

The Mustang Chronicles:

Jockey Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

If she hadn't known better, Mustang would've thought some Hollywood actor, costumed for a vintage Western, had arrived at the Duryea's Montana ranch. Spending the school's grading period break being bounced around on one of the more cantankerous stallions, though, her perspective was a bit skewed.

He wore a Stetson at a rakish angle, to be sure, and was built like a brick on legs - squarish shoulders, broad chest and no real waist, though he wasn't overweight. He might've been a defensive lineman on a college football team in his youth.

Her father's hired hands shouting their encouragement as she remained in the saddle longer than they could ever hope - thanks to power bequeathed to her by occultist and scientist, Jack Parsons - she saw the newcomer in blue flannel, Levis and square-toed black leather boots join the crowd along the corral fence, standing beside Joe Duryea.

They were in a heated discussion when her bay mount tired of its antics and slowed to a manageable trot. She dismounted and passed the reins to the semi-retired Sam, who spent six months every year on the ranch.

"You're the best, Mustang," he praised.

The visitor concurred. "Indeed, she is. And a fine looking young woman, if ever I saw one."

Mustang swallowed a caustic remark when her father approached.

"Girl, this is Trace Bonaventure. He's up from Oklahoma to buy some of our stock."

The name rang familiar, though she hadn't seen him in years. Moreso when the foreman hailed, "Good to see you, Mr. B!"

The purchases made by Mr. B. paid most of the ranch's bills.

He extended a thick hand toward Mustang, and she clasped it, fearing he might injure her scarred palms. His grip was astonishingly gentle, however, and she managed a dusty smile.

Joe inquired, "Where's Gloria this trip?"

"She's in New York, on a shopping spree. I make the money with the races, and she spends it!"

The men laughed, but Mustang missed the humor. "These aren't..."

"Trace has a racing stable in Lexington, Kentucky, too," explained her father.

“I’ve come close in the Derby and the Preakness a few times,” boasted the red head, removing his hat and wiping his wide, furrowed brow with a faded bandana. “But steady money can be won on the smaller tracks.”

Mustang didn’t like horse racing. She’d seen horses whipped and kicked in attempts to make them go faster... they weren’t meant for anything other than roaming free, or riding of necessity.

“The horses Trace buys from us will probably end up on the professional rodeo circuit,” Joe stated.

Another aspect of the business Mustang despised.

“You’ve grown up since I last saw you, Elizabeth. Or, did I hear the boys call you Mustang?”

She shrugged.

“Where are your manners, girl? Why, comparing your hair color alone, you and Trace could be brother and sister!”

Mustang already knew she wouldn’t want this man as a relative.

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr. B., I should clean up before lunch.”

“Call me Trace, please.”

“If you promise not to call me Elizabeth.”

“Deal.”

Brushing dirt from her flannel shirt and jeans, she moved toward the house as Bonaventure waved cheerily, before resuming his conversation with Joe, strolling toward the barn.

A hot shower soothed the teen’s aching muscles - jostled up and down by a bucking bronc made the pain of a lightning bolt ripping through her palms seem minor. Yet, she climbed in the saddle because she was kinder to the animals than some of the hands, who used spurs to break the spirit of the magnificent beasts.

Brushing the tangles from her hair took no little time, after toweling dry the long auburn tresses. She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, awkward and 17, burdened by a secret she could tell no one without bringing harm.

She couldn’t even speak, sometimes, without doing damage. As for getting angry... forget it. She’d been exerting every effort to control her emotions, but it would’ve been easier to become a full-time hermit.

No such luck, in this house. “Lunch is ready, dear!” shouted her mother through the steam-obscured door.

Usually, Maggie Duryea left her daughter to fend for herself through the day, the only cooked meal: dinner. Mustang saw the reason for an exception to this rule; Trace Bonaventure had already laid into a heaping platter of roast beef and baked potatoes, while Joe chuckled at the head of the table.

“Don’t you eat at home?” Maggie quipped, delivering a basket of fresh-baked rolls.

“Gloria hired a chef, so every meal is fancy and inedible. I’m a meat-and-taters guy, hearty servings of both at every meal. But, Gloria wants to be posh and impress her rich friends.”

“You’re rich,” remarked Mustang, sitting beside Trace on the sole vacant chair.

“More than some, not as much as others. I believe in being myself, though. I enjoy horses, and don’t mind smelling like leather or having straw stuck in my hair. I chew cigars, and occasionally smoke them. My wife likes to stuff me in a tuxedo when we go to the opera or a cocktail party. Growing up in a small Texas town, I’m not used to it.”

“Why’d you marry her?”

“Elizabeth!” gasped her mother.

Trace waved away the objection with his fork. “My father and hers were business partners. Her father owned the land we wanted for the ranch in Oklahoma.”

Mustang cringed. She thought the days of arranged marriages long past. “Now that you’ve got the land, why not divorce her?”

Joe bristled openly. “You’ll have to excuse my daughter, Trace. She...”

“Is perfectly right,” interspersed the guest. “Fact is, ownership of the land is in her name until our 20th wedding anniversary - another six years. There were other... terms to the contract, if you will...”

“I apologize for prying,” murmured Mustang.

Trace patted her cheek, and she noticed the wide, monogrammed gold band on his pinky, set with a diamond larger than some engagement rings. “Don’t worry your pretty head about it. At your age, you still think love conquers all. You’ll learn different in a few short years.”

The guest scraped every drop of beef juice from his plate, and tossed his napkin atop the crossed silverware, before rising and stretching. “Damned excellent cook you are, Maggie. Do you still ride?”

Mustang had never witnessed her mother blush before. “No, Trace. I don’t have time these days.”

“Would you mind, then, if I ask this fine filly, here, to show me your spread?”

Joe and Maggie held their breath - Mustang noticed their tension - until she replied in the affirmative. Taking her by the hand, Trace led her out the front door and escorted her across the yard.

Mustang saddled Heartbeat, her pinto, while Trace prepared her father's favorite chestnut gelding for the outing. For Joe to allow anyone else to ride Argo meant he considered the man a close and valued friend.

