

The Mustang Chronicles:

Protective Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

If Mustang Duryea hated Montana winters of her youth, she was rapidly learning to hate the Scottish version, as well. This latest wind storm had knocked out the electricity yet again, leaving her huddled before the living room fireplace for the fifth straight day, wearing four layers of t-shirts, sweat shirts and sweaters, wrapped in three quilts, trying to stay warm.

Living in a remote area had advantages regarding solitude, but not when it came to public authorities restoring power quickly.

At least, it didn't matter the refrigerator wasn't functional. The cold snap meant she could store her perishable foods outdoors, tucked in an old trunk.

The last thing she expected with gale-force blasts rattling the windows was a knock on Boleskine House's front door.

Someone from Dores checking on her, no doubt, she mused.

Gaining a reputation as a kindly noblewoman had its drawbacks.

Not untying herself from her make-shift shawls, Mustang shuffled across the main hall before she remembered being barefoot. Deliberately, she stepped on a fold in one quilt to shield her toes from getting chilled when she cracked the door an inch.

To find a buxom woman in long, camel hair overcoat pacing on the stoop.

"May I help you?" Mustang almost shouted, just to be heard.

Did she detect a hint of Irish accent? "Lady Elizabeth?"

A necessary deception, being known in the region as Lady Elizabeth Neville. "Yes?"

"Your cousin Rachel advised me to call on you."

The door jerked wide, this visitor was unceremoniously yanked indoors. Mustang employed her full weight to force the panel closed once more. Exhausted from that effort alone, she panted, "Rachel? Is she all right?"

"She's fine. I'm not."

"If you've had car trouble and are stuck because of the storm..."

"No." The woman stepped into the light shining from the living room and folded down her collar. Mustang clearly saw massive bruises on her neck and left cheek. "Rachel thought you could protect me."

"Oh, hell..." On instinct, Mustang signaled her to shed the damp coat and draped quilts over the trembling shoulders. Together they settled on the green velvet sofa before the roaring fire. "How do you know Rachel?"

"We met at Trinity College in Dublin a few years ago. She left after one term, but I stayed and finished my degree."

“Why are you in Scotland?”

“I took the train from London.” She shuddered involuntarily, sticking out her right hand from the voluminous fabric. “I’m Kathleen Fitzwalter.”

Mustang accepted the gesture with a chuckle. “Would you like something to drink? Coffee, hot chocolate, tea?”

“Whiskey?”

By chance, the Mistress of Boleskine kept a bottle in the kitchen, and excused herself to fetch it and two glasses. The Jameson Limited Reserve poured, they drank together.

“So, you took the train from London...” prodded Mustang.

“I’ve been working there two years, on the Home Secretary’s staff. That is, until... this.”

“You were mugged on the Tube?”

“Nothing so random.”

“And probably more painful.” Her host refilled the tumbler. “Any broken bones?”

Kathleen gulped the 18 year old whiskey. “Fortunately, no.”

“A boyfriend?”

“A...”

“If I have any chance of helping you, you must tell me everything. I see *why* you need protection,” Mustang remarked. “I need to know from whom.”

Tawny hair drying in the flame-generated heat, Kathleen hung her head over the glass, straight tresses dangling over her eyes. “His name is Andre Desrosiers. He’s a... a...”

“Frenchman?”

“You being American, you’d call him a gangster?”

“Depends on what you mean by the word.”

“He’s... involved in illegal activities, including murder for hire.”

Had Kathleen’s voice not conveyed undeniable torment, Mustang would’ve believed herself the victim of an elaborate prank engineered by Rachel, her step-father Peter O’Donnell and even Thomas Burton. “That sums up the definition pretty well. How did you get involved with such a man?”

“We met in a West End pub last summer. He was celebrating Bastille Day, and I was with friends. I noticed him across the room - oh, Lord, if you ever see him, you’ll know what I mean when I say it was love at first sight. He’s not young - over 40, or even 50 - but his long hair and incredible body... I couldn’t refuse when he asked for a dance, and I moved into his apartment two weeks later.”

Mustang kept her comment of “stupid” to herself. “He has a... volatile temper?”

“I learned that after a month of ecstasy. One evening, I arrived home late from work, and he accused me of seeing another man...”

“He beat you?”

Kathleen nodded, tears streaming along her nose.

“But you stayed with him?”

“I couldn’t leave. He hunted me like a wild animal, and dragged me back... Each time, the abuse grew more...”

