



EXCERPT

# WARRIORS OF ST. ANTONI

St. Antoni Series – Book 1

***On the frontier world of St. Antoni, you got tough—or you died.***

This is the story of sisters Bethany, Jeanne and Iris, and the choices they make to survive on the world of St. Antoni. Bethany marries a mercenary warrior to shield her family from a predatory neighbor. To her surprise, the marriage of convenience turns into a love match, but Bethany and Alec must learn to trust as well as love each other. Iris chooses an arranged marriage with a beloved old friend, but did Carlos marry her for love, or to please her father? Jeanne and Samuel, the son of her family's greatest enemy, run away to a distant city to build a new life, but discover you can't run away from who you are.

## ***Something Wicked This Way Comes***

IT WAS THE luck of the draw that the illicit portal to the world of St. Antoni opened onto a planet that closely resembled its parent world. Although St. Antoni possessed a yellow sun, darker than the one that shone on earth, it looked down on blue seas, land masses covered with lush grass, gray Ironwood forests, high snowy mountains, hot dry deserts and continents threaded by large rivers and small streams. Plants and animals had developed along lines genetically close enough to earth to support human life, and St. Antoni's temperature range was close enough to Earth to make living there bearable for humans.

St. Antoni's illegally founded portal in Gateway City had been open for several hundred years, giving its settlers time to develop seven City States with loosely connected governments. Except for areas directly connecting the City States, much of St. Antoni was still wild and unexplored. In the years the St. Antoni gateway had been open, Portal Runners had brought in a steady trickle of new settlers and other items highly valued on a planet without its own technological resources. The industries developed by the settlers, were mostly farming, ranching and mining in the interior, and fishing along the coastal areas, although manufacturing was growing. Travel took the form of steamboats along the deep rivers, and a newly built railroad system connecting the largest City states using steam driven trains. To get to anywhere else, the settlers walked, rode or drove a tricorn pulled wagon. Named for their three horns; the animals had two spikes set high in the forehead, and a third at the end of their noses. Tricorns were herd animals, and like the horses they resembled, once domesticated, served a variety of purposes for the settlers.

The area around River Crossing and its companion across the river, Minerstown, was dominated by six powerful families who together controlled mining and ranching in the area. Rather than decimate their livelihoods by fighting until only one family was left standing the families of Kenefic had jointly come to an agreement to settle their differences with a joint council. The mountains above River Crossing were rich in gold, silver, bluestones and gems. The Lucky Strike, owned by Michael St. Vyr, mined Bluestone, the other mines owned by the six families, worked gold, silver and various gemstones.



Michael St. Vyr had come through the portal in Gateway City with his parents when he was a child. By the power of his own hard work and ingenuity, he had carved a place for himself and his family in the long wide valley at the base of the mountains ringing the northern continent. He owned a Bluestone mine, gold, gemstone and silver claims in the hills above the valley, and a cattle and goat ranch with a good house and twenty acres of orchards.

Folks around River Crossing described him as a big man, solid, with a mane of graying red hair. His three pretty daughters, well he thought they were pretty, had recently come home from Copper City. He was on the road leading from his ranch into town, because he had just come from a meeting with his lawyer. Michael was pleased to think he had made satisfactory arrangements to divide his property equally between his three girls and their husbands in the event of his death.

"None of your daughters are married or engaged," his lawyer, Terrance Milliner, pointed out.

St. Vyr waved that quibbling objection away. "Doesn't matter. I have plans to take care of that. Before the year is out, I plan for all three of my girls to be wed."

Riding home after signing the papers, his satisfaction was marred by an uncomfortable itch growing on the back of his neck that got worse the further away from town he rode. He knew better than to ignore the feeling.

He had been twelve the first time it happened. He and his parents followed a Portal Runner through an unregulated gate to the raw new world of St. Antoni. The emigrant camp where they were taken by the Runner was a wild place. Young Michael's family had only been in the immigrant camp three days before his father had been gunned down and robbed of the small number of gems he had been carrying to the money changer. After Jess St. Vyr was killed, an investigation was done, but the investigator simply reported it had been a fair shooting because Jess had been armed. Michael and his mother had been left to fend for themselves in the camp.

Michaels neck itched that day too; he had been afraid of something bad happening that day, and had begged his father to let him accompany him, but Jess St. Vyr had left him with his mother.

After her husband's death, Giselle, Michael's mother quickly discovered that on this new world a woman needed to be tough enough to protect herself or find someone to do it for her. A strong-minded woman, she decided to learn how to take care of herself and her son. Michael and his mother were left at the mercy of a society that expected its people to be able to protect, feed and clothe themselves on their own. His parents had been fleeing an organized gang back home, so returning to earth on a permanent basis was out of the question. To support herself and her son, Giselle became a Portal Runner. apprenticing with the woman who brought them over. Portal Runners traveled back and forth between Earth and St. Antoni, smuggling in goods and people. Between trips she supported them with a variety of enterprises.

His father's death had taught Michael a lesson; he never again ignored the warning he got from his gut and it saved his life many times over.

He paid heed to the warning now, and carefully examined the area around the road because paying attention to his surroundings had kept him alive a long time. He could see nothing out of place, however. The road leading from his ranch the Golden Tricorn into town was smooth; it had been recently graded by his own workers. The deep drainage ditch that kept the road from becoming a mire during the rainy season was dry. The thorn bushes growing in it would be underwater when the rains came, but that was not due to happen for several months. It was high summer and the waves of knee high buttery grass, broken here and there with tall thorn bushes, gave the undulating landscape a deceptively flat look. Evening was drawing near and the valley was beginning to cool from the blistering heat of a summer day. Long shadows had begun to shade the road.