The pair cantered north, veering west and skirting the perimeter of the vast acreage over the course of three hours. Trace kept up a constant stream of chatter, to which Mustang barely responded; she learned more by listening to the gravel-tinged bass with its slight accent.

Trace Bonaventure had, like her, grown up with horses. He, like her, considered them better companions than most humans. He'd been on many round-ups, and won the county fair's rodeo three years straight, before breaking his right leg in a nasty fall.

His family had nearly lost everything through bad investments, which was why he pursued a business degree from Texas A&M, helping his parents restore their "modest fortune". His two younger brothers opted for military careers, leaving him "stuck" when his father died of an unexpected heart attack shortly after Trace's wedding.

That's how he inherited the Kentucky racing stable.

A hard luck story to win her sympathy, Mustang puzzled, or a genuine expression of his trust in her?

The answer came soon enough. "The toughest part of the job is finding qualified jockeys."

"I wouldn't begin to know where to look," she commented.

"In the most unusual places... like a Montana ranch."

Mustang halted Heartbeat's progress. "Eh?"

"You top the scale at, what, 110?"

"Dripping wet, maybe."

"And you'd look good on the promotional posters."

The girl guffawed, while Trace realized his ploy had failed, scowling.

"In tight riding pants, two-toned silk shirt and silly cap?" Mustang shivered. "I don't think so."

"Your percentage would be quite lucrative."

"I don't race horses."

Trace slapped Argo's flank, hollering as he galloped off, "We'll see about that!"

Joe paced near the barn when Mustang arrived home an hour later. She'd dismounted from Heartbeat after Trace vanished along the trail, and sat under a tree, unable to calm her frazzled nerves. Torching a few trees wouldn't help,

either. The fate she envisioned for Mr. B. involved the very horse he rode, but she dared not utter it.

Words weren't necessary, she discovered.

"While Trace was removing Argo's saddle, the damned animal kicked him in the shoulder," Joe explained to his daughter. "Lucky no bones were broken."

"Is he at the hospital?"

"He refused to go. Said he's just bruised, and will be all right in a day or two. He'll be staying in the guest room."

"Oh, hell..."

"What, girl?" prodded her father.

"I thought he'd be leaving..."

"His vet is coming tomorrow to examine the horses he's chosen. It'll take the better part of a week..."

During which time, Trace would continue to nag her about becoming a jockey.

Unless she could find a place to hide...

Not when her mother required help to set the table for meals, and sit beside Trace while they ate. She wasn't allowed to step out of the house without reporting her destination and time of return.

The teen was dragged along to observe the vet at work, and asked her opinion about Bonaventure's choices. His plans for the stock turned her stomach, and her snide remarks were plentiful.

"If she was my daughter, Joe, I'd have taught her better manners," the visitor said.

"If I was your daughter, I'd have long since run away."

Joe Duryea reddened. "Mind your tongue, girl!"

"As *your* daughter, I'm ashamed to admit as much, seeing you'll sell these fine animals to be tortured!"

She strode away, not caring whether her boots encountered mud or horse piles. Trace pursued her, clutching her arm to prevent an escape.

"Am I the only buyer you insult, or does your father go through this with each one?"

Mustang fought against his iron grip. "Most of them don't make themselves at home in our guest room, and they treat the horses far better than you will."

She jerked in the right direction, aggravating his injured shoulder. He released her, and she hurried toward the bunkhouse.

His next attempt to restrain her missed by inches. "If you come back with me, not only can you be a jockey, but I'll put you in charge of seeing the horses are treated well..."

"But they'll still go to rodeos and to the races..."

"It's how I make my living!"

"It's how you keep your wife out of your hair, you mean."

"That, too," acknowledged Trace. "As long as there's an audience, people gullible enough to bet on the races, even if I got out, the abuses would persist."

"What a cop-out."

"You can't do anything to change it."

"Can't I?"

A microburst of wind almost blew the pair into the corral fence. Trace steadied himself on the closest post, while Mustang merely grinned.

The knowledge a simple word could stop the cycle of stupidity - horse racing, dog racing, rodeos, and so forth - gave her a sense of phenomenal satisfaction. Yet, if the minds and hearts of the humans behind these endeavors did not change... and she could not change them, no matter the extent of her control of the natural forces.

Trace shrieked in agony; a shard of glass from a window broken in the bunkhouse embedded itself in his bad shoulder. The blood stain on his leather jacket spread, until he collapsed on the wet earth.

"Oh, hell..." Mustang moaned. She bent beside him, glimpsing dampness welling in his blue orbs. No doctor, she, but the depth the glass had penetrated indicated nerve damage and the possibility of surgery. "We've got to call an ambulance."

"No!" his vehement bass growled.

"Why not?"

"Don't trust 'em!"

"You trust the vet?"

"He doesn't have to diagnose my ailments."

"What ailments?"

"None of your..."

A spasm of pain preempted further conversation. Mustang grit her teeth, mumbling a command to nature.

II

Five minutes later, Mustang revived Trace Bonaventure from a pain-induced faint. Conditions had quieted, and the redness dripping from his clothes had vanished.

“What... happened?” he stammered, rising with her assistance.

“You stumbled and conked your head.”

“I... remember...”

“Hallucinations.”

“How do you know, if I...”

Mustang smirked. “Never mind. Dinner should be ready, and we’re both filthy.”

Together, they strolled toward the ranch house, retiring to their respective bedrooms to wash and don clean clothes.

Trace decided upon a brown suit with white shirt, and a black bolo string tie fed through an ornate silver clasp. Mustang ached to deride him for the latter, instead remaining silent throughout the repast of barbeque chicken, fried cubed potatoes, buttered green beans and strawberry jello.

“Your daughter doesn’t like the idea of joining my crew, Joe,” Bonaventure joked between bites.

The elder Duryea grumbled, “She’s more stubborn than some mules.”

“We haven’t talked terms, yet, and I’m hoping a six figure paycheck will change her mind.”

“It would me,” offered Maggie, twirling a sandy curl around a plump finger.

“If you were 20 years younger, hon, I’d definitely make you an offer.”

Again, the woman blushed. Mustang grunted her distaste. She dropped her fork onto a half-finished leg quarter and left the table.