“How did you escape?”

“The police have been investigating Andre’s operations recently, and getting too close to the source. He and his... associates scheduled a meeting last night near the docks, and as soon as I was certain he wasn’t coming back unexpectedly, I limped to Victoria Station and bought a ticket on the first train out of the city.”

“You think he knows where you were headed?”

“He’ll know soon enough. He always manages to find me.”

“Not here, he won’t.”

Quilts dropping on the floor, Kathleen rose. “No. I was wrong to put you in danger this way...”

Mustang seized her arm. “Sit down. You’re safer here than you can imagine. Rachel knew what she was doing when she told you to come.”

“You’re just a kid. What can you do?”

“You’d be surprised.” Mustang relieved Kathleen of her glass, and covered her legs with the quilts. “Keep yourself warm. I’ll get some pillows and sheets, and you can sleep right here on the couch.”

“I... am tired.”

In fact, the woman was dozing before Mustang toted a stack of bedding from the linen closet into the living room. She did her best to cover Kathleen sufficiently, stoked the fire with more logs, and settled in her cane-backed rocker to consider options.

Torching this abusive Frenchman - like the trees she had reduced to ashes when first she tested the power inherited from occultist Jack Parsons - would be suitable, despite studies proving such personalities could be successfully treated with psychological therapies. His activities outside the law negated any respect she might have nurtured for him as a misguided individual.

The tendency toward physical violence might be part heredity and part learned behavior, but a conscious choice existed behind any criminal act.

She would not offer him the opportunity to explain his actions, as she once had Wilfrid Bailey, or the cancer-ridden Abbondio Carneficina. If Andre Desrosiers set foot on her property, he would meet an ignoble death.

Most likely, he would be unable to trace Kathleen's route north from London, and let her go, Mustang rationalized.

Immediately telling herself not to be naive, or underestimate the enemy.

A man so possessive of "his woman" might well have some subordinate constantly shadowing her movements through the day. The report of her whereabouts may already have been phoned back to the British capital.

Which meant serious trouble could be brewing by daylight.

Making Mustang wonder why Rachel had advised her friend so, instead of directing her to the authorities, or a shelter.

Further puzzling her about the connection between the two.

She hadn't heard from Rachel Duryea since the funeral nearly four years previous. Word from her cousin's step-father assured Mustang of her good health and happiness, but they were unaware of this relocation to Scotland...

The whole situation might be a ruse, after all.

Kathleen moaned and stretched after two hours slumbering on the sofa. Righting herself on the cushions, she instantly reached toward the coffee table for the whiskey bottle.

Mustang intercepted the motion. "Before you drown your sorrows any further, I need to know about this conversation you had with Rachel..."

"She called my cell phone, actually, while I was standing on the platform at Victoria," muttered Kathleen. "Told me she had a vision of you and I together, standing on Loch Ness' eastern shore, bathed in sunset hues. When I explained what had happened, she bid me make haste to your side."

A haze of doubt dispersed for Mustang with that narrative. Rachel's visions tortured her as much as Mustang's own power proved a source of personal aggravation. Staring into the fire, she didn't see Kathleen fill her tumbler and drain it in one gulp.

Mustang's uninvited guest sprawled on the floor fifteen minutes later, passed out from the liquor.

The fifth of Jameson lay empty beside her.

She and Thomas Burton would get along well together, Mustang smirked wryly, heavy drinkers - if not blatant alcoholics - going shot for shot at the local pub.

The table lamp flickered, then plunged her back into the afternoon's grey gloom. The coloring matched her mood. She would've rather been out in the

barn, tending her horses, instead of stuck in the house. Being shielded from the winds and icy rain by sturdy walls, with plentiful supplies of oats and water, they would be restless, but no worse for the chilly temperatures. Still, Mustang thrived on her daily rides around the 47-acre estate, and nursed a gaping void in her soul at this break in her routine.

A void not readily filled by Kathleen's presence. Each time Mustang interacted with other human beings, horrible events transpired. Her impulsive nature and reckless attempts to avoid trouble always triggered dire consequences. Forced into seclusion by the FBI, she yearned for nothing more than privacy.

People inevitably managed to interfere with her seclusion, however, and disrupt her tranquility.

Kathleen stirred. Frustrated, Mustang bent to retrieve the bottle. If the woman wanted more alcohol, she'd have to hike into Dores and buy some at the village store. A shot or two enabling relaxation was one thing. Drinking oneself into oblivion was quite another.