The road had no heavy traffic this late in the afternoon, but it was busy enough to be safe from bands of roving outlaws. Deciding he wanted a better look around, he dismounted and fussed ostensibly with the cinch holding the saddle on his red and black striped tricorn. St. Vyr took the opportunity to loosen the gun in his holster

while he was pretending to fiddle with the cinch. He never got the chance to draw it.

Without warning, a savage blow followed by the crack of a high-powered rifle hit him in the lower back. His Tricorn, Redbird, had been trained not to flinch from gunfire and stood like a rock when Michael collapsed against him. But when a second bullet burned the animal across the rump, he took off running, leaving his master to fall half in, half out of the drainage ditch.

St. Vyr slumped to the ground, still conscious but unable to feel his legs. He felt lightheaded, and knew he was in danger of passing out. He touched his waist and brought his hand away red with his own blood. The light wavered in front of his eyes and he knew he had to find cover before whoever fired the shots came to see if he had killed him. Desperately, he used his powerful arms to drag himself all the way into the drainage ditch at the side of the road. He slid sideways and rolled down into it. The ditch was dry this time of year and overgrown with thorn bushes. Just before he passed out, he rolled under a bush, praying there wasn't a Sander, one of St. Antoni's poisonous reptiles, lurking under it seeking shade from the heat of the day. Michael pulled some of the dead bushes lining the ditch over himself before blacking out.

Tricorns, like the horses they had replaced, were herd animals. The stallion ran hard for a few miles and then slowed to a more moderate pace as he made his way back to the ranch. Reaching the barn, he stopped outside the corral where he had the remuda tricorns for company.

The ranch house itself was a large two-story structure built with sun baked bricks made of the local dried grasses and clay found along the riverbanks. High walls, broken apart with narrow slits for windows made from the same material, enclosed an inner courtyard. Barns and corrals for animals rested against the outside wall facing the fruit and nut orchard, and a bunkhouse for the workers attached to the other wall. Racks of Bluestones to power the ranch's steam generators were stored on layers of frames under a roof supported by long poles, so they couldn't develop moisture and catch fire. St. Antoni's first immigrants had discovered the bluestones by accident soon after they arrived. A man had spilled some water on a pile of them

and they burst into flame. His partner, an engineer, experimented with adapting the chemical reaction from the mixture of stones and water to create enough heat to run a steam engine. The first few steam generators had been made from parts smuggled in from earth, but the engineer and his partner soon got rich making their own generators with parts made from a home-made alloy of iron, carbon, copper and tin.



Coming home several hours after Redbirds arrival, Michaels daughter Jeanne found her father's tricorn loose in front of the corrals. Annoyed, because she hadn't counted on her father being home and possibly asking her questions about what she had been doing, she was busy thinking up excuses as she rode up.

Her father had given orders that the girls weren't to ride out alone, which Jeanne had disobeyed, and not for the first time. The youngest of Michael's three daughters, she was accustomed to getting her own way by a combination of sweet cajolery or tantrums. Jeanne wasn't above using her looks ruthlessly to obtain what she wanted, but she knew her father wouldn't be fooled by the attributes that distracted others. Growing up, she had gotten away with doing forbidden things because when she was a young girl, people were diverted by her huge blue eyes that she could make swim with tears and her quivering lips. As she grew older, men especially failed to see past the lush figure, golden hair and red-lipped mouth. They frequently missed the hard-headed intelligence peeking out of those lovely turquoise eyes.

When her father didn't appear, she dismounted and breathed a sigh of relief. She tied her gray striped mare up to the hitching rail in front of the tack room and unsaddled her. Coming out with a brush and currycomb after she deposited her saddle on a rack inside, she was surprised to see that Redbird, her father's mount had come up to the hitching rail where she had tied Grayling her own tricorn, and was investigating the feedbag she had dropped over her nose.

"Redbird, how did you get loose?" she demanded of the tricorn, picking up his trailing reins. As she moved to re-tie him to the rail, she spotted the wound, still oozing a trickle of blood, on his rump where the second bullet had grazed him. When

she stepped back and looked more carefully at the stallion, she could see a smear of blood on the stirrup leather.

Her first impulse was to remount and back trail Redbird to see if she could find her father. Looking around for help, she realized the stable area was empty. This time of day the thirty or so people who earned a living working for St. Vyr around the home ranch were probably inside resting from the burning heat of the day. The herders and farmers who normally would have been close by were doing the same in the orchards or out in the fields with the stock. Jeanne finished tying Redbird to the hitching rail and ran through the open doors on the courtyard to the house, shouting for her sisters, her grandmother and Margo the housekeeper.

"What is it, child?" Giselle, her grandmother asked in alarm when Jeanne burst through the French doors leading from the patio to the sitting room.

"Papa's tricorn came back without him," Jeanne gasped out. "There is blood on the stirrups and he has a bullet burn across his rump. Where is everyone?"

"Margo went into town to do the weekly shopping," Bethany, her older sister said, referring to their housekeeper. "Did you say Papa was hurt? Where is he?"

"I don't know," Jeanne said. "Redbird was loose by the corral when I got back. At first, I didn't notice he was hurt. Where was Papa going today?"

"He went into town to see the lawyer," Iris, the next oldest sister, told her.

"Jeanne, go saddle us some mounts while we change into riding clothes," Bethany ordered. Jeanne ran back outside.

Bethany looked at her grandmother, her grey eyes worried. "Gran, You need to send someone out to the men working in the pastures closest to the house and have them come in and help with the search. If Papa was shot between the ranch and town, he'll be found somewhere along the road to the Crossing."