As she yanked open the door, intent on some fresh air, the vet mounted the stairs, a manila envelope in hand. “Is Trace inside?”

“Eating.”

“Then, I better not spoil his dinner.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Two of the horses... their blood tests...”

“Tell me.”

“It’s confidential,” evaded the professional.

“Until the bill of sale is signed, those horses belong to our family. If there’s a problem...”

“Anemia. Possibly caused by other health issues.”

“You make it sound like a death sentence.”

“Depending on the cause, it could be.”

Joe burst onto the porch. “What?”

“Ease off, Joe,” soothed Trace, right behind his host. “A couple more blood tests...”

“He sounds like he’s going to report me to the county health inspector, and require all the stock be tested!”

Trace eyed the vet. “That’s not what you’re implying, is it?”

“It would be for the best, if we find...”

“Get out!” roared Joe. “I’ll get my own vet to do the tests, and prove you wrong!”

“I could be wrong,” Bonaventure’s hireling admitted. “Usually, I’m not.”

“My accountant won’t cut you a check until we clear this up,” Trace announced. “We can double check the original results, and go from there.”

Joe spat, “Do it, then. And don’t impugn the reputation of my ranch until you have a definite diagnosis.”

The elder Duryea stormed into the living room, flopping into his recliner. Trace signaled to the vet with an expression which made Mustang snicker.

“What’s so funny?” he snapped.

“Why don’t you just say, ‘Get lost’ to the guy, like any normal person?”

He edged toward her. “That wasn’t my message. I want him to get back to work, and figure out whether the test was accurate or not.”

“Same thing.”

“Besides, I want to be alone with you.”

“So you can make me a six-figure offer?”

“Along with other... benefits.”

Maggie interrupted the exchange from the kitchen. “I just poured the coffee, Trace.”

“And marvelous coffee it is!” he proclaimed, withdrawing into the house.

Meandering to the barn, Mustang refilled Heartbeat’s bucket of oats, and topped off his water trough. Then, she propped herself on the stall gate, to clear her head.

Trace Bonaventure confused her. He attracted and repulsed her simultaneously, a rugged, granite visage atop the squarish torso so unlike the lanky hands her father hired. Her father’s age, too, why should he be so interested in her? Students at any of a dozen jockey schools would give their eye teeth for a

chance to ride his race horses. Her ambitions, if they could be deemed as much, lay in other directions, far from the spotlight placed upon the winner's circle.

Still, he persisted in talking about it.

And, worse, her father seemed to approve of the notion. She'd suspected - long prior to being sent to Massachusetts to live with her now-deceased grandmother - her parents just didn't care about her, found her an inconvenience. Or, thought her strange.

Their own relationship - strained being a mild description - didn't make living in the house any more pleasant. Trace's presence provided the only reason there'd been no arguments over dinner in recent days. Mustang could imagine Trace and his wife, Gloria, behaving in like fashion, two people not loving each other, thrown together by circumstances or fate, and enduring, badly, a horrible situation.

"Aren't you cold?" came the accented bass from the increasing gloom.

"Nope."

"I've a mug of hot chocolate, if you're in the mood."

Through the shadows, she could see the steam. "A bribe?"

"A peace offering."

"You concede that your treatment of horses is wrong?"

"I concede nothing, but I'd rather not argue."

"What would you like to do?"

Trace leaned against the doorjamb. "Admire beauty where I find it."

"I've heard better lines from high school freshmen."

"It's not a line, Mustang. It doesn't refer to you, for that matter. Fine horse flesh is a beautiful thing; a horse running on a track can be beautiful, too."

"Being whipped and slapped?"

"Not all horses require..."

"No horse should be treated that way!" Mustang jumped off her perch and breezed by Trace.

"Then, what about dogs, cats, deer, bears..."

The declaration bubbled forth from the depths of her soul. "The price humanity will pay for its misuse of this planet's resources will be decisive and irreversible."

"You read that in one of those ridiculous new age books popular with kids your age?" Trace scoffed, tossing the mug into a pile of straw..

"No, it was written by a wise old man." Jack Parsons, though why she recalled it at that particular moment, she couldn't fathom.

His arms encompassed her waist, not affectionately, but more calculating inches. “God, you’d be perfect on one of my three-year-olds riding at Belmont!”

Squirming, Mustang couldn’t free herself from the muscular constraints. “Let go!”

“Why so nervous?” Trace hissed. “I know you’re not as innocent as you pretend to be.”

“What the...”

“You’ve had your share of boys... and men...”

“Oh, hell...”

Tempted to repel him with a desperate plea to nature, she relented when he retreated, smiling graciously.

“Sweet 16 and never been kissed - or measured for riding togs?”

“No, on both accounts, but I decide who does the kissing, and the measuring!”

“I’ve taken your measure, like it or not, Mustang,” boasted Trace. “In my luggage, I have a set of silks which would fit you perfectly.”

Appalled, Mustang recoiled into the night. Trace Bonaventure had come to Montana assuming she would be his next jockey.

Her parents must’ve consented to the plan before the buyer had left Oklahoma!

Miniscule tremors accompanied the girl to the house.

Buried beneath her blankets and pillows, Mustang deliberated leaving home, especially if she was viewed as little more than a commodity to be consigned to the highest bidder. She pondered whether her father had proposed similar arrangements with other patrons of his ranch and, if she refused this one, would he make additional attempts in the future?

Sick to her stomach, she couldn’t even vomit in peace. A knock on the bathroom door interrupted the rhythmic heaving of her diaphragm. “What is it?”

“You okay?” Not Maggie, or Joe, but Sam, the ranch hand. “I came in for a cup of coffee, and to tell your dad about the horses...”

“Tell Dad what about the horses?”

“They’re clear to be loaded on the Double Bar B’s trucks for shipping.”

Mustang wiped her mouth with a damp towel. “They’re clear?”

“The vet got the wrong paperwork from the lab. The stock is absolutely healthy.”

“Good. I knew he was an idiot.” As is the guy who hired him, she thought - Trace Bonaventure. “Dad’ll be glad to hear it.”

“He’s not here.”

Mustering the strength to stand, Mustang flung the door inward. "He's gone?"

"Both he and your mom."