And Kathleen's sobriety would be essential to rebuilding her life after this calamitous relationship.

Mustang didn't count, however, on the desperate cravings of an addictive personality.

She'd retired to her bedroom when it appeared Kathleen wouldn't wake until morning. A fire roaring on that grate dispelled the chill, and cuddling beneath a stack of blankets insulated her further. Hearing vehement expletives drifting from the kitchen roused her, nonetheless.

"Where's the damned whiskey?" grumbled the woman, slamming cupboard after cupboard in her search.

"We're out."

"Impossible!"

"This isn't a bar, Kathleen. I only had that bottle because I bought it in Dublin..."

"Well, get in your car and drive to town for more!"

Mustang rolled her eyes. "No can do. I don't own a car, and the shops in the village are closed at this hour."

Kathleen sank on a chair, despondent. "You don't know how badly I need a drink..."

"I know you don't *need* a drink, you just think you do."

"Alcoholism is a disease..."

"You admit you're..."

"Until I met Andre, I hadn't touched a drop since leaving Trinity. I..."

“As long as you’re here, you won’t touch another drop. You need your wits about you, if you’re going to make a fresh start.”

The despair in Kathleen’s Irish-tinged voice tore at Mustang’s resolve. “A fresh start? You’ve got to be kidding. I’ve no job, no money...”

“That’s the best time to do it.” Recollections of her reason to start fresh - the death of Jim Neville - confirmed this philosophy. “You have nothing more to lose.”

“If Andre finds me, we could both lose our lives.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Are you so sure?”

“Sure he won’t find you, no. Sure he won’t do us any harm, yes.”

“You good with a gun?” challenged Kathleen.

“Weapons won’t play a factor in the solution to this dilemma. There are other... non-violent means to handle any confrontation.” Mustang bit her lip to avoid laughing aloud, the statement reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi.

Sweat beaded on her brow, Kathleen countered, “I hope you have strong locks on the doors and windows.”

“Better. Inescapable booby-traps.”

“But, there’s no electricity...”

Too tired to enumerate the nocturnal defenses her power enforced around the property, Mustang merely smiled.

II

Wind velocity diminished and the sleet ended, Mustang finally dozed in the wee hours. Terrified shrieks jarred her permanently awake. Given their volume, audible above the howling winds, the intruder had to be close to the house - and male.

Come dawn, whether or not the sun was visible, she would investigate. Until then, anyone foolish enough to roam the Scottish countryside in this weather risked life and limb, and welcome.

“That’s not Andre,” declared Kathleen, a blanket tied toga-like over her purple turtleneck and black wool slacks, viewing the unconscious body prone on the grass from the kitchen window as she shook cereal into a bowl. “It’s no one I know, for that matter.”

Peering past her guest’s drawn countenance, Mustang didn’t recognize the man, either. He must’ve walked the drive from the main road, since no vehicle was parked nearby. An off-season tourist disoriented by the storm?

Loathe to venture into the freezing, murky morning, the Mistress of Boleskine tugged on sneakers and her parka, slipping out the back door. Kathleen observed the scene from her vantage point, and saw the holster and pistol revealed when Mustang threw open the muddy, wet jacket searching for identification.

“When - or if - he comes to, we’re not home,” stated the American upon returning indoors, toweling dry her long black mane. “We’ll be safe in my study, behind a steel door and three dead bolts.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s carrying a badge, but it’s fake, from what I can tell. Maybe a private detective hired by your friend...”

“He wouldn’t waste the money...”

Mustang snorted. “If he thinks you know too much about his operations, he’ll spend a small fortune preventing you from turning him in to police - like in the old movies.”

“I know he takes a cut from an opium smuggling ring, and does a bit of counterfeiting, besides the contracts from... influential party members.”

“You mean, politicians wanting their... opponents out of the way?”

Kathleen shrugged.

No sense in asking why she stayed with such a low-life, Mustang decided. Drinking to smother her anguish, Kathleen had descended into a pit of despair...

Except for the alcohol component, she’d been there, herself, numerous times since meeting Jack Parsons. Seeing death first-hand ate at her soul; being the cause of such deaths through her own ignorance redoubled the inner agony.

She grabbed a glass of orange juice and strode to the study. Kathleen didn’t immediately follow. Retracing her steps, Mustang glimpsed her visitor studying a rather distorted reflection in the stainless steel refrigerator door.

“What... happened to my bruises?” muttered Kathleen.

