

The Mustang Chronicles:

Domesticated Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

“Your young man hard at work?”

Mark Twain always spoke his mind, and when his curiosity piqued, his questions were equally straightforward.

“My young man?” echoed Mustang Duryea, glancing up from the chess board.

“No need to be coy with me, Elizabeth. You know who I mean. Back in Hannibal, I could see you were very close.”

“Hannibal was a long time ago, Mr. Clemens.”

“Not that long, by your reckoning.”

“How long, by yours?” Using the power bestowed upon her by Jack Parsons on the very grounds she now inhabited near Loch Ness, Mustang had accidentally “raised the dead” at inopportune moments, and the experience made her wonder about many aspects of the afterlife.

He peered at her, cigar in one hand, piercing eyes framed by shaggy white hair and bushy mustache. “A blink of an eye, and that’s no answer.”

“Jim’s dead.” Merely speaking the words resurrected the grief of that day.

“Tragic. Was it tuberculosis, or cancer?”

“Neither. He was shot.”

The author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* showed his rage more readily than Mustang. She dared not, given nature’s unbidden reaction to her emotions.

“I will never fathom the minds of men!” Twain stormed. “Be it that shallow preacher who falsely accused you in Hannibal, or critics of my own era... Such skewed opinions lead to mob violence and the death of innocents. If I had pen and paper, I’d write a scathing editorial...”

“Gandhi wanted to speak against the present injustice when I... manifested him,” Mustang remarked quietly. “He soon realized few would listen, and not those who most needed to hear.”

A spiral of pleasant-smelling smoke wound toward the ceiling as Twain puffed meditatively. “You’re right, of course. If people can ban my books for being offensive, they have a long road to travel toward understanding themselves.”

His opponent moved her rook, and he grinned.

“Fascinating ploy.”

“Expect the unexpected when we play, Mr. Clemens. I didn’t learn chess from a book.”

“Nor did I.”

While he considered his strategy, Mustang left the cane-backed rocker and threw another log on the grate. She stared into the crackling blaze, recalling nights at her parents' Montana home, a similar fire warming the living room. She'd always felt edgy with Joe and Maggie bickering about inanities; here, no one disturbed her contentment.

"Your move, Elizabeth," hailed Twain.

The reverie broken, she returned to the table. Her rook was missing, a black queen in its place.

"Mr. Clemens, did you cheat?"

He flashed the carved white castle, which he'd palmed. "Point being, never leave your adversary to his own devices."

They laughed together.

Twain stood, and stretched. "Being flesh and blood has its drawbacks," he conceded. "Bones get old, and stiff. Having no substance means no aches and twinges."

"Without substance, nothing has meaning - not the sunrise, or a rose's delicate smell..."

"True, true. And it'd be a shame to let those magnificent horses you have stabled go to waste."

"Would you like to ride?"

"Indeed."

Mustang convinced Twain to shed his trademark white suit coat and tie for a heavy cable-knit sweater, donning one herself. The December chill invigorated both as they crossed the property to the barn, where saddles were secured on a bay and a roan, and they set off at a canter along trails worn into the hard earth by the young woman's daily rides.

"A fine estate, my dear," observed Twain as they mounted a rise, allowing for a view of the Scottish countryside. "You could've stayed in the States and bought equally delightful acreage..."

"I... inherited this from my grandfather." A fact, with a slight detour through the hands of the FBI.

"Grand that you didn't sell it to the highest bidder, who'd let it go to seed."

She didn't want to explain the details of her exile. Snapping the reins, her mount moved forward.

When she came to Boleskine House the second time, following a tenuous agreement with Ben Espinoza after Jim Neville's death, she'd ripped the main gate off its hinges. Children from nearby villages played hide-and-seek and other games in her woods and, rarely, amateur occultists hunting for remnants of the Aleister

Crowley legend appeared on the winding gravel drive. She didn't mind, as long as they didn't bother the horses or knock at the door. Her only sanctioned visitors were the feed delivery driver from Dores, and the grocer's clerk dropping off her bi-weekly order.

Seclusion had calmed her. No longer torn between duty and dreams - school and her love of the outdoors, for instance - she read, rode and wandered as her heart dictated. She hadn't used her power much since the renovations on the house had been completed - assisting a Druid priestess and a concert pianist, hit international casinos for spending money and the like - and had no regrets.

Afternoon faded quickly into evening. Steering their horses toward the corral, Mustang glimpsed an upright shadow in the distance. It appeared to be inspecting the mutilated wooden altar rotting on the property's highest point. She signaled Twain to dismount. "Mr. Clemens, time for you to go."

"Remember your promise for Christmas."

She smirked. "I won't forget."

He vanished, with a final puff on his cigar.

Bringing Twain, Gandhi, German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and St. Francis of Assisi to Boleskine as periodic guests made these historic figures curious about one another. She'd agreed to host a holiday gathering, where they could meet and socialize.

A news crew would sell their souls for such footage, but she'd be the sole witness.

Ushering Twain's bay into the fenced enclosure, Mustang lifted her foot into the roan's stirrup once more. Villagers did not roam the grounds at night; she knew they suspected ghosts or gremlins haunted the estate. To prevent any theft or intrusion, the slender female maintained a standing order for the natural elements to trap any trespasser after dusk. Whoever she'd seen on the hill, he wasn't native to the area, and was placing himself at risk.

The Mistress of Boleskine - locals believed her "Lady Elizabeth Neville" - galloped to the site and halted the mare on a dime. A warped plank whipped toward her, wielded by strong arms. "Drop it!" she cried.

Fingers unwillingly released the weapon. "What the hell..."

"I could ask you the same." Her boots hit the frozen soil. "If you're looking for Crowley souvenirs..."

"Crowley who?"

She couldn't see his face, bathed in shadows now the sun had descended over Loch Ness, just a reflection off dark-rimmed glasses. His voice resonated with youth, and a New England accent.

Oddly soothing, after the harsh Scottish burr usually assaulting her ears.

“You lost?” she queried.

“No. I’m looking for someone.”

“Then, you’re lost, because I’m the only one here, and you’re not looking for me.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I don’t know you.”

He stared at her; enough light filtered over his shoulder, she assumed her expression was visible.

“Maybe you’re right. The girl was described as having red hair.”