Where would the couple go this late in the evening, without saying a word? It wasn't like they lived in the middle of a thriving city, and could walk down to the corner store for supplies. She heard the television blaring a football game, with no one watching?

She found Trace the screen's sole audience, wrapped in a brown print silk robe, pajamas and slippers. Naturally, the Dallas Cowboys were the home team. "You here by yourself?" she inquired, as Sam slipped out the kitchen door.

His retort smacked of sarcasm. "You're here."

"My mom and dad aren't."

"They drove into Helena for the night."

"It's not their anniversary."

"Not even a birthday. Just wanted some time to themselves."

"Away from me?"

"Away from everything." Trace had chewed his latest cigar down to a nub, and spit a glob of slimy tobacco into a metal bucket normally reserved for fireplace ashes. "I loaned them my limo, paid for their dinner and room..."

His motives became evident in that moment.

Especially when Mustang noticed the signed contract on the coffee table.

"I'm bought and paid for?" she sniffed.

"The horses are." His attention strayed to a desperate forward pass thrown by the New York Giants' quarterback. "Intercepted! Ha!" He sipped tepid fluid from a coffee mug. "We thought, if I had some time with you, uninterrupted..."

Trace signaled the teen to open the rectangular jeweler's case resting beside the contract. A wide bracelet, with diamond clusters shaped like horses, glittered in the firelight.

She repeated, "Bought and paid for."

"Nonsense." He slid the bauble onto her wrist, his thick fingers then engulfing hers. "You'll have an entire wing in the manor house, a private entrance, a car..."

"I don't drive."

"A chauffeur, then. The finest school..."

"I hate school."

"A personal tutor, your choice of doctors..."

"Don't trust 'em."

Trace stiffened. "There are regulations for jockeys..."

“Which I don’t want to be.” Mustang felt trapped, not just because she couldn’t get to her feet. “I don’t understand why you have your heart set on this.”

“Finding a jockey who loves horses - rather than signing after being rejected for other positions because of height and weight - is rare.”

“They’re willing to compromise their beliefs.” She dropped the bracelet on the carpet. “I’m not.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“Except me.”

A Cowboys touchdown distracted Trace; his hold eased. Mustang dashed to her bedroom, hearing him call, “Your resistance just makes me more determined.”

She locked the door and fell on the mattress.

Not that she slept.

Incessantly, her brain churned, bewildered how dealing with human beings - dealing with her unwanted power - eluded her. A careless slip of the tongue had transported her to Italy, another manifested Francis of Assisi and damaged historic buildings. She’d caused Lyndon Bixby’s death, after a feeble attempt to prevent injuries in a fall. The fiasco with Wilfrid Bailey, aka Jonas Fairchild... pure stupidity on her part.

The insight and wisdom beneficial to handling situations such as this, with Trace Bonaventure, should have been Jack Parsons’ first gift to her. Her inexperience and youth failed to arm her with the requisite tools, leaving her to muddle through, often by the seat of her pants.

Furthermore, despite Trace’s assertion to the contrary, her interactions with boys - on a romantic level - amounted to nil. She’d labored side-by-side with the ranch hands, trading jibes and playing pranks, but not one had touched her - a standing rule of their employment. She hadn’t attended Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High for a sufficient number of days this school year to collect any prospective beaux, either.

This left Mustang at a loss to get Trace off her back about the jockey issue. Refusing him - acting “hard to get” as she’d seen in classic movies - spurred him to persist in gaining the unattainable. That, and her parents’ consent.

The latter might give him the impression she would travel to Kentucky, whether she liked the idea or not.

To devise a strategy which would prove her undesirable, not because she objected to rodeos and racing, but would be a profound nuisance...

All the while pretending the prospect of riding for a fat paycheck excited her...

Gazing, exhausted, at the ceiling, Mustang smirked.

She heard the house guest stirring around 5:00 AM. A true rancher, indeed, up before dawn - even on vacation. The shower engaged, and his off-key singing penetrated the walls.

Mustang began her campaign to dissuade Bonaventure by purposely flushing the toilet in the second bathroom, which always shifted the water pressure in the old house away from the tubs. An agonized scream, signaling the rush of scalding hot fluid through the massaging fixtures, caused her to chuckle.

Her parents elsewhere and their return unpredictable, the teen dressed in a long-sleeved denim shirt, jeans and sneakers, letting her long auburn tresses hang loose over her shoulders. A glance in the mirror confirmed her innocent demeanor, before wandering into the kitchen in search of breakfast.

His own red curly mop still dripping, Trace clumped along the hall. "You cooking my steak and eggs, filly?" he barked.

"Sure."

"I like mine rare, and the eggs over easy."

A cast-iron skillet appeared from a cupboard, a package of frozen meat pulled from the freezer. The egg yolks broke, and the sirloin had a consistency not unlike shoe leather when she sweetly placed the plate before him.

His expression mystified her; she poured his freshly squeezed orange juice, and a tumbler for herself. She sat beside him at the table, and raised her glass.

"To a profitable association," she intoned.

Trace's blue eyes met her hazel orbs. "You mean..."

She nodded.

"Why the change?"

"I did some thinking last night, and saw your point."

At the exact moment their glasses clinked together, slices of bread popped from the toaster. Mustang deliberately jolted upright, spilling the pulpy liquid on Trace's green flannel shirt and his jeans.

III

His roar - not of rage, but laughter - startled Mustang. No sound like it had ever assailed her ears.

"You're a nervous filly," Trace guffawed. "If I was hiring you to cook, I'd starve to death!"

She hid well her disappointment the ruse hadn't upset him. One battle did not a war lose, though. After he shed the damp, stained clothes and selected new, he commandeered the utensils and prepared his own breakfast - sharing it with Mustang. The plate mopped clean with his toast, he pointed to the kitchen sink.

"Think you can wash the dishes without breaking any?" he mocked.

She vanished into the laundry room, throwing his shirt and jeans in the washing machine, selecting a "hot" cycle and adding a cup of bleach. She then ducked out the door, hustling toward the barn.

"You like an early morning ride?" he called, hot on her heels, the Stetson angled over his broad forehead.

"The horses in the pastures need to be checked and watered, especially with Dad gone."