“Like all injuries, they healed.”

“In a *day*?”

“Some people heal faster than others,” Mustang noted.

“Not me. The last time Andre hit me, I couldn’t go out for two weeks, my skin was so discolored.”

Having no intention of admitting her power to heal or call upon nature, Mustang gently urged Kathleen from the room, just as a rock shattered the kitchen window.

The glass pane repaired itself so quickly, Kathleen believed the noise had been a figment of her imagination.

Except, the rock lay on the tile, encased in ice.

“What the...”

Mustang jerked Kathleen’s arm. “Come on!”

“But...”

“Whoever he is, he now knows we’re here. If you want my protection, get moving!”

Barricaded in the study for an hour, Kathleen prowled nervously, a caged tigress . “Why is it so hot in here?”

Wishing to tune her ears to the slightest unfamiliar sound, Mustang rushed an answer. “Could be the fireplaces on either side of these walls, or you could be sweating the alcohol out of your system.” So much for what she learned in high school health class.

No more did her words fall silent, she heard the unusual.

A synthesized *Anvil Chorus* - a cell phone’s ring tone.

“Our friend is talking to London, no doubt,” she theorized. “By nightfall, if the roads aren’t iced over, the fun should begin.”

Kathleen, perspiration beaded on her temples, protested, “It won’t be fun, and you know it. They’ll make this house look like Swiss cheese and, if we don’t surrender, they’ll burn it to the ground.”

“Rachel promised I’d protect you, and I will. You’ve got to trust me.”

“I...”

“Sit, calm yourself. Better yet, get some sleep.”

“I’m too tense to sleep.”

“Then, read a book or meditate, but be quiet. To better spoil their plans, I have to listen to their movements.”

Her brow furrowed in puzzlement, Kathleen sank on the love seat and stared at Mustang, who concentrated so completely on external activities, she didn’t notice the blue eyes upon her.

Much sooner than predicted, heavy tires crunched gravel under their tread. Perhaps the original intruder’s signal hadn’t been transmitted to London, as she thought, but to parties miles closer.

They’d have to hoof it the remainder of the distance to the house, anyway, after Mustang cracked all four valve stems simultaneously.

Subsequent vociferous cursing by three thickly-accented baritones confirmed the group’s displeasure.

“Do you recognize those voices?” she queried.

Kathleen straightened. “The one speaking French is Andre.”

“What about the others?”

“Could be any of his crew. He keeps as many as eight guys at hand for different... projects.”

“Stay here.”

When Mustang crossed to unlock the door, Kathleen blocked her path, despite violent tremors. “You can’t go out there! He’ll kill you!”

“Many have tried. No one’s succeeded to date.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I’ve known that for years.” Gripping Kathleen’s arms firmly, Mustang maneuvered her back to the love seat. “Don’t say a word, or move a muscle. Keep the door locked, whatever you hear.”

“I can’t... sit here...”

“You *must*. Promise me.”

Defeated, Kathleen sighed. “Okay.”

Mustang exited the study to witness Andre Desrosiers framed in mist-blurred afternoon light. One of his associates had picked the deadbolt on the front door, and the towering, shadowy figure scrutinized Boleskine’s interior cautiously.

“There may be more traps,” remarked a second shadow, who might have been a former barroom bouncer, given his size and shape.

Desrosiers drawled with undeniable Norman inflection, “I don’t see any security cameras, or infrared beam generators. We will be safe within these walls.”

“Think again, buddy,” countered Mustang.

The trio could not see her in the recesses of the main hall, the unpowered dimness working to her advantage.

Two underlings drew their pistols from beneath expensive trench coats.

“Step into the light,” ordered a slick Spaniard, considering his pronunciation.

Mustang chortled, “What light?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know you’re a dork.”

Desrosiers consulted his team. “Dork?”

“Asshole, Boss,” the bouncer supplied.

“Ah!” Andre sauntered further into the dwelling, his men in tight formation, they might’ve collided with him had he suddenly halted.

The front door slammed shut - a phenomenon which might have been caused hours earlier by the storm, but not now. The ruffians crashed into each other, unable to conceal their fright. Mustang roared with laughter.

“*Madre di Dios!* This place is haunted!” sputtered the Spaniard.

Andre mocked, "You and your superstitions. Haven't I proven a gun is more powerful than any ghost?"