Mustang had darkened her auburn tresses to be less conspicuous.

Disconcerting to have a stranger seeking her - could he be an FBI agent, or from Interpol?

Best to feel him out before revealing anything.

“You got a car to get you back to the city?” she prodded.

“I took a bus from Inverness, and walked the rest of the way.”

“You planning to make the return trip tonight?”

He shrugged. “Hadn’t thought about it.”

“Out here, that’s a mistake.”

“What, you buy into the stories about phantoms and a monster in the lake?”

“No. There are... other things which prowl the wilderness. Bears, cats...”

He glanced toward the trees. “Um... you wouldn’t know of a hotel somewhere close?”

“C’mon.” She reached for his hand; he retracted it. “Now, you get shy?”

Determined fingers clamped on his arm and jerked him toward the horse.

She swung into the saddle, and hoisted him up behind her. At a trot, they reached the stable in ten minutes.

The living room fire had died. Waving the intruder to a lush green sofa, Mustang grabbed a bronze poker and stirred the ashes before rekindling the flames with an assortment of twigs and branches. Soon, heat permeated every corner of the huge chamber, and she spun.

“Would you like some coffee, or tea?”

“No, thanks.” He studied her features; she averted her gaze. “You’re American, aren’t you?”

“I was.”

“Then, you might know the girl called Mustang.”

She struggled not to visibly react. “Sounds more like a horse.”

“She grew up on a ranch in Montana, from what I’ve read.”

“So, you’ve never seen her, yourself.”

“No.”

“Then, why come all this way...”

“I need answers.”

Mustang’s confusion escalated. Average height, trim, brown orbs flecked with grey and wild hair so dark it looked black - except in direct light, when it lightened to a deep bronze - no more than 25, why would someone not acquainted with her traverse an ocean for answers? No logical basis existed, unless... Was this the son of a convicted EEP activist, against whom she’d testified, bent on revenge?

She sank on the rocker. “Start at the beginning. What have you read?”

“The beginning goes back further than that.”

“Fine. I can’t help you, unless you tell me everything.”

“I was born in Providence, Rhode Island. My mom and dad weren’t married. I saw him two or three times when I was really small, and only remember him from newspaper photos.”

Possibilities ran amok inside Mustang’s head, focusing on Wilfrid Bailey, real name Jonas Fairchild. She had no way to confirm he’d attended college in the East; he’d been an orthopedic surgeon in California when his... murderous rampage commenced.

She quieted her brain, concentrating on his narrative.

“When Mom died in a car wreck, I was four. Her mother and father took me to Boston and raised me as their own, though my father supposedly fought tooth and nail for custody.”

“They usually give the surviving parent custody, don’t they?”

“Not always. Mom hadn’t listed Dad on the birth certificate, and the court wouldn’t order paternity tests. Granddad presented bogus evidence my dad was a ‘whore monger’ - the old man’s term, not mine. He hated that Mom named me after the guy. He’d deliberately introduce me to neighbors using his own preference, which drove me crazy. Not a day passed he didn’t remind me of this animosity whenever I dared question why Dad wasn’t allowed to see me.”

He paused. Relating the tale evidently opened many old wounds.

Mustang’s own dealings with her father made her - albeit unwillingly - sympathetic. She moved to sit beside the hunched figure on the sofa and patted his hand. “Take your time. There’s no rush.”

“What about that hotel?”

“You’re in it. I’ve got a spare room.”

“Thanks.” He inhaled tentatively. “Sorry. I thought I’d worked past the grief, but when I read Dad’s journal...”

This reference to a journal presented another option regarding the visitor: Jack Parsons. For the rocket scientist to have a son so young would’ve meant leaving Boleskine - site of his own half-century exile - which he hadn’t. Or, had an American tourist seduced him and returned to the States carrying his child?

Not likely. Parsons’ journals were safely concealed in a small compartment Mustang had constructed in her bedroom closet on the Montana ranch. Had there been other volumes, Ben Espinoza and his FBI crew would have gone in search of those, too. The academy instructor had never hinted at such a venture.

“Your dad’s dead?” prompted Mustang.

“Three years ago. Since the police tracked me down and shipped me his personal possessions, I’ve been reading the articles about his death on-line. I still can’t figure why he was so stupid.”

“What happened?”

“He got into a fight with a motorcycle gang. Even with his... health problems, he should’ve known better.”

Mustang’s eyes widened as an obscure memory burst forth: an interstate highway jammed with cars gradually rolling past the cadre of police investigating an abandoned silver Ford Mustang and row of torched Harley Davidsons, one dead body in their midst.

“What’s... your name?” she stammered.

“Don White.”

The only association she could make: Jack Parsons’ Scottish alias had been Jock White...

“Legally: Lyndon Bixby White.”

II

“Oh, hell...” Mustang lurched upright and crossed to the fireplace, leaning her head on the carved marble mantle. Thinking about it, the young man’s resemblance to his ill-fated father could not be mistaken.

White also rose. “It *is* you. You’re the girl he wrote about...”

“*What* did he write?”

“He was waiting for you - you were supposed to meet at the town square. Some podunk town called Carbon Creek...”

“Canyon Creek,” she corrected.

“Whatever.” White paced the room as he continued, stopping at the chess table to note the placement of the pieces. “His last entry implied you might cure the problem with his hypothalamus before... before it was too late. By the date, he must’ve died a short time later.”

“He did.”

“Then, you *were* the last person to see him alive. There’s so much I need to know...”

“I’ll tell you what I can, if you tell me how you found me.”

“Stories in the *Helena Chronicle*, for starters. One of the library security guards mentioned a red-haired teenager asking about Dad hours before the police discovered his body. The photo of him suspended above the lobby floor after slipping off the ladder... Kinda cool, really. You did that?”

“I didn’t take the picture.”

“That’s not what I mean. He wrote you saved him from breaking his leg.” Mustang’s chin dipped affirmatively.

“Did you know another cell phone shot a different angle, looking up at the mezzanine past Dad’s blurred form? You’re right there, at the railing, clear as a bell.”

“I never saw that one in the paper.”

“It’s in the police investigation file.”

“A cop took the picture?”

“Not a real cop. She worked the front desk for the county sheriff, taking non-emergency calls.”

“That still doesn’t tell me...”

