became obvious intuitively: narrow unpaved roads, treacherous glaciers, pure adrenaline runs that would just as soon put you in the hospital as deposit you at the base heliport for a return engagement.

Some days its two choppers could be seen buzzing round trip to the emergency pad at the mobile medical center down near the valley's funnel before reeling up toward the drop zone at the peak. Blankets arranged in the equipment carriers outside each of the choppers' clear bubbles doubled as evacuation pods on these flights to the center. The open-air 7500 foot drop gave many battered skiers the rush they had expected of their race with the mountain.

What San Moreno did not have drew purists from around the globe: no amenities of resort life, no facilities to pander to the recreational tastes of bunnies and their pursuers. There was purity here. It was the closest thing to a religious experience that Tannon knew of in life.

Even "Jake's LeanTo" on the valley floor maintained consistency with the ambiance. Jake's napkins gave the whole menu in bold type: "BUCKWHEAT PANCAKES AND HOT COFFEE - \$1.75." As long as anyone could remember, Jake had been serving up his rib-sticking pancakes and scalding

coffee for the exact same price.

Old-timers told the story that one time a newcomer had ordered steak and eggs from Jake. He had just nodded his head, then served the cakes and coffee anyway. The hungry patron swore a little and started to leave without paying. Jake coolly reached under the short counter and pulled out a black powder rifle that probably had not been fired in twenty years. Jake just drawled, "That ain't right." Looking down the huge barrel at the man he repeated himself, a little more slowly to make sure the gentleman understood, "That ain't right!"

The man cursed, dropped a five dollar bill on the counter and began to back away, hands extended. Jake tapped the barrel of the rifle on the counter, smudging it with black powder residue, and calmly whispered, "Hold it."

Jake's place had an open front and it was cold, but even the freezing air couldn't stop beads of sweat from forming on the customer's now ashen face. The world froze as Jake again reached under the counter. Then holding out his hammy left hand while holding the firearm with his right, he handed the man three one dollar bills and a quarter that clanged to the granite floor. "Now that's right," he said softly.

Tannon knew Jake well enough to seek his counsel, liked his unassuming manner, his honesty, and his buckwheat pancakes. Their friendship deepened with each visit to the mountain. They had, to the casual observer, only one thing in common: a love for the purity of San Moreno, but its significance represented so much more. This would always be Tannon's place of choice for sorting things out. The mountain served as re-charger for his spirit when personal challenges came up. And this time was no different.

Though a natural athlete with coordination to spare, Tannon's confidence had taken a beating on another mountain on the other side of the globe when he'd been unable to save two buddies from a car bomb. They had slowed to help a man change a tire on the narrow mountain road. Tannon didn't know why or how, but sensing danger at the last moment, he'd thrown himself against the humvee's bulkhead. His dark blond crewcut barely hid the scar that creased several inches of scalp around his right ear. But this time, this personal challenge went deeper than confidence.

The LeanTo was just that, half of a small A-frame open on one side. Sliding up quietly to the front, Tannon saw Jake in a swirl of heat and steam stirring his regionally famous batter. The circular motions were matched in the crisp morning air by his breath. It wreathed about his head like a serpent swaying as he hummed some unknown tune.

Jake always claimed the secret to good buckwheat pancakes was in the stirring. Tannon thought for sure it was Jake's secret additions to the recipe, but he knew that old rifle was still under the counter waiting to end any argument. It was one risk he'd never dared attempt.

"Mornin', Lieutenant." Jake's bass echoed high off the back wall as Tannon stepped out of his skis. The formality of the greeting was traditional, but used only once each time they renewed their friendship. "I heard you comin'." Jake still hadn't turned around and his broad back gave no hint of recognition.

"Hello, Jake. It's good to be back." Tannon's baritone came out deep and evenly matched to Jake's vocal timbre from the cold of the early run. He swung a well muscled leg over a barstool. "How did you know it was me?"

“Oh,” Jake paused as he tasted his batter, then dropped the spoon back in the bowl and continued stirring, “I heard you laughin’ up there at the base of the ridge. You the only one I know fool enough to jump the ridge before sunup, before breakfast, before the gunners check it out, before anythin’!”