Giselle nodded her understanding and left quickly, calling for Macon, the head gardener.

Bethany came downstairs a few minutes later, dressed in homespun grey pants and shirt. The tight shirt and pants fit snugly on her hourglass figure, and the grey color brought out the red highlights in her hair. she went to her father's gun cabinet

and loaded rifles and pistols for herself and her sisters. She belted on a holster belt specially made to fit around her waist. She slid a handgun into the holster.

"Oh, no," Iris protested, her green eyes widening when she saw the weapons. She was tucking her white blond hair up under a wide-brimmed leather hat. "Surely we won't need those."

"If something happened to Papa," Bethany told Iris grimly, "It wasn't an accident. Jeanne said Redbird had a bullet burn across his rump. Do you want to be helpless if we need to rescue him?"

Bethany handed the second pistol and rifle to Iris who took it reluctantly. Despite her height, this middle girl of Michael St. Vyr's had an air of fragility, belied by the expertise with which she checked the pistol and rifle.

"Where is mine?" Giselle asked, returning from her errand. Like the girls, she had changed to homespun pants, shirt and boots. She was a beautiful woman despite showing her fifty years of age, and could still turn heads in the tight pants and shirt.

"In the gun cabinet because we need you need to stay here in case Papa makes it home," Jeanne informed her as she came back in through the window. She took her weapons from Bethany. "The Tricorns are ready to go."

"Thank you, Jeanne," Bethany said. She turned to Giselle. "You are our best doctor. You know you need to stay here in case someone brings Papa home wounded, Grandmother."

Giselle gave reluctant consent to the plan. "I'll give you girls three hours to find him, and then I'm coming out to look also."

The land between the Golden Tricorn and the town of River Crossing looked flat, but it was pocked with shallow dips and cuts in the earth, making searching for a wounded man who might be trying to hide, slow and difficult work. The knee-high grass growing off the road could hide a body as well.

It was Iris who spotted the marks Michael had made when he dragged himself into the ditch for cover.



"Here!" Iris called, dismounting and sliding down into the waist deep ditch. Her tricorn smelled blood and pulled back nervously on the reins, nearly dragging her back up the embankment.

"Papa!" Jeanne called urgently. "Where are you?"

She too dismounted, and taking the reins of Iris's tricorn, she tied the nervous animal to her saddle horn. She had no fear of her own mount running off because she smelled blood; she had spent hours training Grayling not to flinch under more difficult circumstances than a smell she didn't like. When Bethany dismounted, she handed the reins of the tricorns to her and joined Iris in the ditch, carefully lifting the bushes to see if her father had crawled under them.

Iris had just spotted one of Michael's boots sticking out from under a bush against the far bank, and she rushed forward, yanking the bushes out of her way.

"Be careful. There might be a Sander under there. You know how they like the shade when it's hot," Bethany warned, referring to St. Antoni's large poisonous reptiles.

"So, shoot it with that damn gun you insisted we bring," Iris retorted, dropping beside her father and picking up his wrist to feel for a pulse.

Jeanne had finished moving the brush aside and she too dropped beside Michael. "He's bleeding. It looks like someone shot him in the back. We need to get him out of here and back to the ranch."

"The doctor's house in town is closer," Bethany objected.

"Should we move him?" asked Iris doubtfully. "What if it hurts his back?"

"His back's already hurt," Jeanne snapped.

"That might not be relevant anyway," Bethany observed. "I don't think the three of us can get him back up the bank on our own. Here," she pulled bandages, rags and a bottle of alcohol out of her saddlebag. "One of you see if you can clean the wound and bandage it. I—"

Her head lifted sharply as she heard the unmistakable clop, clop of a buckboard driven by a team of tricorns coming down the road from town.

"It's Margo," she cried, waving frantically at the driver. Margo snapped the reins, and the team broke into a gallop, coming to a sliding stop when they reached the girls.

"What happened, Nina?" Margo asked.

"It's Papa. He's wounded, and he's down in the ditch. We will need help to get him out of there."

"Dios mio!" the middle-aged housekeeper exclaimed, tumbling off the wagon seat and coming to look down into the ditch.

"I think we'll soon have help to get him out of the ditch," Jeanne said, pointing to a plume of dust rising on the road from the direction of the ranch. Shortly, about fifteen of the ranch hands thundered up on lathered tricornes, demanding to know what had happened.

With their help, it proved easy to move the wounded man into Margo's buckboard. Margo made a wide, slow turn to jostle Michael as little as possible, and headed back into town. Iris and three of the hands, who were just aching for someone to attempt to stop them, rode with the wagon.

Bethany turned to Jeanne. "You'd better go back to the ranch and let Gran know what happened. She'll want to come into town. Take a couple of the men with you."

Jeanne nodded and remounted.

Bethany remounted her own tricorn and looked over at the hands that had stayed with her. "Durango, who is the best tracker?" she asked a tall slim man with a wide brimmed hat.

"Red and I," he replied. "You want us to find out who did this?"

"Yes," she said grimly. "I'm putting you in charge. And Durango, when you find him, we need him alive to be able to talk to the Sheriff. I don't care if he dies afterward, just if he lives long enough to talk. I want to know who did this."

She turned her tricorn and kicked her into a gallop, following the wagon into town, unaware of the startled look the men exchanged before they set off to find the sniper.

Unlike his father when he had been shot, Michael St. Vyr lived, but he would never walk again. He was lying in bed, unable to do anything but fume when he overheard Emory Johnson's attempt to coerce Bethany into marrying him.

"You can marry me or end up in a whorehouse," Emory told her arrogantly.

Giselle had taught Mike's girls to take care of themselves. Bethany shoved him away and stomped over the front door which she threw open.