“I searched the *Chronicle* archives, using your name. When Jonas Fairchild escaped the Atwater prison, there was a nice retrospective about your involvement in his case. A couple months later, you’re a protected witness in a high-profile court case. Then, you disappear from Montana, only to humiliate armed troops in India and China. One journalist quoted a Mumbai documentary producer admitting you lived in Scotland.”

“Thorough, aren’t you?” scoffed Mustang.

“You’re an international celebrity of sorts, Lady Elizabeth. Society reporters on the Riviera posted your photo among the world’s 100 most eligible singles after your most recent visit.”

Six months ago, to replenish her dwindling bank account, she’d made a brief trip to Nice, courtesy of a lightning bolt...

Damned paparazzi.

“Then, you knew my hair wasn’t red any more.”

“I couldn’t be sure. Most of the photos were black and white.”

“Will you let me read your dad’s journal?” she asked.

“After we talk.”

“How ‘bout some dinner?”

“Okay.” White moved the black bishop on the inlaid board. “Checkmate.”

Pleasantly stunned, his hostess led him through the main hall to her state-of-the-art kitchen. He sat on a bar stool at the granite-topped island while she scrambled eggs and stirred a bowl of pancake mix.

“Simple, but filling,” she stated, placing a steaming plate before him ten minutes later.

“What was your relationship with my dad?”

She almost choked on a sip of orange juice. “And I thought Sam Clemens was blunt!”

“Sam Clemens? You mean, Mark Twain?”

Between coughs, she shrugged.

“You’re not old enough to...”

“Forget you heard that.”

“I will, if you answer my question.”

“I knew your dad only a few days. He was a good man, hindered by serious difficulties.”

“His overactive hypothalamus.”

“More than that. He had a murder wrap hanging over his head.”

“He wrote about that. He ran, but really wanted to be caught - and killed - because his life was hell when the adrenaline started pumping.”

“He was killed after he’d been cured, and it was my fault.”

White paused, the fork half-way to his mouth. “Huh?”

“If I hadn’t interfered that day at the library, his picture never would’ve been splashed all over the news, he wouldn’t have come to my house, and the Feds never would’ve tracked him down.”

“Why did he come to your house?”

“To bring me a couple DVDs I dropped running from the library, though I think he suspected what I’d done.”

“He noticed you; he wrote as much. As I said, he liked women, especially young ones.”

“It wasn’t that way. We had a common bond, our respective... maladies.”

“You don’t look sick.”

“Why did you go up to the hill earlier, instead of coming directly to the house?” she puzzled.

“What’s that got to do with...”

“Humor me.”

“I felt drawn, like it’s a sacred site. Maybe a church stood there centuries ago.”

“That piece of wood you aimed at my head - why rummage around there?”

“It’s been struck by lightning. I was studying meteorology before my grandfather died and I had to quit college...”

His words ceased when Mustang raised her hands, showing her scarred palms.

“You’ve...”

“Yes.”

“Is that how...”

“Only part of it.”

“Dad’s handwriting got really bad the last few pages, as if he was excited about something you told him. Was that it?”

“I have no way to be sure. I think so.”

“You said you were at fault for his death. Did you kill him, and leave the cops to think the gang did it?”

“No, but I could’ve saved him.”

“How?”

“I didn’t react quickly enough.”

“What, you would’ve stepped in and let yourself be killed?”

“No. I could’ve melted the blade, or frozen the guy’s hand...”

“You’re a... sorcerer?”

“Some might call it that.” Mustang yawned. “Look, I’m used to getting up early to feed the horses, and hitting the sack before nine. You’re probably bushed, yourself, if you hoofed it from the village. Can we pick this up in the morning?”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” Another promise rang in her head - and five days until Christmas.

She showed White to the spare bedroom, dusty from disuse. Fresh sheets and blankets, and a space heater to ward off the cold, made him as comfortable as feasible.

“You have no clothes, not even a toothbrush?” she wondered.

“The airline lost my suitcase. When I get back to Edinburgh, it may have caught up with me.”

“You’re flying back to the States?”

“After New Year’s. I wanted to give myself plenty of time to find you.”

Would he expect to remain at Boleskine House the entire two weeks? He couldn’t have *that* many questions, Mustang surmised.

He removed his glasses, and she noticed faint impressions of the laugh lines which had so distinguished his father in her mind. “Did you inherit the... hypothalamus problem?”

“Fortunately, no. It supposedly skips a generation, according to my grandfather. That’s why I’ve decided never to have kids. I couldn’t subject them to... Dad’s kind of life.” He pulled the thick, worn journal from his hip pocket and waved it. “Some of what’s on these pages would make a blood-curdling horror film.”

He tossed it on the polished night stand, and kicked off his shoes. On the pretense of checking the window lock, Mustang moved past the bed, snatching the book as she strode again toward the door. Tired or not, she would devour Lyndon Bixby’s personal reflections before closing an eye.

She settled on a love seat in the small study she’d had fitted with three door locks. If the FBI, Interpol or any other governmental representatives ever converged on the dwelling, intent to taking her into custody, she would make her last stand behind the steel reinforced panel.

This night, Lyndon White wouldn’t invade her privacy accidentally, should he awaken and go searching for a late snack.

A goose-neck lamp arched over her shoulder, casting bright light on pages alternately soaked by rain, then dried in the sun. Gold embossing on the faux leather cover had long since been rubbed off, leaving an indentation of the inscription: “To Professor L.H. Bixby, from the Econ Class of...” The year was unreadable.

The date on the first page gave some clue, two decades previous. “My son turned five today, and I will be unable to share the occasion. I doubt if his grandparents will give him the present I mailed. It tears my heart. Someday, when the doctors find a treatment so my emotions won’t cause such devastation, things will be different.”

Contrary to White’s opinion, his father wrote little about women. He recounted efforts to concoct a remedy for his overactive hypothalamus, including formulae more complex than some of the rocket fuel mixtures Parsons had detailed. Each time, a lament of failure led to weeks of despair.

Still, he never missed a class, until the day he killed Janet, the undercover DEA agent who’d pretended to be his girlfriend. He’d seen a future for them together; she seemed to empathize with his inner turmoil, claiming to be a pre-med

student aspiring to a research career. His eavesdropping on the telephone conversation with her departmental supervisor angered him, a rage redoubled when she confessed during the subsequent confrontation to having a fiancé in Washington, D.C.