"I'm no ghost," Mustang proclaimed. She'd always enjoyed toying with fools, at the same time grasping how easily she could lose focus and wreak irreparable havoc. Still, her grin felt like it might split her face in half.

The acknowledgment itself might have jinxed her.

A .357 Magnum wedged above her right ear shattered her confidence.

"She's flesh and blood, Boss," announced the half-frozen thug who'd been first to arrive at the estate.

He'd undoubtedly sneaked through the kitchen door, Mustang surmised.

And, despite his bulk, moved with the stealth of a cougar ambushing its prey

"My compliments," grumbled his prisoner.

Desrosiers strolled toward her, his breath radiating as puffs of steam.

Long, tapered fingers drew a cigarette from a silver case. "You like living at the North Pole?"

Mustang gazed up at him - taller than any man she'd before met. "Light that at your own peril," she warned.

"Moments from your own death, you threaten me?" His left eyebrow arched above stylish oval sunglasses, and his bushy dark mustache twitched slightly as he flicked the cover on his monogrammed lighter.

A butane flame shot to the ceiling, and Desrosiers dropped the contents of both hands, recoiling. Before they hit the polished wood floor, the items had transformed to dust.

It required a few seconds for the French ganglord to recover his composure. Then, he adjusted his green silk tie and pinstriped designer suit coat, and ran a small comb through his shoulder-length hair.

"Shoot her," he commanded. "Then, find Kathleen."

Anticipating Mustang would beg or cower proved, in the young woman's mind, he hadn't dealt frequently with independent females. Still, he couldn't anticipate the pistol would not fire, bullets fused solid in the chamber.

Her captor fiddled with the trigger, releasing his grip on her to examine the weapon more thoroughly.

Annoyed, Desrosiers shoved the hoodlum into the wall, his own Colt revolver pointed squarely at Mustang's forehead. At this point-blank range, she could see the mole embedded in a crevice to the left of his sloping nose.

"Why are you smiling?" he growled.

"Because you don't want to see what'll happen if I get ticked."

“I am the one to be angry. The woman to whom I have pledged my heart fled our home, taking valuables which were not her rightful possessions.” The warm metal barrel - from being nestled in a holster beside his ribcage, no doubt - pressed against Mustang’s skin. “If you tell me where she is, I may spare your life.”

“Tell me the truth, first. How you made her a prisoner, beat her and drove her to desperation.”

Desrosiers gloated, “You *have* seen her, then.”

“You *did* lie.”

“No. She took thousands of pounds from my safe, and papers...”

“Which the police might find... interesting?”

“I do not fear the police. My organization is well... insured.”

“Not well enough.”

The shot startled Mustang. The hole in the paneling could be easily repaired, but the gesture testified to Desrosiers’ escalating rage.

She should have held her tongue.

She never learned.

At a word, the Spaniard’s knees collapsed involuntarily, and he landed prostrate, only deft reflexes preventing his skull from cracking on impact.

Desrosiers whipped around, suspecting other adversaries present. He saw no one.

“Another trap!” shouted the bouncer, retreating toward the door.

Mustang chuckled; before she could escape, the Frenchman leveled his weapon at her once more, without even bothering to look at his target.

“She is playing a game with us, Harry,” Desrosiers scoffed. “Make it clear to her how much I despise games.”

In quavering tones, Harry the former bouncer repeated his superior’s statement.

The Spaniard echoed this sentiment, garbled by the way his lips were glued to the floor.

“If this was a game,” corrected Mustang, “we’d be having a lot more fun.”

“Your idea of fun and mine... differ,” Desrosiers remarked. “Seeing my enemies dead - that, for me, is fun. Knowing a business... deal has been successfully transacted gives me great pleasure.”

“You’re a warped soul.”

“And you are a dead one.”

Her smile returned. “Not for a long, long time.”

The ground began rumbling beneath their feet, and errant electrical currents caused the candle-shaped sconces to flash eerily. Desrosiers remained unfazed by the spectacle, disdainful when his companions scrambled from the building like rabbits.

“Hard to keep good help these days,” snickered Mustang.

The bullet would have pierced her heart had she not reacted instinctively.

Andre Desrosiers didn't stop to contemplate the misshapen lead pellet rolling near his feet; Mustang felt the full force of his blow across her cheek, propelled off-balance into the living room.

“Your Honor, is this any way for an innocent bystander to be treated?” she steamed, clutching the cane-backed rocker.

An attacking bear, Desrosiers pursued her across the threshold, halting at the sight of a fully-appointed courtroom, bewigged judge at the maple bench, and jury of twelve seated in the box.

