

## Chapter Three

Gothem

New York

*Whack!* Bret Roemer's attention was riveted to the piercing sound of a white wooden ball being hammered fifty yards behind him. He sank his spurs into his horse's sides, demanding maximum acceleration and getting it. He found himself in the middle of a stampede toward the goalposts of the country club's polo field. It was at times like this when he was glad to be wearing a helmet, thick kneepads and stiff leather boots.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he picked up the flight of the ball as it outpaced the entire field of eight ponies. He could tell the ball must have been hit by one of the Argentines, since it climbed in an upward trajectory that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Only a pro could strike a ball that far and true.

But this was no time to dwell on aesthetics. The other players on his team were gaining fast on his flank, readying themselves to take another swing.

One of the lead opposition players caught up to the ball and executed a perfect reverse swing, sending the ball back the other way, right over Bret's head. Instantly the action reversed direction.

As Brett turned his pony, one of the cars parked by the long side of the field blasted its horn, sounding the end of the last chukker.

Bret sighed in disappointment and well earned weariness. Although he had been playing polo regularly for six months, he had yet to score a single goal. It was disheartening. He didn't like to think of how much money his first goal was going to end

up costing him. That was probably why polo used to be called the game of kings. Only kings could afford it.

He reined his horse to a walk, then headed to the sidelines with the rest of the players. As he left the field, he was pleased--and surprised--to see his father's car parked near the tie rail where the team ponies were strung together. His father had never come to watch him play before. Max Roemer would have preferred that his son take up golf or tennis, something he could do with clients. None of the firm's clients played polo.

Bret could understand his father's perspective, of course. Max was a brilliant corporate attorney whose firm was very much in demand by the most prestigious corporations in the State of New York. The proudest moment of his life had been ten years ago, when Bret had graduated from law school and become an associate.

Bret raised his mallet in a gesture designed to get his father's attention, but there was no acknowledgment. It was then he noticed that a young woman whom Bret had been dating for the last few weeks had discovered Max and was in the process of introducing herself. Bret winced; he could just imagine what his father would think of a woman who had been christened with the James Bond-esque name of Honeydew Mellen.

From astride his pony, Bret had a good view of his father. It hadn't been that long ago that the old man had had a full head of reddish hair? Now there was little red left and Max's hairline was receding. At five-feet-seven, he showed every ounce of the extra weight he had put on in the last few years. The gain was due to the usual suspects--lack of exercise and long hours sitting at his desk. But this was a price Max Roemer had paid gladly for the opportunity to build the successful legal practice that bore his name.

Bret wasn't so sure he was willing to make the same sacrifice. He was taller than his father and had his mother's dark hair and eyes, and kept his body lean and muscular through involvement in sports of all kinds. He knew from experience that women were attracted to his rough and ready looks, and he wanted to keep it that way.

He rode over to his father and Honeydew as she already turned toward him. Looking down at them from atop his sweating pony, he tried to brake the ice as gently as possible. "Well, I see you two have met."

"Yes, Miss...Mellen...just introduced herself," Max said, without looking Bret in the eye.

"Good." Bret smiled bravely at Honeydew but spoke to his father. "I wish I'd known you were coming, Dad. I could have used the extra moral support."

"I'm sure Miss Mellen was cheering you on."

"Yes, of course I was." She was thirty-something, but covered so heavily in makeup that even Bret wasn't quite sure of her age. She was also dressed rather formally for the country club in a blue pants suit, a silver chiffon blouse and an oversized black leather belt with large silver studs. Multiple bracelets and rings, all real silver, adorned her wrists and fingers. Her shoulder-length, strawberry-blond hair was perfectly composed, as though she had just come from the hairdresser, and her open-toed, spike-heeled shoes meant she was looking down on Max.

"What did you think of my game?" Bret asked Max as he swung his leg over his horse and dismounted.

"To be honest with you, son, I think a couple of things need a bit more work." Max glanced at Honeydew.