He'd closed his bank account, jumped in the battered Camaro, and fled. The list of tiny towns and large cities where he'd found temporary jobs and modest shelter over the course of 15 years wrenched sobs from Mustang's throat. He'd come to Helena, Montana from Tyler, Texas, where the state police zeroed in on him after a would-be pickpocket wound up in hospital with multiple skull fractures.

Never once did he feel it necessary to use an alias, despite his unique name. He did, as two investigators had once told Mustang, steal license plates now and then, to throw off authorities searching for his car.

The ruse worked, until she stuck her nose where it didn't belong.

"I'm not cut out for maintenance work," he scribbled the morning he fell at the library. "It didn't occur to me changing fluorescent bulbs could be dangerous. How many times have I climbed ladders to stack boxes, wash windows or roof houses, among the myriad of jobs I've held? Yet, one prong sticks in the ballast, and I'm falling like a stone.

"The freak wind destroyed the main entrance and blew books off the racks, but it saved my life, in more ways than one. Had I hit the floor, I have no way of estimating what additional damage my anger would have wrought. As it was, I was so relieved, I didn't see the girl until she mysteriously repaired the twisted metal and broken glass of the doors.

"Something needs to be done about protecting personal information in public databases. When I found the DVDs on the lawn, all I had to do was ask the circulation clerk, and she gave me the name and address without hesitation. Heaven forbid I was some kind of nut or a real criminal, another source of identity theft adding to the economic woes of the country."

So many years had passed since he'd taught at university, and conditions in the business sector still held his interest.

Like horses held hers, Mustang reasoned, flipping the page.

"I've seen her twice now," Bixby scrawled the following afternoon. "Met her mom and dad, as well. An insensitive, self-centered couple, and I feel sorry for her. According to the hired hands roaming the property, she's expert with the stock on the ranch, but lacks enthusiasm for school. A shame, really. She seems intelligent, and strangely wise for her age - 16 or 17.

“Something about her isn’t quite... right, to put it mildly. A guilt complex, or psychological imbalance, makes her keep apologizing for nothing. She swears she didn’t shoot the photo which appeared on the newspaper’s front page, which will do more harm than a broken leg might have. I’m afraid I bruised her or, at a minimum, frightened her when she found me in the woods after... the latest episode. The horror on that pretty freckled face made me wish I was dead.”

Lowering the book, Mustang crinkled her nose in distaste. “Pretty freckled face?” she muttered.

The last entry was, by far, the longest in the entire volume. Bixby sensed his impending doom, wishing to clear up assorted loose ends.

“On the run again, the Camaro finally died an ignoble death. We’ve been together so long, I can’t help but believe my fate will be similar, and soon. The rented Ford Mustang is fast though, 350 horse power taking me back to Canyon Creek in record time. Why, I’m not sure. I thought I’d be safe where the Feds wouldn’t hunt for me. I was wrong.

“The girl found me, and I’m glad. She’s too grounded to be completely insane, however some of what she did and said is beyond my comprehension. There may be a slim chance she can cure me, since her claims include healing a gunshot wound some Italian inflicted a couple months ago.

“Should that transpire, I’ll head east and try to find my son. He’s a man now, and perhaps we can relate on equal terms. I wouldn’t care if they arrested and convicted me for Janet’s death, so long as I could spend a few hours with him and apologize for my prolonged absence.

“To whom can I apologize for a wasted life? Or, is it my fault I was born with a condition making it impossible for me to sustain healthy relationships with others? I tried to be useful, doing what I could from the shadows; it’s never enough, is it?

“Young Mustang is in the same boat I was, nearly 30 years ago. She’s battling impulsiveness and emotional upheaval, which elicits bizarre activity on the natural plane. One word from her lips, and the world could be destroyed. Her claims of raising the dead are unverifiable, and I wouldn’t want to be around to see the aftermath of such a deed.

“She trusts me, if I read her correctly. I may be able to offer some guidance, so she doesn’t make the same mistakes I did. Teenagers seldom heed their elders, so I may be wasting my breath. I’d like to tell her suppressing emotions can be worse than letting them out in moderation. I spent so many years keeping tight reins on my anger, when it did erupt, I could only let it run its course.

She needs to find her true self while simultaneously dealing with the craziness of daily life.

“My son needs to know I love him more than my own existence and, if the judge had ordered the paternity test, I would’ve stood beside him and supported him every step of the way. I envy men today who sire children and can openly be a part of their upbringing, whether or not they’re married to the mother. Those who flee their responsibility should be taken out and shot.

“I checked my watch again, and don’t see Mustang from the alley where I’m hiding. She should’ve met me near the car a half hour ago, and I can stay here no longer. I’ll risk being seen by the old woman sitting on the bench and get myself to safety, uncured.”

The account ended there. Mustang knew the rest; she’d witnessed it first-hand. The clash with the motorcycle gang at the truck stop, their pursuit and... her stupid negligence.

“If I’d healed his wound, he could’ve met his son,” she mourned aloud. “I could’ve arranged for him to be with his son.”

Her hand resting upon the closed book, she vowed, “I *will* arrange it.”

III

One holiday Mustang Duryea dreaded more than any other: Christmas. Celebrations disrupted by family quarrels peppered her childhood memories. Selecting a tree became sheer torture as she grew older, her parents arguing whether the trunk was straight and the branches spaced properly to hold heirloom ornaments. Inviting relatives from either side sparked intense debate, since certain cousins didn’t get along with others.

The sole positive in crowding the house with bodies: the girl could creep into her bedroom and close the door, muffling the inane banter with her pillows.

Since coming to Boleskine House, winters had passed without any festivities. Her trips to nearby villages were infrequent; whether the Scots decorated shops and streets did not interest or concern her. To placate her guests, she would weave together a pine wreath and hang some boughs, mistletoe and holly around the living room, ordering the fixings for a traditional feast. Francis of Assisi, creator of the original creche, might notice a lack of religious symbology - he knew her well enough to respect her non-belief. This wouldn’t be about the coming of a savior, but the convocation of history’s wisest minds.