Two stout bailiffs grabbed Desrosiers by the arms and thrust him into the defendant's dock. “What the hell...” he shouted in French.

A clerk, strangely translucent in the grey natural light, read a list of charges including murder, extortion, bribery, money laundering, counterfeiting and drug trafficking.

The robed barrister began opening statements, facts known to only Desrosiers and a few select confidants, extracted from the felon's own memory and presented for all to hear.

Mustang wore a contented smile as she studied his expressive countenance alternately cloud with confusion, then twitch with indignation.

He nearly fainted when the first witness appeared to be sworn. “How can a dead man testify?” he bellowed.

The barrister whirled toward him. “Then, you admit killing this man?”

“I never touched him! He was a street-corner bully who tried to muscle in on our action around Regent's Park. The cocaine he sold was cut with arsenic. Five teenagers died, and the cops tried to blame me...”

The judge interspersed, “So, you see your actions in... eliminating this individual as a service to society?”

“I didn't eliminate him. I don't know who did.”

“But, you ordered the deed,” pressed the barrister.

Desrosiers blanched. “I... take the fifth.”

“This isn't America,” chuckled Mustang. “You should have kept your mouth shut.”

III

Head drooping, hair dangling over his face, Andre Desrosiers clutched the dock banister, knuckles white. A brain accustomed to devising elaborate schemes searched frantically for a tactic to secure his release.

Blue-grey eyes glimpsed Mustang's pleased smirk across the transformed living room. "This is your doing! You set me up!"

"You set yourself up, for a huge fall," she countered. "You'll be sentenced by a jury of your peers, and live the rest of your days a prisoner of your own stupidity."

Witnesses had continued responding to the barrister's questions, as if Mustang and Desrosiers were not present. Tales of heroin overdoses, midnight stabbings, tabloid exposure of politicians' misdeeds for failing to pay the required blackmail, drownings in the Thames River, and one man's throat slit while he slept beside his wife - as he spoke, the mutilated flesh on his neck repugnantly vibrated - might have made for an engrossing television series.

"You're a warped soul," repeated Mustang, after listening to snippets of testimony. "How do you not go insane with guilt?"

"Guilt is a creation of government and religious bodies to cow the masses into submission," Desrosiers asserted. "Those free to follow their own instincts suffer no such affliction."

"You sleep well at night?"

"Like a child."

"Even after corrupting your sons?"

"What do you know of my sons?" stormed the Frenchman.

"Consider the jury."

Desrosiers squinted at the dozen men and women crowded within the wooden enclosure. Mustang thought briefly, given the veins bulging in his temples, he might collapse from a stroke.

"The jury is tainted!" he thundered. "How can they hand down an impartial verdict when I know every one of them?"

"Silence!" barked the judge. "Or you will be removed from this chamber."

The defendant ignored the order, and leveled his gaze on Mustang. "What are you doing to me, woman? How is this possible?"

"You made it possible, with every bad decision."

"I cannot be blamed for what I am!"

“Yes, you can. You have superior mental capacity, and a cleverness unlike most. You could have done anything with your life, been anything...”

“Circumstances did not allow...”

“Bull.”

“As a boy in Paris, it was not difficult to... find the wrong crowd and fast money,” Desrosiers confessed.

“It’s not difficult anywhere.”

“Ah, *oui*.”

“Why’d you need the money?”

“Before I was born, my mother served as secretary to the British Ambassador. When the diplomats learned of her pregnancy *sans* marriage, they discharged her. My father abandoned her, and she eventually became a *putain* - a prostitute - to support me.”

“Why didn’t she return to England?” persisted Mustang.

“My father was French, and she always believed he would return, so she waited.”

“But, he never did.”

“*Non*. By my tenth birthday, I had left school, delivering newspapers and stocking shelves for a grocer in our neighborhood to earn a few francs to help her buy food and pay rent. I saw... street life at its basest level.”

“Then, you should have worked to improve your lot.”

“By the time I was twenty, I had sired two sons... those two.” Desrosiers pointed to the lanky young men in the jury’s front row. “I had no skills for legitimate employment, yet I felt obligated to support them, so I...” He raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

“A poor excuse. And this is the result.”

He grasped at straws to rationalize the scene. “Is this some twisted *Christmas Carol*, and you expect me to reform my ways?”

“No, it’s *Goldfinger*, and I expect you to die.”