"Get out!" She snapped.

Emory hesitated, but Stevens, Michael's attendant had come to the door of Michael's room, and Margo's son Paco was standing in the kitchen doorway watching, so he stalked out.

"This isn't over," he told Bethany.

"It had better be," she retorted. "If you come back here, I'll make sure someone shoots you."

Michael knew then that he needed to start his plan for taking care of his daughters as soon as possible. Accordingly, he demanded pen, paper and a lap desk be brought to him. He wrote a letter and addressed it to McCaffey & Miller Range & Mine Detection in the City of Bitterstone. Margo's son Paco took it into town and paid a runner to take it to Bitterstone.

## ***An Interesting Proposition***

THE YOUNG runner looked doubtfully at the letter he was being paid fifty copper chips to deliver. It was addressed to A. McCaffey, esq. The sign over the door simply read "McCaffey & Miller Range & Mine Detecting". The messenger shrugged and opened the door. Inside the room were two wooden desks, a gun rack, and a cast iron stove with a battered coffee pot and two tables, one of which housed a stack of wanted flyers. A couple of straight-backed chairs pressed against the far wall of the room. The faded window shade rising halfway up the window fronting the street was drawn, but intense summer light glared in over the top of the glass panes.

The two desks had been positioned so that anyone entering by the door was automatically caught between them, but it wasn't just the feeling of being trapped that made the messenger uncomfortable; it was the men. On the surface, this should

not have happened. Outwardly, the two looked like prosperous townsmen, but the messenger could sense a faint edge of readiness for battle when he entered the office. It made him nervous. On St. Antoni, you paid attention to things that made you uneasy, or you died. The young messenger had been living on his own for more than ten years and he was still alive.

The older man was tall and skinny with a grey beard and bushy eyebrows. He wore a faded plaid shirt tucked into homespun jeans. He should have looked neat and tidy, but somehow didn't. The younger man was a little below medium height with a tough, wiry build and mild brown eyes in a wedge-shaped face. Like the older man, he wore a plaid shirt and jeans but on him the clothes looked comfortable rather than messy. The two men regarded the messenger with almost identical expressions of quiet watchfulness.

"Ah—which of you is A. McCaffey?" the messenger inquired looking desperately from one to the other.

"That would be me." The younger man held out his hand for the letter.

The messenger thrust a clipboard at him in haste. "Oh, please sign here, sir."

A. McCaffey dipped a quill in an open inkwell on the desk and scrawled a signature. He accepted the letter pushed at him and flipped a small handful of copper chips at the messenger who caught the tip deftly. He exchanged grins with the old man as the young man fled their office.

"You suppose he'll change his drawers after he gets back to the Runner Office?" the older man, who called himself Henry Miller, was trying hard not to laugh. "You really oughtn't to scare the boy that way. It's bad for business."

McCaffey made a rude noise. "Shut up, Henry. Besides, maybe it was your sour puss that scared him."

The return address was the Golden Tricorn ranch in River Crossing. McCaffey turned the letter over several times before he opened it and began to read. Afterwards, he shoved it at Henry and went to stand looking out the window although not directly in front of it, as Henry read.

Henry was a slow, deliberate reader. When he was through, he refolded it carefully. Thoughtfully, he tapped it on the desk.

"Well, now. This is quite a proposition. Going to do it?"

"How, the Hell should I know?" Alec demanded almost fiercely.

Henry tapped the letter again. "Don't hurt nothing to meet her, check out the situation. You can always say no. Been awhile since we got out in the field."

Alec gave him an old-fashioned look over his shoulder. "You think I should go find out, don't you?"

"Son, you ain't been happy for a while. Oh, we're making money, especially since we started hiring men for fieldwork, instead of doing the tough jobs ourselves, but you been looking for something. Maybe this is it."

### ***The Arrangement***

THE GOLDEN Tricorn Ranch lay at the base of the foothills above a wide valley in the City State of Kenefic. The ranch had been originally owned by a family of First In settlers. They had died out, and the last of the family had sold the ranch to Michael St. Vyr, a placer miner who had made his fortune working claims in the rolling hills above the Valley. He still owned a Bluestone mine higher up in the mountains that separated the valley and settlement of River Crossing from the neighboring City State of Azure. He also had substantial shares in some placer gold and gemstone claims in the hills.

After buying the Golden Tricorn, St. Vyr, a canny man, put in wells, collected water in ponding basins, and diversified the fork-horned, shaggy cattle and the huge goats that were the ranches traditional crops by adding orchards of fruit trees in the winter and nuts in the hot summer. He added a dairy goat farm and raised geese to sell for meat and eggs. His two younger daughters now managed the dairy farm and sold the eggs and geese.

After St. Vyr had been shot, the family had converted Michael's library into a bedroom, and his once vigorous body lay wasting away in the four-poster bed replacing the overstuffed chairs and tables, but his mind was still as sharp as ever.

The books had been moved into his den, but the room still smelled of the dearly bought leather bound books printed on rag paper, and the citrus and glycerin mixture the housekeeper, Margo Alveraz, used to polish the desk and tables. That

pleasant smell was overlaid now by the less pleasant scents of chamomile, camphor and bandages.

According to the doctor, he would never walk again. Michael eyed the new wheeled chair, an ingenious affair brought by the doctor, in disgust. It was going to be his transportation from now on. A large chair body with the legs removed had been placed between four wooden bicycle wheels with a short axle connecting them. The chair moved when the front wheels were turned by hand.