Lyndon Bixby White, wearing a sweat shirt borrowed from Mustang’s closet, helped the Mistress of Boleskine chop a plentiful supply of firewood over

the weekend, and trim suitable branches for the decorations, keeping them in water buckets until the last possible moment. She treated his blisters with ointment after hours clutching the axe; her hands boasted callouses from two years fending for herself.

“Do you ride?” she inquired after a light lunch of peanut butter sandwiches and chips.

“Bikes, motorcycles, what?”

“Horses.”

“Not since Granddad put me on a pony at the county fair.”

“You afraid of them?”

“No. We lived in the heart of Boston. Not like we could keep one in the garage.”

She conceded the point. “Would you like to help me exercise mine?”

“Sure.”

The sorrel gelding and a roan were chosen for the day’s outing. “What’s his name?” White queried, placing his sneaker in the stirrup.

“You know, I never thought to name them. Back on the ranch, we rarely named the stock, unless they had a distinctive trait, like Old Bastard, or Heartbeat.”

“Heartbeat?”

“My pinto. He nearly died being born, and ended up with the strongest heartbeat of any horse I’ve seen.”

“Will you let me choose?”

“Sure.”

“It’ll be my Christmas present to you. I’ll pick the names and paint them on their stalls.”

“One stipulation: nothing sappy.”

“Right.”

White sat his mount well, for a novice. At a leisurely pace, they toured much of the 47-acre estate, cutting short the ride when a light rain began falling.

“Do you have a job in the States?” probed Mustang while they groomed the horses.

“Why? You need a stable boy?” he quipped, before sobering. “I’ve been taking care of my grandmother since leaving school. She had a mild stroke a month before Granddad died, and didn’t get around too well. They were married 52 years, and once he was gone, she lost the will to live.”

“She passed, then?”

“Last month, peacefully, in her sleep. I stuck around to sell the house and the car, which is when the Feds showed up with the journal, and the news about Dad.”

“What took them so long?”

“Lack of information. They knew he had a son, but didn’t have a name. Only when Grandma’s will was probated, and my name - so similar to his - came up in the public records, did they make the connection.”

“And you decided to come looking for me?”

“The house netted a tidy profit, and I had to find out what happened. I never had a chance to know the man, and you did. I couldn’t just get an apartment and start job hunting, as if he was some hood killed in Southie.”

“What kind of job will you want when you head back across the Atlantic?”

“I’d like to finish my degree, and apply to NOAA or the National Hurricane Center. Weather captivates me.”

Mustang burst out laughing; White eyed her warily. “I’m sorry.” She exhaled. “I couldn’t help but imagine what you would’ve done if you’d seen the reports issued by the Montana Meteorological Service about the earthquakes and windstorms I caused.”

“*You* caused?”

“When I initially discovered my power, the manifestations were a bit... excessive, and tracked by radar and seismographs. I’ve been able to tone things down since then.”

“So you can keep a lower profile than in the past?”

“Definitely.”

They ambled to the house; White opted for a shower while Mustang threw a sirloin steak on the broiler for dinner. She was collecting lettuce and other vegetables from the refrigerator when he trapped her between the door, sporting only a bath towel around his slender waist.

“Did Dad ever kiss you?”

“I already told you, it wasn’t like that...”

“His loss.”

Her hands engulfing fresh produce, Mustang couldn’t adequately respond to his fiery lips. She elbowed him backward. “Go, put on some clothes,” she chuckled.

“What clothes?”

“The ones sent out from the village this morning.”

“Huh?”

She placed her burden on the counter, smiling mischievously. “You’re a sound sleeper. Must be the fresh air. I rode to the neighbor’s first thing and placed a call to the grocer. The sweats should be the right size, if you don’t mind a hokey graphic of Nessie.”

“And, underwear?”

“Boxers, socks and an extra pair of sneakers.”

She didn’t mention the suit ordered for the holiday gathering.

He kissed her again; the floor shifted beneath her feet and she recoiled.

“No!”

Brown orbs squinted behind oversized spectacles. “What’s wrong? You were just getting into it...”

“I won’t allow this house to be destroyed by... by...”

He waited; she didn’t finish the sentence. Disgruntled, he strode from the kitchen.

And didn’t return.

The meal cold and uneaten, Mustang found him later, leaning on the corral fence. “You’ll catch cold, out here with wet hair.”

“I don’t care.”

“What? Just because I can’t let you...”

“*Why* can’t you let me? Is there something wrong with you?”

“There would be, if...”

“You’ll turn into a frog, or an ogre?”

She wanted to slap him. Instead, taking a slow breath, she caressed his cheek - so like his father’s. “Grab your coat and come with me.”

Her familiarity with the property enabled her to navigate dark trails to the moonlit hillock. Sufficient distance from the main house, she released her emotions.

“This kind of thing doesn’t help my ‘low profile’,” she stated. “Like Bix, letting others get close is not just difficult for me, but dangerous. My parents thought I enjoyed doing damage, to spite them. That’s not the case. Nature is so attuned to my emotions, what happens in extreme moments is entirely unconscious on my part.”

White speculated, “Hurricane, tornado...”

“That, or more.”

“And if I’m willing to take the risk?”

“So am I - out here.”

“It’d be better in a warm bed, or beside the fire...”

He heard her snicker. “You’re jumping the gun a bit, Mister. One kiss is about all you’ll be able to handle for now.”

“You think so?”

She didn’t have the opportunity to reply, because he’d pulled her into an unyielding embrace and planted his mouth on hers.

The earth jolted violently, lightning and thunder were generated in cloudless skies. From the pit where Jack Parsons had once summoned unfueled fire, flames shot upward in a twenty-foot column. Miles away, the church bell of Dores began to ring, an alarm wafting over the countryside.

When White paused to suck in a lungful of air, he realized they were suspended five feet above the ground, caught in a fierce rotating wind.

“What the hell...”

“Told you so,” Mustang panted, hazel eyes alight.

“How... do we get down?”

“As I calm down, so will they.”

“You talk like they’re alive.”

“Nature *is* alive. Very much alive. And very responsive to what human beings do.”

“You one of those environmental fanatics?”

“Your studies must’ve shown how wildfires in California, for instance, affect the atmospheric conditions...”

As he pondered the assertion, he realized his feet were again settled on the ice-coated grass. Hand in hand, the pair strolled to the house, heating their plates in the microwave to enjoy a late supper.

