

# **THE BITTER FIELDS**

A Marty Singer Mystery

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## Chapter One

“Just one question,” I said. “How do they keep from hitting each other in the head?”

“With the mallet?”

“With any of it. The mallet. The ball. A hoof. It looks batshit crazy out there.”

Without looking away from the field, Ruth Colvin smiled like she had a secret. She was slim, dressed in a flowing white shirt and well-worn jeans tucked into knee-high riding boots. A pinch-front raffia cowboy hat covered auburn hair that swung side to side, brushing her shoulders as she walked. She paused before answering as a half-dozen horses and their brightly colored riders thundered within arm’s length of the rail, kicking up turf and the red dust of Virginia clay as they passed.

I glanced down to make sure my ensemble hadn’t taken on an extra layer of dirt. My summer getup—khakis, a navy-blue blazer, and white button-down—was pretty spiffy for me, even if I was sweating like a triathlete underneath it all. My sweetums, Julie Atwater, walked beside me. Having been both a prosecutor and defense attorney, Jules usually exhibited a no-nonsense attitude that would’ve made Cotton Mather look positively giddy and often dressed like it. To say I’d been stunned when she showed up

wearing a cream-colored summer dress with a daisy print and a sunhat the size of a radar dish would be a substantial understatement.

“If you mean getting hit unintentionally,” Ruth replied, “it’s a matter of training and practice, like anything else. Accidents happen, sure. Someone gets hit with a pass or falls off their pony. But blows to the head are mercifully rare.”

Julie threaded her arm through mine. “Is there an *intentionally*?”

“Now that you mention it, some of them could use a good thump...but no. These are people who settle disputes with teams of lawyers and corporate buyouts, not blows to the head. Tempers flare occasionally, of course, and there are some long-running feuds, but nine times out of ten everything is patched up by the time the martinis are being poured.”

I eyed the group as they dashed – galloped, I guess – down the field at full speed, trying to catch up with a small white ball that lay on the turf like an egg at Easter. The lead rider, barely slowing as he approached, swung his mallet in a massive, full-armed arc and clobbered the ball with a sound like a small caliber gun going off.

He’d hit it with more enthusiasm than accuracy, however, and within seconds the ball became a tiny black dot as it sailed over the wooden fence surrounding the arena and into the meadow – and maybe the county – beyond. The rider shouted an expletive that was drowned out by the *oohs* and *ahhs* of the crowd, then pole-mounted speakers crackled as the game’s emcee gleefully described the miscue in florid detail to the well-dressed and well-heeled audience. An audience, I’d noticed, that was already half in its cups, barely managing to totter around the spectator area in their high heels and spats.

And we'd only just started the first of four advertised matches. By halftime, the horses would be the only ones left standing...and I wasn't too sure about them.

Ruth turned, focusing blue eyes on me. "You've never seen polo before, Marty?"

"Nope. First match." I took a sip of my white wine. It was tart and thin at the same time, like the last dregs of ice water with a lemon wedge. I peered into my drink, longing for a beer.

"What do you think so far?"

"I'm glad you asked—" I flinched as Julie's elbow dug into my kidney. "Well, I think it must take quite some skill to ride a horse and hit the ball at the same time."

"You don't find it silly? A sport for the wealthy and the bored?"

"Now that you mention it, it does seem a trifle extravagant," I said, pivoting slightly to block Julie's second dig. "If you left the horses at home, shrank the field, and put the target on a pole, you'd have basketball. Adding animals and funny pants seems to complicate things unnecessarily."

"It also makes it tremendously expensive."

"That had occurred to me."

"It's what the rich do," she said. "They make the simple arcane. The more complicated a thing is, the more it costs, and the more desirable."

"I see," I said, wondering if Ruth was being intentionally ironic.

The match we were watching from our catered box seats was being played on a permanent polo field complete with grandstand, concessions, and parking on the grounds of her own multi-hundred-acre estate, Blue Moon. Most of the horses — ponies,

they called them—for both teams were boarded at her state-of-the-art stable a hundred yards to the west. The stable, in turn, was just a short fox hunt away from her home, a fourteen-room Federalist mansion built when the Industrial Revolution was thought to be a passing fad. And, while Ruth charged admission and the place was packed, I doubted ticket sales paid for much more than lawn care. Which means some other stream of income was keeping the lights on. In other words, if Ruth Colvin was going to take a swipe at the rich and famous, she knew whereof she spoke.

Some of what I was thinking must've registered on my face. Her expression grew mischievous. "Pot calling the kettle black, perhaps?"

"I'd never presume, madam." I tugged an imaginary forelock. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll just go see if there're any chores to be done in the barn. Or maybe there're some boots to be shined?"

She laughed, a deeper, throatier sound than I'd expected. "The job isn't all cocktail parties and polo matches. There's a lot of horseshit involved, too."

"Oh, you were a cop, too?" I asked.

Our conversation was interrupted as the part of the crowd that was paying attention to the match shouted in delight. One of the players, deep in her own end, had given the ball a tremendous whack and sent it sailing into the goal at the other end, some eighty yards away.