His daughter Bethany sat in the straight-backed chair across from him looking down at her clasped hands. Except for her red hair and grey eyes, she bore little resemblance to her father. At twenty-four she couldn't be considered a girl any longer—in fact by the standards of the pioneer society in which she lived, she was considered a spinster; old enough to be on the marriage shelf while younger women passed her by. She was wasn't unmarried because of her looks; Bethany's full, lush figure, fiery red hair and icy grey eyes as well as her father's riches had attracted many men in the past, but by choice she was still unmarried. Although there was no social bar to a woman competing for work with men on St. Antoni, most of the work in the frontier society still required more physical strength than all but a few women possessed. With so few opportunities for women except marriage, Bethany should have been grateful for the marriage proposition her father had just presented to her. Instead, she regarded it with mixed feelings.

"Papa—"

"Mind, I'm not forcing you girl. If you've got a fancy for someone else, why, I can put this to Iris as she's the next oldest. But so far as I can see, you haven't got anyone else in mind."

"No," she retorted, "and there is no one else eligible either! At least no one I could stand to be married to."

"Just so. The only really eligible bachelors around here aren't fit to sire pigs—well except for Carlos Madonna and I think he's got eyes for Iris."

"And she for him—not that she would admit it. Very well, Papa. I will meet this Alexander McCaffey. If we agree we are suited, then I will marry him; but I won't consent until after I meet him."

He scowled at her. "You're as red-headed stubborn as your mother, but I agree. Now go and tell those two with their ears glued to the door your decision. I'm tired."

Dismissed, Bethany shut the door softly on the downstairs room. Her father had posed a solution to their problems she would have liked more time to come to terms with. Unfortunately, her two younger sisters were lying in wait for her in the hall, anxious to discover the outcome of her discussion with their father.

The three girls shared a father, but different mothers and each of them had inherited their mothers looks. Iris was a tall slim blond, with dark green eyes and her mother's patrician beauty. Just now, she looked anxious. Jeanne, the youngest, had inherited her mother's full, red-lipped mouth, statuesque figure and her turquoise eyes. Just now the lush mouth was hard, and her blue snapped furiously.

"Well?" Iris whispered.

"Yes, what did the Doctor say?" demanded Jeanne at the same time.

"Come into the parlor," Bethany gestured to the room across the hall.

Once inside the room Iris's mother had designated the 'lady's' parlor', she shut the door and sat in one of the overstuffed chairs. She waited until her sisters had taken seats before she answered.

"The paralysis is permanent. The Doctor is sure, but that wasn't what Papa wanted to talk about."

Iris covered her face with her hands. Jeanne sent her a half-contemptuous look at what she considered an over-reaction. None of the girls had ever been close to their father. He had sent them all east to be raised by his mother after his last wife, Jeanne's mother was murdered by raiders. Michel St. Vyr hadn't had good luck with his wives. All three had died on him, leaving him with daughters and no son to take over for him. When Copper City, where they were living, was taken over by a rival gang faction, he had come east to rescue them but none of them had spent much time here on the ranch since the oldest, Bethany had been twelve years old.

"Then he wanted to talk about the ranch," Iris stated.

"Who is going to take over handling the railroad holdings, and running the ranch and the mines?" the practical Jeanne asked. "Us?"

Bethany shrugged. "For the time being Papa is going to continue to run things from his chair—"

"What about the Johnsons? Isn't he afraid they are going to take advantage? After all, we know one of them shot him from ambush, probably that horrible Abner, even if we can't prove it."

"Well, as I started to say, Papa has a plan for that. It involves all of us. It is pretty much the same plan he told us about when we first came home—"

"I'll not be a sacrificial goat! He's not marrying me off to some old man!" Jeanne exploded.

"If you don't marry someone how do you expect to live if we lose the ranch and the mine to the Johnsons? Go to work as a cowhand?" Iris asked. "If we returned to Earth we would have nothing and probably be put in jail for violating the Portal Rights Act. Here at least we have money and land. If we allow it to be taken from us, how will we support ourselves? I mean the railroad practically runs itself and we get some revenue from the shares, but—"

Jeanne jumped to her feet. "I can run the ranch!"

Bethany shook her head. "While I agree that you could do that under ordinary circumstances, that isn't the case right now. What do you or any of us for that matter, know about fighting a takeover like this? Jeanne, you know as well as I do, that the men won't obey you if we must fight the Johnsons. No, Papa says we need a warrior to defend the ranch. A *male* warrior that the men will follow. In fact, he's already sent for him."

"What about Carlos?" objected Iris. "He would help us."

Bethany shrugged. "He says Carlos has too much to do defending the Lucky Strike and the gold and gemstone claims. Apparently, there is trouble there too."

Jeanne took a deep breath for another blast, but Bethany cut her off. "In any case Jeanne, you aren't going to be the 'goat', I am."

Her sister deflated like a wet pig's bladder and sank back into her chair. "You? But that isn't fair to you either—"

"What if he's horrible?" whispered Iris.



"Papa isn't forcing me," replied Bethany mildly. "He did say that Alec McCaffey is young with an established investigator business and he has resolved situations like this before, so he will have the experience to take over the fight. If he is good enough, maybe the two of you won't have to marry to save the ranch and the mines. I do have the right to refuse if we can't stand each other."

"Honey, we can't ask you to do this for us," protested Iris faintly.

"That's right!" Jeanne seconded.

She smiled at them. "Do you know I love you both?" Bethany held out her arms and enfolded them in a tight embrace. "This is the best way. If we want this man to take up our fight, we must offer him something substantial, and to safeguard our ownership of the holdings, he must be bound to us. According to both Gran and Papa, the best way to bind a man to us is through a marriage. Kids, I'm the eldest. This is my job. We all know what happens to women who don't have money or a way to support themselves. Remember what it was like for the Jones women when that Smith gang in Copper City killed their men?"