Bret laughed nervously. Honeydew had obviously made a questionable first impression on the old man. That was not surprising; the level of his father's approval of the women Bret dated depended on how close they came to being like Bret's mother-- which meant being gentle, soft-spoken and always conservatively dressed.

"Frankly, I'm surprised to see you out here, Dad. I didn't think you were the clubby type anymore."

"I have my reasons. I'm meeting Ari Fischer for lunch in the clubhouse in a few minutes."

"I see." Bret was disappointed but not surprised that his father had come to keep a business appointment rather than to watch him play. He was getting used to the idea of not seeing as much of his father as he once had. Since Bret had joined the firm, Max had reduced his social calendar substantially. When Bret needed to see his father now, it was always at the office.

Max smiled slightly. "Now that I think of it, if you're finished with your...commitments..." He cleared his throat--"on or off the polo field, how about joining us for lunch? I don't think Ari would mind."

"Great," Bret said. "Let me clean up and change my clothes, and I'll meet you in, say, twenty minutes."

Max nodded and turned to Honeydew. "Sorry you can't join us, Miss Mellon, but we're going to be having a little business discussion over lunch."

"I have to run along now, anyway. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Roemer."

"Good day to you, Miss Mellen." Max turned and walked toward his car.

When he was beyond hearing, Honeydew looked at Bret. "I'm surprised I haven't met your father before. He's been a member here for years, hasn't he?" Because her family owned the club, she knew most of the people on the membership list, which read like a who's-who of upper New York State society.

"Dad's practically a founding member," Bret said.

"I got the feeling he wasn't exactly delighted when I introduced myself."

"Oh, don't pay any attention to that. He can be a bit stuffy; his idea of fun is reading Goethe in the original German."

"No, I get the feeling he really doesn't like me."

"Of course he likes you. He just doesn't know how to show it. By the way, what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing special." She'd been saying that ever since he'd first noticed her watching him during polo matches, but he knew damned well she had plenty of suitors. Her parents owned not only the country club but half the real estate in New York. A guy could do a lot worse....

"I'll pick you up at seven," he said. "We'll think of something to do then. But right now I've got to run."

"See you at seven."

The grooms came to take Bret's horse, and he hurried to the clubhouse to change his clothes.

Dressed in a blue blazer, khaki pants and an open Madras shirt, Brett walked to the club's restaurant and approached the hostess stand. The hostess smiled. "Are you Mr. Roemer?"

"Yes. The younger one."

"I thought so. Your father told me to keep an eye out for you. Let me take you to his table."

Bret was often amused by the fact that total strangers could tell Max was his father, in spite of what Bret considered to be a total lack of resemblance. He followed the hostess to the most distant corner of the room, far from other diners. Ari Fischer had already arrived and appeared to be deep in conversation with Max.

When Bret reached the table, he extended his hand. "It's good to see you again,

Mr. Fischer. It's been a long time."

"Too long," said Ari, as he rose to shake hands.

Bret was immediately struck by the expression on Ari's lined face. The man was usually affable and smiling, but today he looked drawn, and there were dark hollows around his hazel eyes. Unlike Bret's father, Ari had lost little of his hair. Cropped close to his round head, it was iron gray on the top, with patches of snowy white at the temples.

Bret's mind flashed back in time ten years, to the day he had sought Ari's advice about whether or not to accept his father's invitation to join the firm. Ari's words had been clear and unequivocal. "Yes, I would advise you to join. Family is more important than you may think. Take my word for it."

Brett had known immediately what Ari meant. On the walls of Ari's office in Manhattan hung photographs of the people who, Ari had said, meant the most to him. But the collection was far from complete. Missing were photographs of the sixty members of his family who had not survived the Holocaust.

"Your father tells me you're a polo player now."

"Not a very good one, I'm afraid. I'll have to keep my day job for a while longer." Bret hesitated. "You sure it's all right if I join you? I get the feeling I might be intruding on something important."

"No, please stay. In fact, I'm glad you're here."

As Bret slipped onto the chair beside his father, Ari sat opposite him and said, "This is kind of a family matter anyway, and I would like you to hear what I have to say directly, without any translation from your father."

