

Cole Settler, Star Ranger
Book 1:
Secrets and Memories

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my son, Brandon Martin.
I may not say it often enough, but I love you, and I'm
proud of you.

Acknowledgements

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people, places or alien races is all in your head. Or an accident. If you think you recognise someone in these pages, get help ☺.

Sunlight glinted off the barrel of Cole's pistol. He took a slow, cautious step, then another, carefully placing his feet so as not to make much noise. His quarry was a tall, scaly, mean, green humanoid called Barreth. Barreth was an E'fli, a race noted for their cold-blooded attitude to other species. He had a stumpy tail, big muscles, bad teeth and a worse temper. He also had a reputation for ending the careers of careless bounty hunters. Cole was doing his best to make sure that *his* career didn't end today.

One more slow footstep brought him as far as he could go. He rested against the wooden railings outside one of the hotels, eyeing the town's only saloon, breathing deeply, waiting for the right moment. Barreth had gone inside a few minutes earlier, and judging by the lack of fight sounds, was probably celebrating his recent success.

Small puffs of dust sprang up from what passed for a road, seemingly of their own accord, and Cole could feel the scorching heat of the planet's sun beating down on his bare neck.

"Damn," he muttered to himself. "And me without protection."

He grimaced. This was going to mean a few hours in the healing chamber. Cole hated the awful silence of the chamber; hated the darkness and *aloneness* of it all. Healing tanks did have their uses though. He flexed his gun hand, keeping the muscles ready, and remembered.

It had been such a simple thing, really. Just another childhood accident. Only this one had quite likely saved his life. Actually, if he was completely honest, Cole had to admit that the accident was also the reason his life had turned out the way it had.

It had been a hot summer's day, and Cole had gone out fishing with his friend Steffi. Steffi was the same age as Cole, and the two of them had been practically inseparable since birth. Physically, the two couldn't have been more different. Apart from the gender difference, Steffi was slim where Cole was chubby; Steffi was tall, Cole short; Cole had deep brown eyes and short black hair, Steffi blue eyes and blonde hair that reached halfway down her back. On the inside, however, they were identical. Both had a thirst for

adventure, and a tendency toward ignoring risks in pursuit of their goals.

The two had grabbed sticks, twine and hooks and run off to the creek to see what they could catch. They had been out there hundreds of times before, and never caught anything, but neither of them ever gave up hoping. As the sun began dipping low on the horizon, empty-handed, Steffi spoke.

“Maybe we should head back.”

Cole looked up from his fishing line.

“One more cast?”

“One more.”

Cole pulled the line slowly out of the water, pulled off whatever gunk had attached itself, and drew back. He flung the pole forward with all his might, and heard a satisfying ‘plop’ as the hook hit the deep water in the centre of the creek. He looked over at Steffi.

“Your turn.”

Steffi brought her line back and flicked it forward. She knew something wasn’t right the moment the hook shot forward, but it was too late. The hook sailed gracefully through the purple-tinged air, and floated down, down, until –

“Ah!”

The hook had buried itself in Cole’s right hand. The point had pierced the skin about three centimetres down from the knuckle and travelled right through.

Blood was leaking out from the wound and dribbling onto Cole's clothes. His face went pale, and he dropped to the ground on knees as weak as jelly.

"What do I do?" Steffi asked.

"Pull. It. Out."

Steffi tried to get a grip, but the blood made the hook too slippery to push back. She tried from the line end, but had to stop. The barbs which had slid in so easily were not designed to come out again, and they had torn chunks out of the wound. Cole screamed, and Steffi felt her stomach churn.

She took a knife from her belt. Cole's eyes widened.

"What are you - ?"

His answer came in the form of Steffi's knife flashing, cutting through the fishing line.

"We need to get help," she told him. "Come on. Lean on me. Got to get you out of here before you end up pushing up daisies."

Cole did as he was told. Together, they walked out of the woods and on to what the locals called the main road. It was basically a dirt track just wide enough for two vehicles to pass side-by-side. Stumbling, the children trudged along toward town. The blood flow slowed as they walked, but Cole had gone deathly pale and Steffi was practically carrying him by the time a car

passed them. The driver slowed, looked at the pair, and then stopped.

The car door slid up, and the driver, a solidly built man in his early forties, jumped out.

“Get in,” he ordered .

The children got in. The driver pressed his foot to the accelerator, and the car shot silently forward. Mag-harnesses wrapped themselves around the driver, Steffi and Cole.

“What happened?” the man asked.

“I don’t know.” Steffi’s voice was practically a whisper. “I just... I don’t know.”

She was looking at Cole’s hand, and had gone almost as white as he had. Blood was still leaking from the wound.

“Don’t worry about it,” the driver told her. “He’ll be fine. I’m Mac, by the way. And you are?”