"The hands should do that for you."

"They don't... aren't always sober on weekends."

Trace yanked open the heavy wood panel. "I wouldn't tolerate it."

"If you're gone, how would you know?"

"You should tell him."

"He doesn't listen." The girl grabbed her saddle from the tack room and crossed to where Heartbeat seemed anxious for exercise.

Her companion selected a hand-tooled set, but Argo fidgeted when he drew close. "What's wrong with this dunderhead?"

"He's temperamental. Only Dad can really control him." She glanced along the row of stalls. "Why don't you ride Nonsense?"

"What kind of name is that for a horse?"

"When you have so many, you run out of ideas. You should know that."

"Mine all have dignified names. Who would bet on a horse named Nonsense?"

"People with a hunch about unusual names, probably."

Trace paused to consider her statement, and grinned. "That's ridiculous enough to be true."

Heartbeat ready and chomping his bit, Mustang assisted Trace steering the roan Nonsense into the open air. Adjusting the stirrups, she intentionally left the buckle loose, knowing what would happen when they accelerated faster than a trot.

They chatted amiably during the outing through delightful autumn colors.

"Why is Kentucky grass blue?" Mustang asked eventually.

"It's not, to be honest, but it is a very dark green, lush and perfect. Makes for the best lawns."

“You have it in Oklahoma, too?”

“It would take too much water to keep it alive. I prefer natural vegetation, prairie grasses and the like.”

“That’s a point in your favor, anyway,” sulked the girl. Louder, “What kind of names do you give your horses in Kentucky?”

“The best contenders for next season are Trace’s Glory, Bonaventura, and In Excelsis Gloria.”

“Kind of narcissistic to use variations of your family names, isn’t it?”

“We run out of ideas with our stock, too. It’s better than calling a horse Nonsense.”

“Who are your other jockeys?”

“We keep six or eight under contract. To sign with the Double Bar B, they need to have won at least three major races in the past two years.”

Mustang snorted, “You’ll make an exception in my case?”

“It’s about potential, more than anything. I see potential in you. For instance, if you took Heartbeat to a gallop right now, with the right posture and equipment, you’d be up that next rise in a flash.”

“Equipment?”

“A racing saddle is lightweight and compact. A traditional saddle doesn’t allow for the added speed...”

“Wanna bet?”

“Bet what?” Trace retorted.

“I can beat you to the top.”

Not waiting for his answer, she nudged Heartbeat’s flank and he broke into a run. Bonaventure kicked Nonsense - a technique Mustang knew the roan didn’t like - and made it only fifty feet before the leather cinch gave way and sent the rider tumbling to the base of the hill.

Reining her mount, the teen reversed course and retrieved Nonsense before he fled. Descending the steep grade, she tied both horses to a low branch, dismounted and shuffled through the underbrush where Trace had landed.

His shirt torn by brambles, mud had splattered his jeans, and his hat lay flat from Nonsense’s hoof. Stunned but otherwise uninjured, he glared at Mustang.

“I hope the stock I bought isn’t so skittish,” he sighed.

She offered her hand; he swatted it away, rolling left onto his elbow, swearing at the pain. He made a grab for a sapling; Mustang swallowed her snicker.

Poison oak.

Bird song and a gentle breeze broke the silence of the trek home. Mustang noticed Trace eying her periodically, between rubbing his sore neck with a hand reddening with rash. By nightfall, he wouldn't be able to tolerate the itch.

He showered and dressed, leaving his hostess to tend the horses. She heard the stream of expletives as she switched his now-ruined outfit from that morning into the dryer. Before she finished, they'd be a size suitable for a ten-year-old boy.

He rampaged into the kitchen, bare chested and wearing purple jockey shorts, every inch of skin inflamed. As he'd soaped himself in the bathtub, he'd spread the poison over his whole frame.

"Can you do anything about this?" he bellowed.

Lamely, she replied, "There's a bottle of calamine lotion in the hall closet."

"Get it, and fast!"

She brought a washcloth and, standing on a kitchen chair, dabbed the pink liquid over Trace's squarish torso and arms without the least bit of urgency. She knew it wouldn't alleviate his discomfort.

"Anything else you can think of?" he complained

"We can call the doctor."

"Don't trust 'em."

"Our foreman would know what to do. A lot of the guys ride through poison oak without knowing..."

"Get him, then!"

Sam came, instead, the foreman being on a feed run with the pickup truck. He presented Trace with a box of Benadryl tablets.

"I want something which will work *now*, not take an hour or more!"

Typical man, couldn't handle the slightest incapacity, mused Mustang. "Take the damned pill," she advised. "If you don't scratch, you should be better in a day or two."

"A day or two! I'm supposed to fly to New York tomorrow, to meet Gloria!"

"Wouldn't be much of a tender reunion, you looking like this."

"That's... it's not that. She wants me to invest in some designer's line of clothes. Western styles, to bear our brand and family name. I have to sit through some ruckus called Fashion Week."

Imagining Trace Bonaventure sitting beside a runway, anorexic models loping past, started as a giggle and escalated to a near-hysterical fit. Mustang's effort to be a nuisance to this millionaire couldn't match the trouble his own wife must cause.

“What’s so all-fired funny?” he moaned, Sam helping him into a light-weight cotton shirt.

“You, and the way greed can get into a person’s blood and drive him to do everything he doesn’t want to do, just to have a sliver of what he really craves.”

“You’re no different. I saw you light up when I gave you those diamonds. That’s why you changed your mind and decided to sign on as a jockey.”

She couldn’t admit the truth - that she’d been tempted to melt the bracelet into a puddle on the carpet.

“Thanks, Sam. If we need anything else, we’ll shout.”

“Sure, Mustang. Your folks going to be home tonight?”

She shrugged. Touching his grey forelock, he backed through the front door.

“Best thing for you is sleep,” she hinted as Trace grabbed the television remote.

“Itching like this? I’d never shut an eye.”

Switching channels, he found a football game and ordered her to fetch him a beer from the refrigerator.

She warned, “You shouldn’t mix the medicine with alcohol.”

“Hush! You can’t even do a proper load of laundry.”