*"There she is, folks. The Polo Princess, the Russian Ruble, Anastasia Litminov,"* the emcee crowed over the speakers. *"Pretty good for a girl, ain't she? You wouldn't know it by her size, but she's one of the best polo players around. And not hard on the eyes, either, if I do say so*

*myself. None of the girls are, actually. Speaking of which, if we were playing girls versus boys, and not this newfangled coed nonsense, the fillies would be up six to three."*

"Who is that guy?" Julie asked.

"If you play polo in Virginia, Jerry's got to be the one announcing the matches."

Ruth closed her eyes briefly. "He's an institution."

"So was slavery," I said. "And we got rid of that."

"The mid-Atlantic horse world is a very tight-knit, old-fashioned group," Ruth said, resigned. "You upset the apple cart at your own peril. And, right now, I can't afford to do that."

Before I could ask what she meant, a man—tall and good-looking in a patrician, Waspy sort of way, with sandy hair, a bent nose, a bit blotchy in the face—approached us. He was adorned in full equestrian regalia: white, skin-tight breeches slipped into high leather boots, checkered red-and-white jersey. I'm sure the outfit was practical for swatting a ball on horseback but, to my uneducated eye, looked borderline ridiculous. On the other hand, we *were* at a polo match, and none of it was too out of line with what I'd seen on the field, so I would've given him a pass except he hadn't removed his helmet, a black, bulbous cap with a tiny brim. It sat atop his beanpole body like the giant dot atop a skinny "i" and gave the impression he might tip over at any second.

"Ruth," the man barked. "Have you seen Freddie?"

"I'm sorry, Aldrich, I haven't." She frowned. "He's playing in the pro match today, isn't he?"

“Of course he is. And we need him if we’re going to score a single goal against Shady Hills. He’s the best damn player in either lineup.”

Ruth pulled her cell phone from a pocket. “I’ll call Nano. If anybody knows where Freddie is, it’s him.”

“Sarah’s not here, either,” Aldrich said, fuming. “I suppose if he’s not riding a pony, he might as well be riding something. Do you have her number, too?”

“Aldrich, please,” Ruth chided. “This is a family-friendly event. He’ll be here soon, I’m sure.”

“Fucking Argies!” Aldrich snarled and stalked away.

“Tally ho,” I called after him, but he was too busy barreling through the seats to be someone else’s little black raincloud on an otherwise pleasant afternoon. I glanced back at Ruth in time to see her return the phone to her pocket without dialing.

She rolled her eyes. “Aldrich is...excitable. And competitive. You get that way when you own an airline.”

“What’s an Argie?” Julie asked.

“Short for Argentine,” Ruth explained, making a face. “I hate the term, but it’s unfortunately stuck.”

“Why Argentines?”

“They’re the finest horse people in the world. They make up most of the stable hands, barn managers, and polo players around.”

“And this Freddie is one of the players?” I asked.



Ruth nodded. “Federico Ferrar is the best polo player in the mid-Atlantic right now, a four- or five-goal handicapper. Aldrich will have to find a sub at the last second, but whoever it is will just be a warm body compared to Freddie. Which means his team will almost certainly lose. Shady Hill is very good.”

“Is today’s match something Freddie would normally blow off?” Julie asked.

“No.” Ruth drew the word out, hesitating. “Argentines have...different priorities, sometimes. You want Freddie to appear at a charity event, he’ll show two hours late, if at all. But polo always comes first. Arrive at the last possible second for a dramatic entrance? Sure. Ignore a match? Never. He’ll be here.”

I shrugged and looked around. Aldrich’s problems weren’t my problems. In fact, problems of any kind were to be ignored for the time being. Julie and I were here to have fun and enjoy ourselves as special guests of Ruth, who’d invited us to enjoy a short vacation at her lush estate outside the town of Burwell, two hours south of DC and smack-dab in the storied heart of central Virginia, the land of wine, horses, and money.

I hadn’t met Ruth before, but Julie had mentioned her several times—an old law school friend whose husband had passed away suddenly from a heart attack a handful of years earlier, leaving her to manage a farm and a stable on her own. Julie had helped Ruth through the tragedy before I came into the picture, but she spoke of her often, with that regretful tone we all get when talking about friends we haven’t seen often enough.

So, the trip was a much-needed getaway for both of us, though mostly for Jules, who had been burning the midnight oil trying to get her law practice up and running

again after a two-year hiatus. She'd started the process months ago, but clients were slow in coming and I'd known the strain of reestablishing herself was getting to her, so when she casually mentioned that a former law-school-friend-turned-horse-entrepreneur had offered us a free vacation, I'd locked the door to her office and hustled us into the car myself.

I could tell Julie, though normally just as cynical as me, was enjoying the spectacle of sunhats and bow ties, but I found myself getting restless. I caught her eye. "I'm going to walk around a little."

"Have fun," Julie said, squeezing my arm. She turned to Ruth and they started chatting, forgetting about me two seconds later.

