

The Chapter Sixteen

Wiesbaden, Germany

Helena and Excalibur entered the stadium with a well-earned air of confidence, like the champions they were. The proud warmblood trotted with such elevated suspension that Bret realized he had never seen anything like it, not even at practice sessions at Dreieichenhof.

Horse and rider prepared themselves mentally and physically around the outside of the court in front of the judges' stand located at the letter "C" for a last review before the bell. Then, on to the other end of the arena, in an extended floating trot, the final demand by the rider that put Excalibur on notice that it was time for his best effort.

They entered the arena on the center line at "A", and then proceeded to X. Halt, salute, and then it began, the Grand Prix, with some six thousand admirers looking on.

Bret felt the anticipation building as he and Claire took their seats. In less than six minutes, the most demanding international dressage test would be over. It was quiet enough in the stadium to hear a whisper.

Celebrated for the fluidity and grace of his gaits, Helena's stallion passed the difficult canter zigzag requirement with no sign of irregularity or hesitation. The always demanding pirouettes followed and to Bret's untrained eye, they looked perfect, but he wondered if Claire would see it the same way. As he glanced at her, she closed her fist with her thumb's up, confirming that it had been flawless. As Falckenstein had predicted, Helena had found a way to compensate for the minor problem experienced in the warm-up. And so it was for the tempi changes as they looked absolutely even, with no signs of lateness.

Concluding the performance was the extremely demanding *passage* and *piaffe* tour. The all important transitions were seamless and artistically ridden. Once again, Helena and Excalibur rode down the center line to "X" in the middle of the arena, confident and proud. After a halt and quick salute to the judges, another world class performance had come to an end.

Dressage crowds were almost always polite to the competitors, so it was very difficult to tell by their reaction how well a competitor had done, until each test had concluded. This crowd on this day was obviously very pleased with what they'd seen and clapped loudly, as did Bret and Claire. Even a whistle or two could be heard breaking the air.

Helena lifted her hat in acknowledgment and gave Excalibur an enthusiastic pat on the neck for a job well done.

Claire told Bret that soon the scores would be posted electronically for all to see. If the audience disagreed with the judges, there could be catcalls and even some booing. Just then, the score went up and Bret could hear a few isolated catcalls ringing out."

Claire looked at the scoreboard, where a 68.5 was posted. She sighed. "That might be good enough for third place, but there are still five more riders to go, including a strong Dutch rider and an even stronger German one. I don't think she will be happy with the results."

"Maybe you should go talk to her," Bret said. "Friend to friend. I can kill some time out here."

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all."

"We'll meet back here by the information stand at five."

"Deal."

With no timetable or agenda, Bret was free to stroll around the beautiful grounds at his leisure. Even the vendors' tents were tastefully presented, especially compared to American show standards. The variety of goods and services was astounding. In addition to the usual tack and clothing, there was fine art, furniture and even automobiles, everything was for sale. It was like an East Asian bazaar, but cleaner and, above all, orderly.

And then there was the food, plentiful and whatever you wanted, especially if it

included *wurst and sauerkraut*.

Bret had already grown extremely fond of German cuisine and, as the thought of it crossed his mind, he started walking to the nearest schnitzel café. It had been a long while since breakfast, and he was in the mood for traditional cuisine.

As he pulled up a chair and sat down at one of the outside tables, something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. And then he heard the sound of a ruckus brewing nearby. It seemed to be coming from the direction of a vendor's booth, tucked away in the far corner, slightly off the beaten track.

Slowly sipping his beer, he studied his surroundings more closely, looking intently for the cause of the unlikely commotion. Then he saw someone pick up a stack of brochures, lifting them over his head and then throwing them up into the wind, intentionally scattering paper all over the place. That kind of behavior was out of place, especially in Germany, a country where the expression "*Alles in Ordnung*", all is in order, was more than a hackneyed cliché.

Remaining unstirred and even stoically observant, but not in the least detached, he finished eating his lunch, rose slowly from his chair, and walked directly toward the little man working the booth, whereas as best he could tell, the trouble came from. The man was frantically scurrying around, trying desperately to restack the brochures on the front table, pathetically struggling to put everything back where it belonged.

As Bret approached the display stand, he could see a large sign protruding behind it: It read in large type, **ARPA**. This was probably the same stand Colonel Sullivan had referred to earlier in the day.

"Do you speak English?" he asked the tall, scrawny young man behind the counter.

His glasses were so thick that Bret had trouble making eye contact. He appeared to be in his late twenties and had a small blond mustache. The large space between his front teeth caused him to whistle slightly when he spoke, reminding Bret of some of his oil-industry clients from Texas.

"Yes, of course," came the answer, confidently.

"I couldn't help notice the ugly little scene that just took place."

"Yes, ugly indeed. But it wasn't the first strange encounter today. Just before that idiot threw my papers up in the air, there were a couple of men in suits who came by asking crazy questions, so I kicked them out, too. They acted like investigators,

investigating each other. You're not an investigator, too, are you?"

"Who, me? No. As you can see, I'm not wearing a suite, either."

"Yes, I see. So then, how can I help you?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe you could start by telling me what your organization does. What is ARPA all about, anyway."

"Certainly. My pleasure. ARPA is the largest active animal rights group in the world. Our goal is to effect the necessary changes required to make animal rights a reality on this planet."