White escorted Mustang to her bedroom door, his lips brushing her neck. “If I come to you in the night...”

“Don’t, I beg you. It would tear me apart to have the roof fall on our heads.” She tenderly ran her fingers through his wind-blown dark mop. “Believe me, there will be time...”

“All right,” he sighed, proceeding along the hall.

Light snow fell over the next two days, turning Boleskine House into a microcosmic winter wonderland. Mustang loved snow, in limited quantities. Early mornings spent riding through six-foot drifts to break ice off water troughs in the Montana pastures spoiled her recollections of winter. The horse barn she’d had built here protected the animals with an electric heater, eliminating the need to use a pick unless she decided to scale nearby mountains.

“When will your guests be arriving?” White inquired Christmas Eve, mixing the egg nog.

“Around noon.”

“Too bad you don’t have a TV.”

“Why?”

“Football. Granddad always ate Christmas dinner, then fell asleep in his recliner during the big game.”

“My dad did the same. Pissed off my mother every year.”

“Grandma, too. Come to think of it, I don’t have many good memories of Christmas.”

“Me, neither.”

Wistfully, White gazed out the frost-encrusted kitchen window. “I never found out what happened to the presents my dad sent, which Granddad never gave me.”

“Pitched in the trash, most likely.”

“Not Granddad. He didn’t waste anything. Probably donated them to the church’s ‘Giving Tree’.”

“What’s a giving tree?”

“Those who have donate toys and clothes to those who don’t, to make themselves feel better about neglecting the poor January through November.”

Mustang couldn’t hide her smile. “Welcome to the Cynics’ Club.”

He studied her reflection in the glass, and she recognized his quizzical expression.

“Ever since my high school comparative religion class, I’ve held a very dim view of…”

“Mandated guilt?”

“Amen.”

“That’s why I love you, Mustang.”

He extended his hand toward her; she demurred.

“Lots to be done before the party.”

“That’s what Grandma always used to say.” Dejected, he left her to the baking.

The third batch in the oven, she brought a mug of hot cocoa and a plate of chewy sugar cookies to him in the living room. Slumped in the rocker, he glowered at the fire. She didn’t enjoy domesticity, despised preparing fancy meals, and saw in this homey scene images of her parents.

Not how she intended to spend her life.

Not how she *could* spend her life.

Her power placed the “simple pleasures” far beyond her reach.

Boleskine House cleaned and dusted, the air was filled with the aroma of stuffed turkey, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie on Christmas Day. Lyndon White opened his bedroom door to find a gaily wrapped package propped against the wood. When he entered the kitchen wearing the blue suit and black turtleneck, Mustang felt a yearning she thought had died with Jim Neville.

“Thank you,” he said, sliding his arms around her apron-clad waist as she stirred the saucepan of gravy.

“I didn’t want you to feel underdressed.”

“Who’s coming, anyway?”

“You’ll see.”

The boughs and wreath hung, dining room table set with linens and fine china, no cars were heard approaching on the gravel drive, no rapping sounded on the front door. White carried a tray of wine glasses into the living room just before noon, to be confronted by four curious faces.

A tremendous mess would’ve been made had not Mustang followed him across the threshold with a bottle of sparkling white grape juice, pausing to steady his arms.

Filling the crystal flutes, the hostess presented one to each guest, introducing them in turn.

Mark Twain wore his customary white suit, a sprig of holly pinned on his lapel to honor the occasion. White’s eyebrows arched behind his glasses when Mustang kissed his cheek like an old friend.

She did likewise to the weathered countenance of Francis of Assisi, garbed in a tattered brown robe. White had seen many statues of this saint surrounded by birds in people’s gardens; he resembled those images not one bit. A playfulness shone in his eyes as he presented Mustang with a shiny pebble.

“From the streets of Assisi, in memory of our adventures there.”

White couldn’t believe his ears. He heard the man in English!

Retrieving the next glass from the tray, Mustang patted his arm. “Don’t fret, Don. Language is no barrier to understanding within these walls. Imagine Francis, hearing us all in Italian!”

Dumbfounded, the young man pursed his lips, and observed the remaining greetings.

“Gandhiji, your presence blesses my house.”

The diminutive Mahatma in a homespun dhoti placed gnarled hands together in a prayerful Hindu pose, bowing slightly. “I am honored to be included among your esteemed guests.”

Erwin Rommel wore a 40s-style suit of European design, and clicked his booted heels together when Mustang handed him a glass. Confined within the body of Georg Schiller, the girl had shared the final two years of the German campaign with the Field Marshal, and it had taken a number of visits to Boleskine for him to grasp the truth. He hugged Mustang like a daughter, kissing her forehead affectionately.

One glass remained unclaimed as the gathering prepared to offer a holiday toast.

“Who’s missing?” asked White.

Mustang responded, “Turn around.”

Framed in the doorway, laugh lines etched deeply around his eyes and mouth, Lyndon Horatio Bixby beamed at his son.

IV

“He’s alive,” gulped White.

Mustang countered, “He’s here.”

“You stole the journal off my night stand...”

“Yes.”

He kissed her ear. “Thanks.”

Two strides brought the men together, and they wrapped each other in a long overdue bear hug.

To give them a modicum of privacy, Mustang raised her glass toward the historic guests. “Gandhiji, will you begin?”

The Father of India inclined his bald head. “To peace.”

“To wisdom,” added Rommel.

Twain chimed in, “To knowledge.”

“To hope,” came Francis’ wish.

All eyes fell on the practically identical father and son, afraid to let go of each other. With his free hand, Bixby accepted the last flute. “To family.”

White murmured, “To Mustang, with deepest gratitude.”

Though she would have preferred to choose another tribute, the young woman could not deny facts. In hushed tones, she uttered, “To Jack Parsons, my grandfather, without whom none of this would have transpired.”

They drained the liquid, and threw their glasses onto the fireplace grate, laughing. Mustang waved them toward the door. “Dinner is served.”

Lyndon Bixby offered her his arm. “I owe you an eternal debt,” he whispered.

“You owe me nothing, except to have a good time with your son.”