Iris shuddered. "The Smith's turned them into whores. I'd rather die."

"I won't let that happen to you, and I won't do it myself," Bethany assured them, calm descending on her as she came to terms with her agreement with her father.

"Why does Papa think this man will be better than the Johnsons?" Iris asked.

"He was recommended by your uncle, Iris," Bethany replied.

Jeanne frowned at her. "And if he is worse than Emory Johnson?"

Her sister smiled grimly at her. "Gran has a contingency plan for that. But first we let him defeat the Johnsons."

Jeanne gave her a penetrating stare and Bethany nodded. Jeanne swallowed. Unlike the softer Iris, she had a good idea of what her grandmother's 'contingency' plan might be. "I see."

Bethany didn't get any time to herself to think about her new situation until after dinner when she managed to slip away from her anxious sisters into the inner courtyard of the house. She had always loved the inner patio space. It was so quiet here. The dark sky overhead was broken up by stars, and St. Antoni's double moons had risen, making the white-washed walls of the house stand out in sharp relief to

the shadows cast by the night. Separated by a low wall from the outer courtyard leading to the stables, bunkhouse and barns, the patio was a quiet area of tranquility.

Separated from the outer courtyard by a low wall, the inner courtyard provided shaded benches under fruit trees and flowering plants with luxurious scents. It was too early for the fruit to be ripe, but hard little balls were already beginning to make fruit. In the moonlight, Grans flowers made splashes of bright color against the whitewashed walls. A deep brick pond with colorful fish surrounded by raised flower beds was attached to the shaded well in the center of the flagstone courtyard.

Razor, her grandmother's brown and green striped Bobcat, yawned and stretched from his perch atop the wall enclosing the well. The Bobcats were a species of feline native to St. Antoni. Dubbed Bobcats for their resemblance to earthly wildcats by the settlers who first saw them, the bobcats of St. Antoni were about halfway in size between their namesakes and a pet cat on earth. A grown bobcat weighed about twenty-five pounds, with short, stripped fur in rainbow colors. Razor and his sons and daughters earned their keep by ridding the ranch house and barns of St. Antoni's large rodent-like creatures who were attracted by grains stored there.

The area created an oasis from the late summer heat, but it was by no means cool. Bethany's white blouse clung damply to her body in the heat.

A faint rustle of clothing caught her ear. She was not quite alone then. She turned her head. "It's alright, Gran," she said.

Her father's mother came forward and sat beside her on the bench, stroking Razor's tufted ears when he leaped down to join them. How did Gran manage it, Bethany wondered? Despite the heat, Giselle St. Vyr didn't look in the least wilted in her long-sleeved blouse and trousers.

"I thought you might want to talk about it," her grandmother's voice was soft. "I think I met him once you know."

Bethany shifted on the bench so she could see her grandmothers face. "Really? What was he like?"

"Very presentable actually. I could tell someone had taught him manners. Oh, not the kind you sometimes see out here, but true Gentleman's manners. It was

just after I moved to Copper City. I had gone to the hotel to make a delivery of a necklace to a customer. He had rescued a kitten from some boys who were tormenting it," she added inconsequently. "He gave it to me to hold while he dealt with them. I found him quite charming." She patted her granddaughter's hand and went back into the house.

Her emotions a wildly teetering turmoil of hope and fear, Bethany continued to sit there in the scented darkness until it was time to retire to bed. Her prospective bridegroom rescued kittens and shot people. It was quite a combination.

The next few days were nerve wracking for Bethany. To keep herself busy, she went to help Jeanne with her birds. The large, rainbow feathered birds were raised by the ranch for meat and the eggs they laid.

"Today, you can help us separate out the ones we're sending east to the market," Jeanne said. The flock was still inside the enclosed fence next to the bird cote. All the workers were dressed in leather shirts and pants to protect them from the bird's sharp beaks and talons as they separated them. She handed her sister a pair of gloves and a hat with netting to cover her face.

Bethany looked at her curiously. "I thought we were going to collect eggs today?"

Jeanne laughed. "I already did most of that. No, today, we are going to separate most of the grown drakes out of the flock to send them to market."

The big drakes were easily identifiable by the black plume of feathers riding over their heads. Using long sticks with brooms on the ends, the crew began moving the drakes into a separate enclosure. From there they were herded into large wagons with enclosed tops to prevent their escape. When a wagon was full, it moved down to the spur of the railroad set up to load animals. Large wooden crates with sealed tops were waiting for the birds to be loaded. As soon as the shipping cars were loaded, they would be pulled to the docks and loaded onto steamboats where they would be taken to the rail head in Junction City, and then on to the other city states to be sold. It was hot, dirty and messy work. Bethany was soon too busy trying to shoo the hens back into the cote with a protesting Lulubelle to worry about the marriage she had agreed to. She knew Jeanne would spend the next day soothing a complaining Lulubelle, who would be searching for the missing members of her

flock and keeping a jealous eye on the others as she supervised them feeding on the long grasses in the orchards.

On the third day, to keep herself busy, she went out to the barn where she kept her racing tricorn. Tricorn racing was big business. There was a racetrack on the outside of River Crossing that drew large crowds. Once a month during Race Day, breeders like Bethany brought their animals to town to pit them against each other in four races; two sprints of a quarter mile, a medium distance race of about three quarters of a mile and a longer race of a mile and a quarter. Bethany's stable held two animals showing promise, a red and white striped filly who could sprint like the wind, and a gold and brown colt who might prove himself as a distance racer.

Tessa, a slight girl who worked as her head groom, met her at the door this morning.