When the antihistamine and the brew combined in his system, Trace dozed in the recliner. Mustang used his stupor to heal most of the poison oak rash, except for one spot on his upper arm. Just to annoy him.

As a defensive end intercepted a pass and ran into the end zone, she shouted in feigned triumph, waking the guest. Groggily, he strained to focus on the screen, then joined her jubilation.

“Good thing I bet on the Jets,” he breathed, content.

Curiosity won over tact. “How much?”

“Ten thousand.”

That would’ve been enough to pay many of her father’s debts, and Trace risked losing it on a mere game.

She couldn’t squawk. She’d played poker in the bunkhouse some Saturday nights, winning \$20 or \$30 on the turn of a card. She might be out a new pair of shoes if one of the hands bested her full house, nothing more.

If her parents were coming home that evening, she’d hear no end of it with dirty dishes in the sink, orange juice dried on the kitchen tile, and who knows what mess in the guest bathroom. Leaving Trace to the football game, she grabbed a bucket and set to work.

She would've rather been out amongst the trees, their gold and red leaves gently falling to earth, a nip of winter in the air. Once these chores were done, she had the barn to clean, and the saddles to tend. She'd left them in disarray, in order to help Trace into the house.

The scent of saddle soap always soothed Mustang's nerves, as did the steamy breath of a horse being brushed. Oats blended with hay; no more favorite place, no place closer to nature, than the barn.

Here, she could escape temporarily from dinner-table arguments between her parents, or their neglect of her. Someday, she ached to figure out whether she'd been an "accident" or their priorities were just so skewed, they didn't grasp what being a parent entailed.

She knew she'd never have children.

Not the least concern being passing along the power she'd acquired from Jack Parsons.

She wouldn't wish that on a dog.

Her stomach grumbled; she'd not eaten since breakfast. If she went inside and prepared herself an entirely edible dinner, Trace would see through her game. Ruining another meal wouldn't be merely wasteful, but a terrible shame.

Maybe she'd find a jar of peanut butter in the pantry, and some grape jelly in the refrigerator. A sandwich would hold her until she could sneak a late snack.

Gravel being stirred up by heavy tires drew her attention to the barn entrance. Bonaventure's limousine rounded the curve in the driveway, braking near the house. The chauffeur, in his black suit and cap, hopped out and ushered Maggie from the vehicle as if she were a queen.

Mustang guessed her mother liked that treatment. In fact, the woman probably envied Gloria Bonaventure such luxuries.

Joe Duryea had worked hard his entire life; Maggie never claimed to be satisfied with the roof over her head, the food on the table, the clothes. She yearned for something more - given what Mustang heard during their disputes - but never clarified exactly what.

Her father, for that matter, wore the same frazzled expression as he had the previous day, before their unannounced departure. Whatever they'd done in Helena, he hadn't enjoyed it.

Trace greeted them at the door, and dismissed the driver. Only then did a random comment about the absence of his rash reach Mustang's ears. "Good stuff, that Benadryl."

Dumping the bucket of dirty water behind the structure, Mustang washed at the water pump, just to eliminate the stickiness on her hands. She wiped her

scarred palms on the backside of her jeans, and restored the towels and brushes to their rightful places.

The teen stood at the tack room window, watching a multi-hued sunset. She heard boots approach, ignoring the scraping of leather on wood. Trace Bonaventure positioned himself to her left, his strong right hand on her right shoulder. He radiated heat, as if he'd finished a five-mile jog, or was spiking a fever. She didn't flinch.

"Sunsets in Kentucky are just as gorgeous," he drawled. "Especially combined with the many advantages you don't have here: private plane, vast mansion, a healthy salary..."

"Including riding my pick of the boss' prize stallions?"

"Including the boss."

The teen's head snapped toward him, shocked by the innuendo. Suddenly, his mouth attacked hers, relentless, tasting of tobacco.

"I like my fillies with spirit," he breathed.

He maneuvered her over a saddle in a split second; surprisingly agile, thick fingers had unfastened her flannel shirt's buttons and were struggling with the zipper on her jeans.

Paralyzed momentarily by Bonaventure's aggressiveness, Mustang's delayed reaction sent the man slamming into the plank wall, opposite. He sank to the floor just as Joe Duryea crossed the threshold.

"What in hell is going on here?"

Quickly pulling her shirt into place, Mustang lunged toward her father, tears streaming. "Your *friend* tried to rape me."

"Don't lie to me, girl," accused Joe, dodging the embrace.

"I'm not lying. He... he..."

Her father gripped her shoulders, his voice insistent. "Given what I've heard about you while passing the bunkhouse..."

"What have you heard?" she demanded, breaking from his grasp.

"That you've been passed around like a bottle of cheap whiskey."

Mustang slapped her father across the mouth. "And you believe that about your own daughter?"

"What should I believe?" countered Joe, rubbing his jaw. "You don't go to school unless you're forced, you wander the countryside like some wild animal... who knows how many boys you've slept with, or why you're not pregnant!"

"So, for Trace to manhandle me is perfectly fine with you?"

“He’s my best customer, girl. If he wants a little... bonus for his trouble, why would you refuse him?”

“He’s a married man!”

“When has that stopped two people from enjoying themselves?”

The conversation disgusted Mustang, and verified her father’s lack of sensitivity. She brushed past him and fled into the dusk.

IV

Hunched in a chair at the kitchen table, Mustang wiped her eyes on a tea towel, and blew her nose, while Maggie spouted mindless inanities.

“There’s a lot you don’t understand about running this spread...”

“Since I’ll be inheriting it eventually, you should tell me!” her daughter steamed.

The woman avoided the harsh glare of green orbs. “Your father’s... not one to share his troubles...”

“What trouble?”

“Twelve years ago...”

Trace, composure intact except for a few stray bits of straw clinging to his shirt, preceded Joe through the kitchen door.

“Maggie!” the latter chided his wife.

“She’s 17, Joe. She ought to know.”

“No!”

If her father had been a tree in that instant, he would’ve burst into flames. Mustang held her temper as best she could, however. “Dad, if you don’t spit it out...”

“Don’t threaten me, girl!”

“I made no threat.”

“Your tone of voice...”