“Damn you!”

Both Desrosiers and Mustang turned toward the door at this feminine invective.

Kathleen stood - pale, fidgeting and unmistakably livid - watching the debacle.

To whom her curse had been directed, neither Mustang nor Desrosiers could determine.

“I heard a gunshot and thought you were dead, and they were gone,” she stammered. “What is this kangaroo court?”

Desrosiers' revolver flashed from its holster. Mustang had forgotten he was armed, and uttered the order through grit teeth. The weapon flew from his grip, landing in the corner. "The jury foreman is announcing their decision," she stated.

Desrosiers' younger son rose and proclaimed, "We find the defendant guilty of all charges."

"And the sentence?" urged the judge.

"Death."

"*Non, non!*" Desrosiers screamed, frantically scrambling over the dock rail, unsuccessfully restrained by the guards. "Jacques, Michel, how can you do this to your own father?"

The vision faded as the Frenchman rushed toward the jury box, tripping instead over the green sofa. He landed on the floor at Mustang's feet.

"It... was not real?" he babbled.

"It will be very real, in the very near future. I promise you that."

"So long as Kathleen does not go to the police with those papers..."

"Don't you think I would've already gone to the police, if that was my intention?" whined Kathleen. "I just want you out of my life!"

"Then, return what you stole, and I will leave."

"I took nothing. More than likely, those boys you trust so much raided the safe after they discovered I was gone, and made me the scapegoat."

Desrosiers glanced from Kathleen to Mustang.

"Don't look at me," remarked the latter. "If your business associates aren't dependable, it's your own fault."

"They will die..."

"What, more violence? What does it prove? Did leaving Kathleen bruised and hurting make her love you?"

He climbed to his feet and scrutinized Kathleen. "I see no bruises."

"They... healed," she said.

"In two days? Why do you feel you must lie to me? You know I did not hurt you!"

Mustang intervened, "I *saw* the bruises."

"And you are responsible for making them vanish?" barked Desrosiers.

"Like you did this... courtroom?"

She stood, impassive.

"Well, try and heal this!" His right hand reared back, but before he could strike the blow, his skin began to shrivel, and he screeched in pain.

She left him to think about the past two hours, escorting Kathleen into the main hall. "I'm sorry about all this. I wanted to teach him a lesson, but he's not the type who's willing to learn. Go and get showered. You'll feel better."

"Then, what?"

"Then, you've got to make a few decisions. You need to live on your own terms, demanding the respect you deserve from others. If you've never seen the movie *The Shootist*, find a copy and watch it some time. John Wayne's character is very clear when Ron Howard asks his rules for living: 'I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, and I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people and I expect the same from them.' Good advice."

"The very rules I have adopted," Desrosiers mocked from the doorway.

"Except respect doesn't enter into your philosophy," retorted Mustang. "If it did, you wouldn't be on the wrong side of the law. All you care about is lining your own pockets."

"No differently than 99 percent of the world's population."

"Then, that 99 percent is wrong."

Finally, after six days, the electricity flickered to life once more. The trio blinked against the abrupt, harsh glare from the sconces, never switched off when the outage began. Warm air blowing through the floor vents thawed Mustang's nose and ears.

Desrosiers reasoned, "My business is... lucrative, and not as volatile as the housing market or manufacturing."

"Because addicts will never stop craving their next fix?"

"*Oui*." He slipped his arm around Kathleen's shoulders. "Like this beautiful woman pours glass after glass of wine."

"Or whiskey," chuckled Mustang.

Kathleen vowed, "No more!"

"Wait until dinner," Desrosiers prophesied. "When I open a bottle of Chardonnay, you will not refuse a drink."

"Except, there's no wine in the house," announced Mustang.

"What? I thought all Scots..."

"That's where you're mistaken. I'm not Scottish."

Desrosiers scrutinized her countenance. "You have the rudeness of many Scots, and yet... that horrible accent is missing. You are..."

"American."

"I should have guessed. You are a professional illusionist, retired from the stage?"

Mustang's description didn't strike her as problematic until after the fact. "You might say I'm a fugitive from injustice."

"Like myself." Desrosiers' eyes twinkled. "Of what would a jury find you guilty?"

"Excessive impulsiveness, and having... the wrong ancestors."

"What do you mean?" asked Kathleen.

"I tend to stick my nose where it doesn't belong." Mustang moved toward the kitchen. "Like now."

"Where are you going?" Desrosiers snarled.