“Steffi. Steffi Bekkom.” Steffi answered pretty much without thinking. If the whole ‘regular conversation’ thing had been Mac’s idea of something to take her mind off the situation, it had failed. Cole had passed out just after they got into the car. His breathing was shallow and his face was pale and sweaty. Mac pressed his foot down further, and the car surged onward. Trees, shrubs, and the local breed of small rodents flew by in a cloud of dust. Fortunately there was

little traffic, so there was no need to slow down before they reached town.

Soleton was a medium-sized town, population roughly 22,000 humans. Most made their living trading with the farmers like Cole's family, or from off-world tourists who would trek for miles just to be able to take images of themselves at the top of Mount Lave or the lip of Plan Canyon. There were plenty of souvenir stores, hotels, bars and the like, but only one hospital. The corporations responsible for setting up the colonies on Gamma X, or Gaxx, as it became known, had built the town to accommodate up to 80,000 without the need for a second medical facility. This meant that until the population increased, locals and tourists alike had no choice but to pay StarCo's outrageous fees.

A loophole in the laws, though, meant that registered doctors could set up practice in town, as long as they didn't perform surgeries. They still had a limited range of drugs from which to prescribe (all manufactured by StarCo), so no-one worked too hard to close the loopholes. It was to one of these that Steffi, Cole and their rescuer headed.

The car screeched to a halt, and Mac bolted from the vehicle. He had Cole's door open and Cole halfway out before Steffi had unbuckled her mag-harness. She followed them inside a nondescript three-storey building. Like most of the buildings in town, there were

no windows; the extra building costs were too prohibitive. The main exceptions to this were the StarCo Hotels, the hospital, and the House of Worship.

Steffi ran up two flights of stairs trailing Mac, who had slowed significantly by the time he reached the top floor. A single door led off from the stairs, marked in very small letters 'Doctor'. The man charged through this door shoulder-first, Steffi right behind. She watched as Cole was dumped on a Medbed. He looked incredibly pale, and seemed to be staring at something she couldn't see.

"What happened?" The question came from a short, pudgy man with glasses and a thin ring of white hair around the top of his head.

"We were... we were fishing, and..."

"Okay," the doctor interrupted. "Accident. Yes?" Steffi nodded.

"And you tried to pull the hook out?"

Again, Steffi nodded, too shocked now to speak. As he talked, the doctor gloved his hands and withdrew a set of tools from a drawer in the Medbed. He turned the lights up, and bent over Cole.

"Can you hear me, boy? Anybody home? Hmm?" He studied Cole's eyes after each question, looking for any sign of a response.

"Well, if you are there, this will hurt. Probably a lot." Bedside manner, this doctor had none. He lifted up

a shiny metal instrument, used it to take hold of the hook, and pulled. His face went red with effort, but he managed to pull it out.

“Aah!” Cole cried out. He sat up briefly, wrenching his hand towards his chest, but then flopped back down. His eyes closed; he was unconscious again. Now that the hook had been removed, the wound was much larger and scary-looking. Blood poured freely from it, all over the Medbed and dribbling down to the floor.

“Help me,” the doctor ordered. “We have to get him into the healing chamber.”

The doctor and Mac lifted Cole up as if he were a sack of sand. Stumbling, they lugged him through a door. Steffi, unsure of what else to do, followed.

This second room contained four Medbeds, all currently unoccupied. In the far corner, taking up a third of the room, sat the healing chamber. Made from sand-coloured plasfoam (a spray-on liquid which hardened into an incredibly strong shell) over an assortment of wires, dials, knobs and gadgets, the healing chamber was a staple in all modern medical facilities. It was also totally illegal for non-hospital doctors to have one. Steffi didn't know this, of course; she was just grateful that it was there.

The two men took Cole's unconscious form to the tank, stripped him and dumped him into the liquid inside the tank. The lid closed over, and the doctor began

frantically pushing buttons. The chamber made a series of strange glooping noises.

“Do you believe?” Mac asked.

Steffi nodded.

“Then pray.” Mac bowed his head, laced his fingers together, and began muttering. Steffi did the same, as did the doctor. They spent the next hour like that, in complete silence broken only by various sounds from the Medbed.

Completely without warning, the Medbed beeped. Steffi almost jumped right out of her skin. The doctor shuffled over, pushed a few buttons, then turned and announced, “He will live.”

Steffi felt an incredible weight leave her shoulders. She burst out laughing, but the laughter soon gave way to a series of hiccupping sobs. Mac rested a meaty hand on her shoulder and offered a few words of comfort. There was nothing more any of them could do, so once Steffi had calmed down, Mac offered to take her to Cole’s house and let his parents know what had happened.

They descended the stairs much more slowly than they had gone up them, and walked quietly back to the car. There was no conversation this time; the soft music warbling through the vehicle was interrupted only by Steffi’s directions on which way to drive.