Her head tilted at just the right angle to convince him she might be insane, after all. He sank on his usual chair, running his hands through thinning hair. Trace leaned on the counter, having poured himself a mug of coffee. Mustang didn’t like his sanctimonious smile.

“Twelve years ago...” The words were being ripped from Joe’s mouth. “Some investments I made went bad. We couldn’t make the mortgage payments, and the bank sent a notice of foreclosure.”

Maggie moved behind Joe, laying a supporting hand on his trembling shoulder.

“Trace loaned me the cash to cover the past due balance,” the elder Duryea continued. “And I had to ask three other times...”

Mustang pressed, “What’s the total?”

“Half a million.”

She nearly fell off her seat. “Oh, hell...”

All that had transpired in recent days suddenly made sense. Trace controlled the ranch’s fate, thereby controlling her parents. Wanting her to be his jockey amounted to extortion.

“Dear, for Mr. Bonaventure, ‘jockey’ is a term he uses when referring to his mistresses,” explained Maggie, self-consciously trying to suck in her middle-aged spread.

Another shock to her system, which nature mirrored, the floors and walls beginning to shudder.

Mustang ignored the tremors. She faced her mother. “Were *you* ever his *jockey*?”

Maggie fled the room, providing her answer.

A series of deep breaths eased her daughter’s tension and the minor quakes, though she relished the panicked expressions of the two men who remained in the room. “What kind of bastard are you...”

Trace chuckled. “I told you I married Gloria to get some prime property. With your father, it was just as easy. He’s no businessman, you see.” He slapped Joe playfully on the back; the man bristled.

“Fine time for you to feel guilty about debasing your wife and your daughter,” grumbled Mustang across the board.

“I... couldn’t give up the ranch.”

He’d have to, because Mustang wouldn’t...

And she couldn’t raise that kind of scratch in a simple card game.

Or... could she?

Trace Bonaventure gambled large sums on sporting events...

Mustang rose. “One hand of poker.”

The idea obviously intrigued this guest. “What stakes?”

“You win: the ranch is yours.”

“What about you?” he prodded.

“Eh?”

“You come to Kentucky.”

“As your *jockey*?”

The light in his blue eyes needed no words.

“Yes,” came reluctantly. “If I win: you wipe out Dad’s debt, and deposit an additional \$100,000 in their bank account.”

“I...”

“Punitive damages, for humiliating them all these years. Plus, you never set foot in Montana again.”

Trace extended thick fingers. “Deal.”

Joe leapt to his feet, intercepting the gesture. “No!”

“If I don’t do this, Dad, you might as well sign over the deed right now.”

Her father hesitated, then acquiesced.

Mustang didn’t grasp Trace’s hand yet, though. “To prevent any suspicion of cheating,” she proposed, “we drive into Helena - together - and buy a fresh pack of cards.”

“Agreed.”

“We let a neutral party hold them until we get back here.”

“Who?”

Sam chanced to burst in, with news of a fight in the bunkhouse. Both Mustang and Trace confirmed the selection.

“He’ll shuffle and deal, too,” Trace stipulated.

“We’ll both cut.”

“Where will we play?”

Mustang proposed, “In front of witnesses, so there can be no renegeing.”

“Have a table set up in the barn.”

“Fine.”

“What time?”

“Bright and early.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“What, you want to go to church, first?” Mustang scoffed.

“No, but *you* may want to, after.” He yawned. “Let’s get going.”

Fortunately, a convenience store on the edge of town hadn’t closed its doors for the night, and the pair made their purchase without difficulty. Sam had accompanied them, enjoying the limousine’s accouterments, and took charge of the box marked “Aviator” in large letters.

Mustang slept until daylight, unconcerned about the game’s outcome. She already knew what it would be, without the slightest need to manipulate the deck.

What bothered her is Trace’s disregard for the value of women, using them as objects for his own pleasure. Sure, he might lavish diamonds on them, buy them fur coats, or expensive cars, but did he really think a person’s soul could be bought so readily?

That every female was, in essence, a gold-digger?

Her mother's behavior flabbergasted the girl. She'd seen wedding photos of the couple, and Maggie had been quite beautiful before the drudgery of this life took its toll. Still, to sleep with the man who could ruin her very future...

Tiny snow flakes blended with the dawn, creating airborne prisms as the ranch hands gathered near the barn's wood stove to watch this spectacle before starting their chores. Most wore long underwear and multiple layers of clothes. Sam, unruffled given his responsibility in the ordeal, guarded the deck in the center of the octagonal gaming table, flanked by two folding chairs.

Trace wore his Stetson and best suit, tailored to his unusual physique and accenting both his red hair and blue eyes. Mustang had thrown on a faded sweatshirt and torn jeans.

"Girl, you could at least show some respect," muttered Joe as she approached the table.

"Dad, when this is over..." She didn't complete the sentence, fearful her words would cause permanent damage. Best to concentrate on the task before her.

They took their seats. Their audience sipped coffee anxiously. Sam displayed the box for anyone who wished to inspect the seal, then tore off the plastic. Extracting the deck, he also removed the inner wrapping. The cards were counted, jokers removed, and the stack shuffled.

Trace ventured, "What's the game?"

"Five card draw, nothing wild," said Mustang.

"Agreed."

Plucking the cards off the green felt surface, they were held close to the vest, so no one else could give away their contents.

Mustang didn't look at hers, instead watching Trace's left eyebrow twitch. A consummate player, no other fluctuation of his features betrayed his holdings.

"Cards?" Sam offered.

Mustang requested two.

"One," drawled Trace.

If nothing else, the girl would miss that accent when he departed.

Their discards in the middle of the cloth, they didn't need to fuss with bets or raises. Trace elegantly laid out his four aces and ten of diamonds. Mustang let him momentarily revel in the presumed triumph.

Her queen-high straight flush in hearts dropped his granite jaw.

"There's no way..." he protested, snatching the deck from Sam.

Try as he might to confirm underhanded dealings, those in attendance could verify all had been done according to Hoyle, as the saying went. The two

remained, staring at each other, while Joe rustled his employees out to the pastures. Maggie shed tears of joy in the shadows, but uttered not a word to her daughter.