Max raised his chin in mock insult. "And what's so bad about my translations?"

"Nothing at all. It's just that this is not exactly a legal matter, and I don't have all the facts yet. It's not like we're discussing case law."

"Fire away," said Max, then winked at his son. "We Roemers are professionals; we can handle anecdotal testimony just fine."

The waiter approached. They all decided to have the buffet, then ordered drinks: wine for the two older men and beer for Bret.

After the waiter left, Ari leaned forward, clasping his hands on the tablecloth in what looked to Bret like an intentionally solemn gesture. "Last night I had a very disturbing conversation with Claire. You remember Claire, don't you, Bret?"

"Sure. I last saw her...let's see, I guess it was five years or so ago, at her high-school graduation."

"She attended college for a couple of years, but has been in Germany for the last three years training in dressage. You are familiar with dressage?"

"All I know is that it's a kind of fancy horseback riding."

"Well put. Both my sister Madeleine and Claire are mad about it, so I took it upon myself to learn a bit of background. The term 'dressage' is from the French *dresser*, which means 'to train.' And that is what dressage riders do. They spend enormous amounts of time and money conditioning themselves and their horses to perform very precise movements, like gymnastics on horseback, but only the horse moves. You can't see the rider do anything. It's like a magic act."

Bret had to laugh. "And that doesn't make sense to you?"

"I can't honestly say it does, but at least I have been able to console myself with the fact that the greatest danger is falling off a horse now and then." He paused. "But that's changed."

"How so?" Max asked.

Ari sighed, then reprised a brief account of everything Claire had told him over the phone, including the terrible news about anthrax spores and the zoo fiasco. When they heard this, their chins dropped. Ari added, "Claire tried to minimize the threat to herself, personally, but it's clear to me that she could be in real danger--not because of anything she's done, but because she happens to be involved with the wrong sport, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. I'm wondering what to do about it."

Max didn't hesitate. "That's easy. Just--"

He broke off as the waiter reappeared with the wine and beer. After he left, Max leaned forward. "Ari, my advice is simple: bring Claire home. Now. I know your sister has horses over there for training, but why not persuade her to sell them? Cut your losses, sleep at night, become a grandfather, and leave the rest to the police. From what you just told us, Claire could be in the way of people who are willing to feed living human beings to lions."

"While videotaping it," Bret added. Suddenly the thought of the luncheon buffet was no longer appealing.

Ari waved a hand. "I agree with you completely, but I'm afraid Madeleine and Claire are both absolutely closed-minded about selling the horses. That option is out of

the question. Also, apparently Claire is becoming a top-notch rider, so she's reluctant to break her training. As for the police, pah! I've done some checking, and the word is that between Interpol, Paris and Frankfurt, the authorities are too busy bickering with one another to do anything productive. In fact, Interpol doesn't even believe the killings of the horse and the insurance man are connected."

"That's entirely beside the point," Max said. "But the truth hurts sometime, and your daughter is a grown woman now. No matter how worried you are, you can't force her to do something she doesn't want to do."

Ari snorted. "That's more truth than I want to hear. Which is why I need to have someone in Germany to act as my eyes and ears and maybe lean on the authorities a little bit. Meanwhile, whoever I send, they could see to it that my daughter is protected. I would go myself, but as much as I hate to admit it, I'm getting too old to be involved in something like this." He sipped his wine. "So what about you, Max? Go for me, just like in the good old days. You've always been my good-luck charm. Isn't that so?"

Max chuckled. "Not so fast, Ari. I'm not getting any younger myself--and besides, I wouldn't make a very good Sherlock Holmes. This sounds like a job for someone younger than me, and a lot more adventurous....." His voice trailed away. After a moment his gaze flickered to Bret. "Son, would you give your father and me a minute, please?"

"Sure," Bret said, still thinking that maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to accept the invitation for a free lunch. Nevertheless, he got up and headed toward the buffet, but decided to pass on the roast beef this time.