I moved away from the fine appointments of our owner's box and into the general crowd. Lining the crest of the hill that formed one side of the arena's bowl was a row of pickups, Range Rovers, and luxury SUVs with their backends wide open. Tables covered in luxurious spreads of food and booze rivaled anything offered in the private boxes. I sauntered behind the vehicles, admiring some of the more extravagant parties, such as the group that had trucked in a fully furnished living room suite, complete with three-seat couch, coffee table, and Persian rug.

The more elaborate the tailgate, the less the participants paid attention to the match. In fact, the hedonists with all the furniture were completely oblivious, focusing instead on a game of cornhole with beanbags in one hand, a flute of Veuve Clicquot or a Cuban cigar in the other.

Downslope, I mixed with the hoi polloi sprawled on blankets and camp chairs along the grassy hillside facing the field. Although they were relegated to lesser seats, nothing was keeping them from enjoying themselves just as much as the upper crust living it up in the private boxes. I saw plenty of hands dipping into coolers and plastic cups being tipped back. Families and couples alike were enjoying a beautiful June day, spread underneath the shade of hundred-year-old oaks.

At the far end of the tailgaters, just as the curve of the bowl began to turn, was a concession stand, and not of the hot-dogs-and-funnel-cake variety. Silver chalices, a green velvet tablecloth, and racks of wine glasses indicated I'd found the source of the fuel that was powering so much merriment in the crowd. Slick brochures and display bottles littered the counter and hanging from the corners was a white banner that read HARROWING FIELDS WINERY in a modern-looking font.

Behind the bar was a blond woman with a long nose and wide green eyes. She was dressed in a man's dress shirt and khakis with a pearl necklace. I imagine the ensemble was meant to look like something she'd found lying on the floor but was much too flattering to be accidental. She and a broad-shouldered, ruddy-faced man with curly blond hair were chatting and serving wine to all comers.

I hovered nearby, undecided. My glass was empty, and I didn't want to try and score a free beer from the tailgating crowd. Dare I plunge back in for a second pinot grigio? I looked into my glass again.

Curly walked to the end of the bar. "Better hurry. We almost always run out of white by the last chukker."

“Chukker?”

“The standard polo match period,” he said with a grin. “Six chukkers to a game. Not that anyone except the players gives a damn or knows when they end. Or, hell, when they start.”

“Serving gallons of wine probably interferes with most people’s sense of linearity.”

I put my glass on the table. “Fill ‘er up.”

He took my glass. “White or red?”

“Beer?” I asked hopefully.

He laughed. It came easy and sounded like something he did often. “Afraid not. If you’re looking for something with a punch, try the Revolutionary Red. I put a little more zip to it than the average glass.”

“Red it is,” I said. “You’re the winemaker?”

“Owner, maker, chief cook and bottle-washer. With my wife, Giselle,” he said, nodding toward the blond woman as he uncorked a bottle and poured a generous glass. “I’ve got the degree and the farming background; she’s got the French sophistication and sense of proportion.”

He handed the glass to me and I took a sip, rolling the wine around in my mouth like I knew what I was doing. It was good, as far as I could tell, smoky and deep in a way that the sour white wasn’t, though my tongue wanted to stick to the roof of my mouth once I’d swallowed. It wasn’t something I could drink all day, but it was a decent stand-in for my missing beer.

I reached for my wallet, but he raised a hand. "On the house. I saw you were with Ruth. Any friend of hers is a friend of mine." He extended the hand. "Cody Michaels."

I shook. "Marty Singer. Thanks, Cody."

"Don't mention it," he said, then turned as Giselle called to him. "Excuse me."

I took my glass and faded back the way I'd come just in time to see the players and their horses trotting off the field. Apparently this chukker was over. Or maybe, since the score was twelve to two, the losing team was throwing in the towel. If they even had towels. Polo seemed to have some strange conventions. Maybe they threw in the bridle.

With Cody's complimentary glass of red and the wine I'd already knocked back, I had a pleasantly fuzzy outlook as I weaved in and out of the groups of blankets and chairs, taking my time as I returned to my seat. Snatches of conversation hung in the air, but I heard tone and emphasis more than actual words, noises of indolence and fun. The players seemed to be taking their time coming back on the field and I wondered if the match was actually over or if they always took a half hour between chukkers. Like I said, polo seemed to have its own way of doing things.

But as I got closer to the box, the buzz took on a different tone, a thrum of anxiety that was out of place. People were frowning and sitting up or turning away from conversations. I was nearing the box now and had a sudden surge of adrenalin as I saw Ruth put both hands to her face, covering her mouth. Julie looked around and, spotting me, waved me over frantically. As I started running to the box, emcee Jerry's tinny voice came over the PA system, tight with emotion.

*“Folks, I don’t know exactly how to phrase this, so I guess I have to come out and say it. Freddie Ferrar, the Argentine Astronaut, our region’s star player, won’t be coming to play today. I just got word that he was found shot to death on the Bissette family estate earlier this morning.”*

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