"Glory is feeling pretty fresh, Miss Bethany," the girl told her. "I think she's ready for her workout."

"Then saddle up. I want you to ride her this morning," Bethany said.

Tessa smiled delightedly. Bethany knew the girl wanted to be a rider because a rider got a percentage of the purse, so she had decided to see if Tessa could handle it. She saddled her own tricorn, a gold and brown mare and followed Tessa out to the practice track south of the nut orchards.

## ***Bad Blood On The Rise***

NESTLED FURTHER north in the same foothills above the valley, a far different family conference was taking place. The two ranches shared a border along Gold Creek whose headwaters began in the mountains to the east. The creek, dotted with small gold & gemstone claims, most of whom had been sponsored by St. Vyr, rushed down the mountains to join the Black River, the body of water bisecting River Crossing and who gave it its name.

Even from the outside, the ranch houses were very different. The Golden Tricorn was a gracious Spanish style hacienda with a tiled interior courtyard and a well in the center. The J4 ranch house was tucked up under the Ironwood trees bordering the valley. Although as large as its rival, the Johnson house was a timber-built two-

story house with a breezeway between two bottom stories. The kitchens and laundry were on one side and the living and dining rooms on the other to avoid the intense summer heat.

The Johnson patriarch, Ira, was still tall and broad shouldered with bright blue eyes and a leonine shock of white hair. Before settling in River Crossing, Ira Johnson had been a member of the Grayling Clan who controlled Highland Mountain Stronghold. Having risen as far as he could in his own clan, he decided that opportunities in the lowland city states might prove easier to surmount. An ambitious man, he had traveled to the lowland City States, studying how to become a power in the three states bordering Highland Mountain. Introducing himself as a businessman, he made influential contacts. During this time, he met and married a woman who he felt would fit in with his new station when he achieved it. Pending that time, he set her up on a captured farm at the edge of Highland Mountain territory. When the war with the neighboring Kawasaki family had led to the demise of Johnson's Grayling clan and the death of his wife, he fled Highland Mountain to the town of River Crossing and the J-4 ranch he had won by cheating in a card game.

Johnson had been a handsome man in his youth and had bequeathed his looks to his three sons. Emory, the oldest, made the most of his choir boy looks and natural animal magnetism with the ladies. He was quick-tempered, intolerant of opposition from both men and women, and prone to violent fits of anger when he had been drinking. The youngest son, Abner, was the most like his father in appearance. He was vain of his long golden locks which he kept tied back with a leather string. His dark blue eyes and clean cut features made many women sigh over him. He enjoyed his position as a member of a powerful family and his reputation as a gun hand. The middle son, Samuel, shared his brothers' clean cut features and blue eyes, but his hair was a dark, burnt honey color. Unlike the other two, he had inherited their mother's brown eyes and more importantly, her sense of right and wrong.

The current discussion like that on the Golden Tricorn concerned the coming fight, but offense was the topic here. Samuel was making coffee in the big tin pot. Abner was cleaning his gun at the table. Emory sat straddling a wooden chair with

his arms crossed on its back. Ira turned from looking out the window to glare at his oldest son.

"When are you going to get married to that St. Vyr gal? You've been sparkin' her long enough."

Abner giggled. "He ain't! Not if she has anything to say about it!"

"You shut up!" Emory slapped the table with his fist so the cups on it jumped.

Ira frowned at his son. "What's wrong there? You're a fine-looking man and you will have a share in the ranch."

"She don't like him," Abner grinned and blew a kiss at his older brother. "He tried to kiss her at the last dance and she boxed his ears. Then he went over to tell her it was time they got married, and she threw him out."

Ira snorted. "Rushed your fences, did you? Well, you go into town, buy up a big box of chocolates, and take it out to her. You be real sweet and apologize for taking liberties."

Samuel brought the pot to the table and poured coffee into their cups. "Might be too late for that; I heard old St. Vyr sent off for a husband for her. Some range detective out of Bitterstone."

"I swear boy, you got a better spy system than anybody I know! Where did you hear that?"

Samuel shrugged. "If some of us talked less and listened more, everyone could hear what I hear."

Ira fixed his middle son with a cold stare. That had almost sounded insolent. But Samuel was never insolent to him. He grunted.

"You hear a name with this rumor?"

"Alec McCaffey. He's supposed to be coming in on the train from Junction City this week."

Ira's fingers drummed on the table for a minute. "McCaffey, ain't he the one cleaned up that mess at the Mill Creek Mine over the mountains? As I recall, he's got an old gunhand he runs with name of Henry Miller."

"Why don't we take him out before he gets here?" suggested Abner eagerly, patting his handgun. "Emory would have time to make up with his lady-love."

Ira shook his head. "If we arrange an ambush this soon after St. Vyr got shot we'll end up with a District Marshall down here. I don't want that. They're getting too nosy as it is."

"Who said anything about an ambush," countered Abner, "I'll meet him somewhere and force a fight on him."

"Don't be so sure you can take him out," Samuel warned his younger brother. "Word is McCaffey got his start as a gun for hire; even if Emory came with you to even the odds, Henry Miller isn't the only one he has in his crew. There were six guys with him on the Mill Creek job."

Samuel was talking about Emory shooting at McCaffey from behind when Abner shot from in front and they all knew it. This was the part of his family Samuel hated. Love and loyalty kept him from riding off, just as it had kept his mother from leaving when she realized the kind of man she had married. Still, he did his best to discourage actions like these. It had earned him the reputation in the family of being too cautious, but sometimes the Old Man listened to him.