Max leaned over the table. "Ari, Ari, Ari...I know what you're thinking, but I am not--hear me now--am *not* going to give you my only son. I don't care how noble the cause is. He needs to continue the practice of law and not be distracted by running off to Europe."

"I don't want you to *give* him to me, Max. I just want to borrow him for a while."

"Oh, how innocuous you make it sound now--but it's too late; I've already heard enough about deadly diseases and man-eating lions."

"Max, listen. We've been to hell and back together, haven't we?"

"Yes...." Max said warily.

"Having to deal with a few horse trainers and police detectives can't possibly

match the difficulty of what we went through during the war, could it? Or what about the negotiations we pulled off in Zurich and Coblenz twenty-five years ago?"

"That's different. Horse trainers, police detectives and Swiss bankers do not typically feed people to lions." But he spoke as if he weren't thinking about his own words. "I wonder...is our old friend Henri Madrid still at the helm at Swiss Bancorp, do you know?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Ari. "And the answer is 'yes,' thank God--although he must be getting close to retirement age by now. Why?"

"You said Bancorp insured this dead horse, right? Geronimo?"

"Yes."

"Then they've got a vested interest in what happened, too. Which works to your advantage, because it means they've also got the kind of the clout they need to get things done in Europe. Maybe Madrid will recommend someone to keep Claire under surveillance while..."

Ari was shaking his head. "Forget it. I'm not going to have someone snooping on my daughter without her knowledge, and I know she would never agree to a bodyguard. But if someone she knows were to suggest--"

"Someone she knows?" She hasn't seen Bret since they were kids."

"Still..."

Max drummed his fingertips on the tabletop, then let out a sharp puff of breath. "Let's see if we can establish some kind of connection with Madrid first. Ari, I am *not* going to ask Bret to walk into a lions' den--so to speak--unless we have a few friends nearby in case he needs to be dragged out."

"Agreed," said Ari. Now it was his turn to fall silent for a moment. "Speaking of Madrid, I've been thinking... this might be a good time to tell Bret the family secrets."

Max's eyebrows rose. "What about the confidentiality agreements?"

"This is family, and our children are old enough now to understand what we did. Besides, if Bret agrees to go to Europe, he'll need to know the background--especially if Madrid gets involved."

Max thought a moment, then nodded. "I have no problem with that. Frankly, I've been dying to tell him myself for years."

"Then it's agreed." The two men reached toward one another over the table and solemnly shook hands.

"When will you tell Claire?" Max asked.

"As soon as I can. As for Bret--" Looking toward the buffet, he saw Bret approaching with a plate heaped with salad. Ari caught his eye and reassured him with a nod. But the moment Bret took his seat the hostess appeared, carrying a cordless phone. "Excuse me, Mr. Fischer, there's an emergency call for you. Would you care to take it here, or...?"

"Thank you," said Ari, eyes sparking with worry. He reached for the phone. "Hello? Yes? What is it, Madeleine?" He listened a moment, and his hand, laced with blue veins, tightened on the receiver. "I see. I see. No, I haven't spoken to Claire today. I agree. Actually, I'm working on it right now. With Max Roemer and his son Bret. Please don't worry, Madeleine; we'll work something out. I promise. All right. I'll call you later. Goodbye." He put the phone down on the tablecloth, then slowly lifted his head.

"What's wrong?" Max asked. "Something about Claire?"

"My sister just got word through the equestrian grapevine that there was a big fire at a stable in Poland last night. An American girl who trains there was badly injured; one of her horses was killed. Other horses had to be put down from smoke inhalation."

"Do you think it was the same people who..."

Ari shrugged. "Possibly Claire will know more. I'm sure she knew about this before Madeleine, but didn't tell me for fear of making me even more worried. Well, I *am* even more worried." His gaze focused; his eyes regained their sharp energy. "This clinches what we were just discussing, Max. We need to get involved in this, and soon."

"I agree," said Max. "Forgive me for whatever reservations I had before. I just realized in my selfishness that Claire is also your only child. How could I have been so insensitive?"

"I forgive you. Now let's eat..."

Together, they then turned and looked at Bret.

Bret put down his salad fork. "What?"