Reaching the dining room, she directed the men to their places, then slipped into the kitchen. Not having servants meant numerous trips to hurriedly deliver endless bowls and plates, then take her place at the head of the table. Not one for prayers, she lifted her fork, to be halted by Twain loudly clearing his throat.

“Mr. Clemens?” she acknowledged.

“If I may, a short poem?”

“Certainly.”

Twain rose, stuffing his hands in his trouser pockets. “We herald from the past, yet feel at home around this festive table, friends sharing a quiet day of joy. Let us eat, drink and revel in good company, while our lives continue to inspire those who came after.”

Wine glasses were raised in salute as the renowned author resumed his place. Mustang passed Bixby the carving knife, though he attempted to refuse. “I’ve never...”

“It’s a father’s privilege,” she retorted, squeezing White’s hand on her left.

Thick slices of meat were shaved off the turkey’s bones, and placed on each plate in turn. Gandhi, being vegetarian, declined this treat, spooning massive quantities of potatoes, corn and beans from their bowls.

“You are an excellent cook, my dear,” praised Rommel between bites. “Had I known this during the war, I would’ve made you my personal chef.”

“I never spent much time in the kitchen, until I moved here,” Mustang admitted. “My mother handled those duties at home.”

Gandhi interspersed, “But, you told me modern American women have jobs outside the home, and are treated as the equals of men.”

“They are, Gandhiji. Some *choose* to be housewives and care for their husbands and children full time. That does not diminish their value.”

“Women’s liberation,” Twain chortled. “It started in my day, with females wanting the vote.”

The animated discussion continued from there, until every dish had been cleaned of the last crumb. Unlike family dinners in Montana, not a voice was raised in anger, whether the topic was politics or religion.

“Providing a supreme deity with human qualities defeats the purpose of worship,” declared Twain at one point. “How could such an entity be truly partial to one culture or another? When the North fought the South, each cried, ‘God is on our side,’ which has been a justification for many wars. If ‘God is Love,’ as the gospels purport, how can he love some more than others?”

Francis' dignified objection riveted those present. "It's all in the interpretation, Sam. The human mind is fallible, and sees only what fits into its own limited perspective. To take the gospels literally was impossible, even in my day. You can count on one hand how many people through the centuries have stripped off their clothes, sold their possessions and given to the poor, trusting entirely in God's providence. Most want someone on whom to dump their problems, the rest of the time keeping tight personal control over their wealth, possessions and lives. God is what God is; humans are the problem. Until they reach enlightenment, there will continue to be wars."

"Your wisdom rivals Mustang-ji," commented Gandhi.

"Where do you think I learned so much?" their hostess confessed, appearing with two pies balanced on open palms. "Each of you has taught me invaluable lessons, some of which I haven't always heeded."

"None of us can claim to be perfect," Rommel affirmed. "We tried to better the world, limited by the framework of our culture and age."

"My question has to be: when will human beings finally catch on they're merely mice running in a wheel, making the same mistakes generation after generation?" queried White.

"I've been waiting 800 years," Francis replied.

Mustang interrupted, "Coffee, anyone?"

"I'll go," offered Bixby.

"I'll get the cream and sugar."

The two alone in the kitchen, Bixby hovered near the coffee pot, staring at her. "My son's in love with you, you know."

"Yes."

"You've given him one gift today; are you going to deny him the other?"

"I have the same reason to steer clear of intimacy as you did. Ask him about the earthquake when you talk later."

"How long can I stay?"

"As long as you like."

"We have so much catching up to do..."

"I ask just one favor: convince him to go back to school, and get a job in the States. If he decides to stay here with me... Let's face it: he'll end up very unhappy."

"If he's anything like me, his feelings stem from your kindness, and your... mystery. Now he has what he always wanted, he'll refocus those energies elsewhere."

"Good."

The subject of their conversation popped his head through the door. “What’s the hold up? There are thirsty men waiting!”

In lieu of football on television, Mustang cleared the dining room table after the meal, and broke out a deck of cards and poker chips. Twain’s cigar added to the ambiance, though Francis amassed the most winnings.

“I never would’ve thought,” Rommel grinned, “given you’re known as the ‘Little Poor Man’ in most biographies.”

“Before my conversion, I was quite a gaming enthusiast. We used dice most often, but gambling is gambling.”

Mustang said, “I should take you with me to Monte Carlo next time.”

Gandhi stretched and yawned. The mantle clock showed midnight. “This has been a delightful holiday, but I am old...”

“We must be going,” confirmed Rommel, rising.

Unnecessary to walk her guests to the door, Mustang kissed each in turn, with invitations for them to come again. White and Bixby shuddered when the four men abruptly vanished.

“Is that what...” the elder stuttered.

She assured him, “It’s not painful, or anything.”

“Maybe not, but it’s... like something from a horror movie.”

“Only if you were a vampire.” She stacked the china coffee cups and saucers. “I’ve got a load of dishes to wash. You two make yourself comfortable in the living room.”

“Would you have any beer in the fridge?”

“No, but there’s whiskey.”

“Where?” demanded White, licking his lips.

“I didn’t break it out, because I know Francis and Gandhi don’t drink.”

She led them into the kitchen, opening the pantry and extracting a sealed bottle of Jameson Limited Reserve. “I picked this up in Ireland a couple years ago.”

“Will you join us in a glass?” Bixby invited.

“Too much to do.”

She shoed them from the room, and spun the faucet handle, squirting blue dish soap into the stream.

Exhaustion overwhelmed her before the last pot was stacked on the drain board. Shuffling across the main hall, she peeked into the living room, where the men rested side by side on the sofa, feet propped on the coffee table, deep in conversation, the open journal on Bixby’s lap.

Nothing had changed when Mustang awoke six hours later. She brought a breakfast of toasted English muffins, jam, juice and coffee on a tray, setting it on the end table and silently retreating.

“Stay, please,” invited White.

She protested, “I... don’t want to intrude.”

“How can you intrude,” smirked Bixby in that sideways style she remembered so well. “It’s your house.” He snatched her hand and drew her forward. “We’ve got something to ask you.”

She plopped on the cushions between them, suspicious of their eerily similar intensity. “The answer may be no.”

“How can you say, when you don’t know the question?” speculated the younger.

“I can make a good guess. You want to stay here permanently, perhaps?”

Bixby shook his wavy brown head. “No.”

“You want me to loan you money?”