"You don't say," said Bret sarcastically. "What's that got to do with sport horses?" he added.

"We're opposed to any activity that is cruel to horses, and that includes training methods, confinement and placing these animals in immanent danger, potentially lethal or otherwise. We are particularly opposed to the discipline of Eventing, cruel competition in which horses and riders are often killed or seriously injured, all needlessly every year." He picked up a clipboard. "If you will give me your name and address, I'll put you on our mailing list."

"Ah...no, thanks," said Bret. "But I would like more information, if you don't mind."

"Are you sure you're not an investigator?"

"Positively. Actually, I'm an attorney. I've been interested in animal rights back in the States. I live on the East Coast of the US. It's getting to be a bigger issue all the time back home."

The spokesman looked at him now even more skeptically. "What brings you to Wiesbaden, then?" he said.

"The usual reasons. I'm visiting friends. One of them is competing here tomorrow."

"Well, in that case, maybe you could tell your friend about us. We hardly ever get a chance to speak with the competitors directly. They hate us like mortal enemies."

As a parting gesture, the spokesman invited Bret to a viewing of a new, documentary film that was already in the final stages of editing. "Maybe you would like to come by our office in Frankfurt and give us an opinion before the final cuts are made."

This was an offer too good to pass up. "I'd like that, but I don't speak German," he said.

"It doesn't matter. There are English subtitles."

"I think I'll take you up on the offer. Let me have your name and one of your brochures with your phone number and address on it. What's the name of the film?"

"Test Puppen."

"Auf Englisch, Bitte," said Bret.

"Crash Dummies. And my name is Schneider. Ask for me when you call."

Bret walked away from this serendipitous encounter, thinking that the battle had just been joined and that the barbarians were nearly at the gates.

At five o'clock, Bret met Claire at the agreed rendezvous point. She was waiting for him.

"Hi, handsome." She said. "Keeping busy?"

"Yeah, there's something I have to tell you about later, maybe in the car on the way back to Dreieichenhof."

"What is it. You look worried."

"I am, a little. By chance I found my way to the animal rights group we heard about from Judge Sullivan. I think they are up to no good."

"There's something I want to tell you about, too, speaking of no good. They are drug testing all the quarantined horses."

"What for?" said Bret "Don't they always?"

"No, not every horse. Helena says they have found something in one of the German Team Horses on the Jumping side and now they are testing every horse without exception. We'll know more in a few days. But nothing like this has ever happened before. It could affect the outcome of the standings in Dressage and jumping as well."

"Speaking of jumping. It's getting late." said Bret. "How about taking one last walk over to the jumping arena before we leave? It's on the way out, anyway. Maybe it will take your mind off things for awhile?"

The large jumping arena was easy to find. They just had to point themselves toward the direction where most of the noise was coming from. Near an opening in the crowd, there emerged a clear view of the jumpers who were making their way around the course, one at a time. The height of the jumps was well over six feet, and judging by the reaction of the crowd, Bret concluded the competition was coming to a crescendo.

"This must be for the finals," he thought. "They're going for time on a short course. Look at the sharp turns. Now every second counts." He said aloud, as he got

caught up in the drama of events unfolding before them.

Jumping was where the money and sponsorship was and now they found the congestion of people, too. Picking their way through the crush of people, walking slowed to a crawl in front of them as they minced their steps. At times the only way to keep from being pushed backwards was to turn sideways and wait for the next surge.

Then at one point, they were suddenly forced to come to a momentary standstill, as the faceless crowd pushed and jostled them indifferently from side to side. Ever so gently, Bret and Claire were pressed together into a hugging position, and then an uncontrollably urge immersed, the chemistry between them, exploded. It was followed by a quiet, awkward, but delicious moment of mutual eye contact. Cupid's arrow had once again found its mark.

They gazed into each other's eyes as they were squeezed out again into the flowing traffic of humanity. Without thinking, Bret put his arm around Claire's waist, holding her close and guarding against any accidental separation.. He wanted her now all to himself, no longer magnanimously volunteering to share her with Weisbaden, or anything else, for that matter.

The next day was a long and full one. Open classes for the professionals were held all morning for international and national competitors gaining experience in their long struggled to become the next Olympians from respective countries. In mid-afternoon, the Grand Prix Special was held and as the selection of the final twelve riders in the musical freestyle was decided. Helena had easily qualified, which allowed her to ride her new musical *kür* in competition for the first time. When all her scores were accounted for, she was solidly in third place.

Claire knew that under the circumstances Helena would be pleased with the results, as would Falckenstein. But now the final outcome would continue to hang in the balance as all parties awaited the blanket testing results of every horse registered in competition. She didn't want to think of the implications of this unprecedented decision. It could hold up the final results of the competition and possibly effect public perception of the sport negatively.

Claire glanced askance at Bret, and her mind now wondered to the plans she had made for the evening ahead. Rarely did she miss an opportunity to attend the magnificent

opera productions at the Opern Platz in Frankfurt, known as "*Stadtische Bühnen*." And now, she wanted nothing less than to share her love for the arts with Bret.

Three tickets to one of her favorites, *The Marriage of Figaro*, would be waiting for them at the door. It would be another opportunity to gauge Bret's cultural aptitude. She thought of it as "compatibility testing." She was sure that Bret, with his legal training, would view it as "profiling."