Sam collected the scattered deck and presented it to Mustang as a memento. She thanked the aging gentleman sweetly, then leaned back on her chair.

“I’m hoping you’ll deposit the money as soon as the bank opens tomorrow,” she suggested.

“And, if I don’t?”

This would be one occasion when she wouldn’t blow her advantage by revealing her power. She could’ve torched the table, or brought the roof down on his head. “If Gloria divorces you, you lose everything, am I right?”

“Pretty much.” He stepped in a pile of horse manure when he rose. “She wouldn’t believe anything you told her about me...”

“What if all your *jockeys* confronted her with the truth?”

“You wouldn’t... you don’t know...”

“You risked the big bucks - and lost. You want to risk that, too?”

He marched toward the house without another word.

For her part, Mustang sent the deck airborne, which disintegrated into flakes of snow, coating Heartbeat’s mane. The horse shook them off in exasperation. Placing the saddle gently on his back, she went for a long, quiet ride.

Reflecting on the past few months, the teen wondered why such a series of bizarre events had commenced only since Jack Parsons had bestowed his power upon her. Before she went to Scotland, life on the ranch had been mostly dull. She’d helped care for the horses, ignoring the escapades of others.

She had to admit, she might’ve been wearing blinkers, like horses too skittish to be around motorized vehicles or other animals. She’d not paid attention to the world - or people - around her. Acting on impulse had no consequences.

Then.

Now, in the process of learning self-control, the very things she realized she should not do were done anyway, with dire results. Cleaning up the mess could be dangerous, if not fatal for those involved. The faces of those she’d harmed would haunt her forever.

This time, at least, she’d done well, without wreaking havoc. She wished her parents would trust her, confide in her, care about her. Naturally, their worries about money and the ranch might be the reason they distanced themselves from her... would it be better, with some capital on reserve?

In her heart, she doubted her father would ever be willing to hug her, hold her when she wept, as he'd refused to do after Trace had... had...

Would Trace Bonaventure change, for once denied what he believed money could buy? His soul had been warped by gratification of every desire over the years. The only good to come from this - besides her parents' security - might be the absence of new generations of Bonaventures to corrupt.

A herd of deer foraged to her right, barely visible through the trees. Soon, hunting season would decrease their numbers; she grasped how they ruined many crops for area farmers, but on the ranch, they caused no trouble. By next spring, the young does would give birth to speckled fawns, just as the mares would birth their foals.

Why men and women had to complicate matters with games and lies...

Her bones chilled, Mustang returned home as Maggie set a tasty Sunday feast of roast pork, baked potatoes and carrots on the table, draped with an embroidered white cloth. Trace sat at the head, having removed his Stetson, and all seemed right in the world.

The girl tramped to her bedroom, her stomach rumbling. She realized a side of beef wouldn't have satisfied her hunger, but she couldn't share a board with those three, not yet.

She rummaged around for a mystery novel she'd never finished reading, stretching on the bed, propped on the pillows.

When she glanced up later - having dozed briefly, she guessed - Trace's brick-like figure was framed in the doorway. His smile radiated lust, pure and simple.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he queried.

"I lost my appetite."

"Because of what happened?"

"A lot of reasons."

Trace crossed the threshold; Mustang sat up, glowering.

"Damn, you're beautiful when you're on the scrap."

"How old are you, Trace?"

"Celebrated 42 years last month."

"You want to see 43?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't see a knife, or a pistol, and I outweigh you by sixty pounds, at least."

The door closed, Trace locked the knob without looking. He loosened that ludicrous string tie as he neared the bed, blue eyes gleaming.

When the braided cord tightened around his throat, robbing him of air, he halted.

Mustang swung off the mattress, snarling, "You might think I'm beautiful when I'm on the scrap, as you put it, but I do horrible things when I'm angry, including shriveling parts of human anatomy which people might find valuable."

Making her exit while Trace remained motionless, Mustang found it ironic that Gloria Bonaventure stood in the living room, shedding her white mink coat while Maggie held her Gucci purse.

"I got bored in New York," the bleach-blonde gushed. "No new shows on Broadway, and the styles this year just didn't appeal to me."

Outside, a rented limousine idled on the drive, the chauffeur unloaded luggage and boxes with designer labels.

"Hold on there a minute!" bellowed Trace, his breath recovered as he vacated Mustang's room. "Tell that boy to pack those things back in the trunk. I was leaving in the morning, so we might as well..."

His wife protested, "But, honey, I'd like to visit with Maggie and Joe..."

Somehow, Mustang understood why the man sought his pleasure with women other than his wife. She wondered, too, if her father did likewise, when visiting other ranchers to - ostensibly - discuss the sale of his horses.

"We'll see them in Las Vegas next month, and you can visit then," he bluffed, snatching his Stetson from the wall hook and sidling toward the waiting vehicle. A quick kiss on Maggie's cheek, and a shake of Joe's hand preceded Trace dropping onto the Lincoln's rear seat.

"What about your bags?" Gloria asked.

"Joe'll send them along to the airport."

Tires kicked up gravel as the sleek silver limo accelerated toward the road. Maggie glanced at her husband, curious. "What was that all about?"

Joe shrugged, returning indoors and switching on the evening news.

"I thought Trace hoped to convince Mustang that she'd have greater opportunities in Kentucky..."

Mustang bristled. "After I covered your debts, you *still* wanted me to go with him?"

"You don't seem to like it here, dear," said her mother, running water in the kitchen sink.

The teen rushed onto the porch in shirt sleeves and shoeless. Her ruminations of hours earlier rang true - nothing would change!

At least, Trace Bonaventure didn't know her secret, and no longer posed a threat to her future.

She had a sneaking suspicion, though, men would always pose a threat to her, if not craving her power, then desiring whatever physical attributes they found appealing. Catching her reflection in the picture window, she puzzled how they could find her gangly figure and tousled auburn tresses attractive.

“Mustang!” called her father. “Don’t you have homework to do?”

She chortled quietly. He had no notion what classes were on her schedule at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. But, she was tired - and hungry - and could curl up on her bed with the television blaring an old movie, and have a few moments of relative peace.

Until the next time she was caught off guard and had to clean up another disaster.