“Outrageous!”

The mood lightened somewhat, she relaxed. “Then, what?”

Bixby and White looked at each other, deciding who would speak. It fell to the father. “We want some time to... be father and son. Is it possible for us to go back to Boston together, and...”

Suddenly, Mustang regretted her deed. One aspect of returning the dead to their afterlife state involved their willingness to go. She’d learned as much with Francis, Twain and Gandhi. Had they resisted, her power would have been of no use. The human spirit is stronger than nature, in certain regards.

They had to see how their request would cause no end of trouble for them both. In tandem, they could override her rationale with their own logic. Singly, she might have a better chance.

“Don, you’ve been up for 24 hours. Why don’t you hit the sack, and we’ll talk this afternoon?” she suggested.

“What about you, Dad?” he ventured. “Don’t you need some sleep?”

“I’m wide awake, thanks.”

Mustang straightened. “I was thinking, you and I could take a ride.”

“Good idea.”

“Good night, then,” said White.

Wearing heavy sweaters and knit caps, Bixby and his hostess trod toward the stable. He selected the bay mare, while Mustang saddled the sorrel gelding.

Block lettering had been painted on each stall's lintel - her mount had been named "Sarge".

Fitting.

White had christened the roans Pietra, Molly and Wench. The bay whinnied at the sound of the name "Crystal".

Bixby had other topics on his mind. "You don't like our little proposal."

"I can't *make* you go back. There's a list of positives why you should stay - no more hypothalamus problems right at the top. You and Don deserve time to get to know each other, to enjoy what men enjoy as friends. Two negatives may outweigh the positives, though: what if the Feds were to get wind of you and arrest you?"

"Thinking I'm dead, they wouldn't be looking for me."

"Can you be so sure? Other criminals have faked their own deaths, only to resurface. A simple traffic stop could turn into a real fiasco..."

"What's the other negative?"

"You can't just board the plane with Don in Edinburgh. You have no passport. To get you to Boston, I'd have to..." She raised her palms toward him.

"Isn't there any way?"

"Don's here 'til New Year's. I'll arrange for a car to take you wherever you want to go - dinner, bars, golf, brothels, sightseeing, mountain climbing. Make it the best week ever, then let it rest."

They rode the perimeter while Bixby debated options. By 3:00 PM, a limousine idled on the drive. White had awoken and showered, packing his few belongings. Each embraced and kissed Mustang warmly before departing.

They would rejoin her on December 31 to ring in the New Year.

Not that they didn't celebrate to excess during their excursion. Five undisturbed days came to an end when she heard the raucous laughter through tinted Rolls-Royce windows. The chauffeur alighted, apologetically bowing to Mustang, who'd abandoned her reading of Greta and Rolf Steckling's latest mystery novel to investigate the noise.

"They've been drinking steadily since last night, Lady Elizabeth," explained the British driver. "A fight ensued, and they barely escaped before the constables arrived."

He opened the rear door, revealing Lyndon White with a mottled black eye and gash across his cheek, while his father's left arm dangled in a sling, fingers swollen and non-functional. He walked with a limp, as well, when he managed to slide off the leather seat.

Mustang mused if her relationship with her own father would have involved such incidents, had she been born male. At any rate, she had no intention of playing nursemaid to a pair of overgrown delinquents.

The chauffeur was paid in cash for his time, with a generous tip for his patience toward the passengers. The sleek vehicle steered along the snow-packed drive, before Mustang whirled on her guests.

“Inside, both of you!”

They hobbled to the living room, collapsing on the sofa. The young woman stood on the threshold, glaring.

“What happened?”

“Aw, Mustang, it was incredible!” drawled White. “We kicked ass!”

“Whose ass, and why?”

“There was this girl,” Bixby related. “Almost prettier than you. Upper crust, I think they call it in these parts. Wouldn’t look twice at my boy. We *made* her notice.”

“Sleep it off, you two. I never liked New Year’s Eve parties, anyway.”

White’s eyes had already closed, his breathing steady. Bixby struggled to his feet, his one good arm barely supporting him as he wavered from dizziness.

“Come to bed with me,” he urged, when Mustang rushed to prevent his fall.

“What, and listen to you snore?”

“Last time, you were jail bait. Now, you’re a woman...”

“Not as pretty as the one at the bar, though, huh?”

“Your beauty comes from within, like a beacon.”

“And you’re smashed. Time for you to go.”

Bixby pondered, “Do dead men get hangovers?”

“I don’t think so. In the morning, you and Don can say your good-byes...”

“We already did. He’s a good kid. He’ll do okay.”

“I agree. I’ll fill him with coffee and get him to Edinburgh in time for his plane, don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Mustang. Thanks, for everything.” Bixby seized her shoulders; her eyes met his smoldering brown orbs. “Funny, I had to die before I learned the meaning of life.”

“Some people don’t get that second chance.”

“Because they don’t know you.” His liquor-flavored lips fastened on hers briefly. “Will I see you again?”

“Next time we play poker.”

“It’s a date.”

He released her, and vanished.

Night fell before White roused himself. He stumbled into the kitchen, shirt half-buttoned, but injuries entirely healed. “Dad?”

“He’s gone.”

“Oh, right.”

“How’s your head?”

“Throbbing.”

“There’s aspirin in the bathroom.”

“Thanks.” He turned, then changed his mind. “Mustang...”

“A shower will help, too.”

“I’ll never forget these two weeks.”

“And you’ll never be able to tell anyone about them, either, unless you want to wind up in a padded cell.”

“I’ll write it in my journal, and pass it along to my sons one day.”

“What about the hereditary affliction?”

“Dad told me Granddad lied. It was entirely a genetic fluke. My kids would be a thousand times more likely to have allergies than an overactive hypothalamus.”

“I’m glad. Your future is filled with infinite possibilities.”

“Thanks to you.” His arms circled her waist. “Whenever the radar displays a weather anomaly, I’ll think of you.”

She didn’t spoil the moment by telling him no more would be forthcoming.

When she awoke the next morning, he’d already left.

It had taken three years, but she’d finally been able to make amends for letting Lyndon Bixby die. She watched the sunrise from her study window, her New Year’s resolution to ignore random trespassers and enjoy the solitude, with an occasional historic visitor to share a game of chess.