He turned and Tannon noticed the corners of his mouth doing pushups. Jake threw a dollop of batter on the hot grill. The sizzle gave emphasis to his words, “Some day you gonna wind up broke at my very own door!”

Tannon tried to disarm the comment with a smile. “I really can’t think of a better way or a better place to go.”

Jake jerked back, throwing hot grease across his kitchen, nearly losing his spatula. His response came quickly and from somewhere deep inside. “Ain’t you got any sense, son? Don’t say that, here or anywhere else. You *never* know how sensitive he’s gonna be,” Jake shrugged toward the mountain, “or who might be listenin’. Why’re you talkin’ like that anyway?”

Jake stood 6’4” and his tall frame was just beginning to show a paunch. Any expansion of his gut, however, seemed of little consequence compared to his back and shoulders. Hundred pound sacks of flour were regularly managed two at a time as Jake prepared for big weekends on the mountain. He leaned over the counter toward Tannon as he spoke, and taking the hint, Tannon changed the subject quickly, not reminding him he had brought up the matter. “Is the coffee hot?”

Jake’s coffee could steam decals off of skis, but it was customary to ask. “Yup,” came the whole response.

Jake flipped his cakes high over the grill. A slight movement near the end of the LeanTo caught Tannon’s attention. A young raccoon sat there nearly motionless licking its lips, looking every

bit ready to play the part of bandit.

“What’s on your mind, Lt. Mac? You was up there laughin’ in the death angel’s face this mornin’. I could hear it, and I can feel it now. What’s troublin’ you?”

Jake wasn’t one much for small talk, or any talk at all. In fact, neither man said much outside an intimate circle of friends. Still, Tannon didn’t think the time quite right just yet. He checked to see if anyone else was around. “Did Petey come by after he dropped me off?”

Jake was more than patient, though the deep furrows of his face reflected concern. “Yeah, Petey came through here ‘bout a half hour ago. That chop-jock got my first real batch of the day, though they wasn’t quite stirred yet.” The word “stirred” came out low and soft. A gleam in Jake’s eye and a quick glance toward his First Aid cabinet gave him away. Supplies “for medicinal use only” were kept there under lock and key.

He slapped the flat of his giant spatula on the grill loudly for emphasis, splashing more grease across his kitchen. “He told me what fool thing you was plannin’ on doin’. The ridge has been closed for a week. They’re gonna blast it this mornin’. Two kids were pulled out just last month stiffer than last year’s cakes.” He caught himself when he saw Tannon wince, “I guess you know all that, already.”

The distant roar of a throaty V-8 recoiled between mountain walls, distracting them for a moment. Still near the foot of the valley, it headed for Jake’s up the only road. It stopped momentarily at the medical center, and finding no one around, at least no new nurses, it slipped and pounded its way for the heliport.

State crews had cleared the road all the way to the LeanTo earlier. They knew crowds weren’t expected on the mountain

today, but they always cleared the road to Jake's first. A warm rib-sticking presence in their bellies afterward resulted from Jake's appreciation for the ride and access to his livelihood.

First rays of the morning sun glanced off the glossy truck and danced across the valley revealing its raw, awesome beauty. Winter scenes are usually studies in black and white, but San Moreno's steel blues and grays of granite palisaded in great walls of rock. Near the peak far in the distance, at the edge of truly keen sight, three wooden crosses stood in silhouette.

Some adventurous zealot had raised them one summer years ago on the horizon line far above the medical center. To be seen at this distance, they each had to be twenty feet tall, a couple of feet around at their bases, and their crossbars must have extended out more than ten feet on either side. Neither Petey nor Vic, his partner, would admit to having helped raise them with their helos. Jake had pointed them out first one morning, but no one admitted knowing their origin.

A single figure emerged from the truck down at the heliport. That had to be Vic as he had drawn the morning schedule. It would cost Tannon plenty for Petey's earlier service, but by now he was home watching the sunrise out his cabin's window wall, sipping coffee from the thermos Jake had filled thirty minutes before, the liner having withstood the initial meltdown temperature.

Throaty growls from the big V-8, and the whine of spinning tires on ice drew attention back to the truck. It spun completely around exiting the heliport before straightening out for the upper end of the valley. With luck, it would be three minutes before the gunners made it to Jake's. Three minutes. Tannon knew the time had come.