Ira considered battle tactics and his cocky youngest son. True, the boy was lightning fast with that gun, but he was green. McCaffey was rumored to be fast too and he was a seasoned fighter. However, Junction City was far enough away so a killing there might not be connected to St. Vyr's shooting. It probably wouldn't spark an investigation by the Territorial Agents office. The situation needed to be assessed. He could decide on the killing after he got there. It never occurred to Ira that he would be breaking the law. When he had taken over the J-4 five years ago, he had decided he wanted the Golden Tricorn. He planned to become governor of the Kenefic City State, and for that he needed money. St. Vyr had money and holdings. Laws were for the weak. Power was survival; to survive a man took what he wanted. He got rid of anyone or anything in his way.

"Maybe. Abner, You and I will take the riverboat up to Junction City. I'll decide if you fight him after I've seen the setup there. You," he pointed at Emory, "get into

town and buy that girl those chocolates! Samuel will stay here and run the ranch as usual."

## ***The Wrong Mac***

THE PROPRIETOR of the Ferry Boat Hotel in Junction City was a canny man. Junction City, once just a convenient crossing place above where the Wild Mans River joined Black River and two other rivers on their way to the southern coast, had grown to be the main hub for travelers using the newly minted steam trains. Hopeful settlers wanting to take up land in the North and West came here from the eastern and southern city states to buy supplies and find guides. Junction City was the second oldest human settlement on St. Antoni, almost as large as Gateway City itself, where the illegal Earth Portal operated. It was large enough to overtake several of the smaller towns that had previously surrounded it. These boroughs had retained their independence and local government for the most part, joining into a larger council who decided on issues affecting all of them.

Junction City had several fancy hotels to serve wealthy travelers who wanted a break before crossing the Wild Man and going on by train. Jim Faring, the owner of the Lilliput Saloon, was one of the business owners to decide to take advantage of the influx of travelers. He divided his Saloon into two parts and separated the halves with batwing doors. On one side, his regular customers could still congregate for food, liquor and cards. On the other, a man could safely bring his family for a nice meal or courting couples could enjoy a soft drink from the new soda machine.

On the Saloon side, Henry and Alec were enjoying a quiet supper before heading up to their room for the night. It was early evening. Arriving well before the rush from the incoming train, the mixture of miners coming off shift, far walkers and rivermen in town for a spree, they choose a table against the wall dividing the two areas, providing them a good view of all the customers.

At the bar, a tall, raw-boned man with dusty clothes leaned his double-barreled shotgun against it and ordered a whiskey. "You, better check that gun Mac, the



bartender reminded him. You know how Sheriff Melody is about not following the City ordinance."

"Yeah, just as soon as I get a drink," the man called Mac replied.

At the sound of the name, Abner Johnson looked up. Like Mac, he hadn't turned in his tied down handgun. Pa had said to wait, but here he was with a golden opportunity to rid the family of this McCaffey. He strode to the bar and bumped the man, knocking the shotgun to the floor.

"Hey, watch it!" he said loudly, shoving Mac again.

Instead of reaching for the fallen shotgun, Mac slowly turned to face him. "Kid, you need to settle down," he said mildly. "Joe, set him up a drink."

"I don't drink with dirty Irish Micks!" Abner sneered.

"You got a big mouth, Kid," one of the other men offered. "Maybe we ought to shut it for you."

"Now, Tim," Mac drawled, "he's just a baby with a loud mouth."

Across the room, Henry touched Alec with his hand and jerked his head towards the bar. "Trouble building," he remarked.

Alec turned his chair to watch. "Both with guns, this could get ugly. Kid's looking to make a rep as a gunfighter."

Henry shook his head, "Big man's shotgun got knocked down, and he hasn't got a handgun; besides, he's a blade man. He's got a big-ass knife on his belt, one in his boot and another down his back under his shirt. My moneys on him."

Abner slapped Mac across the face and stepped back so he could draw. A riverman sitting nearby stuck out his boot and Abner tripped. He went down on his rump, accompanied by jeers and laughter from the crowd. Furious, he scrambled to his feet and jerked at his gun. His draw was fast and sure, but before he could fire, ten inches of steel flashed across the room, speared itself into his throat and out the back of his neck. Abner's bullet went into the sawdust floor.

"What'd he make me do that for?" the man called Mac complained.

"Guess he was looking to make a name," suggested one of the bystanders.

The outside doors swung open and Ira Johnson came running in to kneel by his son.

"Who did this?" he demanded.

"It was a fair fight. He tried to pull his gun on Mac here Mister," offered the riverman who had tripped Abner, gesturing to the tall rawboned man standing at the bar.

Sheriff Melody pushed his way past the crowd. "Anybody, see it?"

"I saw it, Sheriff," the bartender said. "Mac here was minding his own business when the kid shoved him and then slapped him. He was looking for a fight. He tried to pull iron and Mac knifed him."

"That's right, Sheriff," corroborated several witnesses.

The sheriff eyed Mac with disfavor. "Jeb Mackenzie, maybe I ought to have you check that knife as well as the shotgun."

"Sheriff, my son was just a boy," Ira protested. His son was dead and he would grieve for him later, but perhaps the situation could still be salvaged. "This man McCaffey is a known gunfighter. I say this was murder."

"Didn't use a gun, used a knife. And Mackenzie here is a pain in my ass but he's no gunfighter," the sheriff retorted. "It looks like a fair shooting to me."

"His name's not Alec McCaffey?" Ira asked.

"Nope. This here's Jeb Mackenzie."

At the back table, Alec exchanged looks with Henry. "Well now," Henry observed. "Looks like Mike was right and you've bought chips in this game whether you anted up or not."

"Yeah. I think we better check out and take the boat south tonight instead of in the morning."