"To bring in the food."

Kathleen volunteered, "Could you use some help?"

"Sure." Mustang paused. "Bring him along. A little physical labor won't damage his manicure. Then, we can check on the horses."

"Horses?" gulped the gangster.

"What did you think I keep in that bright red barn? My collection of antique cars?"

"He's never spent any time outside the city," Kathleen supplied. "Farm animals are an unknown quantity."

"What about you?" wondered Mustang.

"I lived near Salisbury when I was a teenager. Gorgeous country."

The mention of this English town made their hostess smile.

"You've been there?" prodded Kathleen.

"No, but I knew someone..."

"Really? I was acquainted with most of the families. Who was it?"

"He was... before your time." Mustang propped the kitchen door open with a split log from the wood pile. "Come on." Remembering James Michael of Salisbury, who she'd accidentally manifested via a Cal Tech time machine after Jim Neville's untimely death, resurrected an unwelcome ache, because those two events were so closely linked.

Desrosiers refused. "I have not carried parcels since I was 12."

"If you did it then, you can do it now."

"*Non*. It is demeaning."

"Stop it, Andre," chided Kathleen, passing him a bag of apples from the sturdy trunk. "Running legitimate errands is less demeaning than distributing cocaine."

Mustang grabbed two partially frozen gallons of milk. "And less dangerous."

"The danger... makes it more invigorating," beamed Desrosiers.

“You’re a bigger fool than I. I’ve inadvertently walked into a mess of situations I couldn’t handle. I’ve seen men die, and been inches from death myself too many times in the past few years - like with your gun aimed at my head earlier - and I don’t find it the least bit invigorating.”

The refrigerator thermostat set and the shelves loaded, the women leaned against the counter, sipping glasses of orange juice.

Desrosiers eyed them with displeasure.

“What?” Mustang puzzled.

“You are... capable of mind-bending feats, yet you hide here in the wilderness, and encourage other naive souls to abandon their lives of luxury and comfort for... what? Loneliness and insanity?”

“Peace and quiet.”

“Luxury and comfort don’t compensate for broken bones and constant suspicion!” added Kathleen.

“If anyone was suspicious, it was you!” Desrosiers spat.

“I didn’t have you followed through the London streets...”

“You had no need. I was faithful to you.”

“And I wasn’t?”

Mustang had reached the end of her patience with the pair. She laid a hand on Desrosiers’ rock-hard chest. “You’ve got ten seconds to get the hell out of my house.”

“Or you will do what?” he challenged, brushing aside her fingers.

Though his own victims had ordered his demise, and her mistakes had indirectly caused the deaths of Lyndon Bixby, Wilfrid Bailey and Rick Shimoto, Mustang had never purposely ended the life of another. She was sorely tempted in that instant.

“Look out the window,” she instructed.

Desrosiers could barely distinguish his men, fumbling with a jack and air pump as if reenacting a Three Stooges routine. The SUV’s engine explosion threw them into nearby underbrush, third degree burns on their hands and faces preventing them from howling in agony.

“*Mon Dieu!* You are a devil!”

Mustang restrained Kathleen as Desrosiers bolted out the door.

“What did he see?” asked the tawny haired guest.

“What I wanted him to see.”

Through the window, the pair observed the vehicle roll, driverless, along the winding drive, being chased by the four London thugs. Their laughter reverberated through every room.

“Do you think he’ll ever change?” Kathleen pondered, catching her breath.

“His chosen lifestyle is too ingrained. In some ways, he’s an addict, his drugs the money and the illusion of power. He won’t be returning here, though, because he fears the unknown, as do many people.”

“How is it you know so much, at such a young age?”

“Unfortunate and unwanted experience.”

Kathleen shuddered. “I’m surprised you aren’t a raging alcoholic.”

“I’ve seen what drinking does to the mind and the soul. I need a clear head at all times, for very specific reasons.”

“Which are?”

Her hostess dodged the question. “Why don’t you start chopping some lettuce for a salad? I’m going to check those naughty boys are off the property and feed the horses. After dinner, we can both get a good night’s sleep.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It’s not good.”

“Cancer?”

“Nothing health-related.” Mustang snatched her parka off the coat rack and crossed the main hall. Kathleen stood at the kitchen door, waiting for her to continue. The near-inaudible statement confused her further: “At least, not *my* health.”

IV

Morning dawned bright and temperate, a welcome change from the recent stretch of freezing temperatures. Mustang had promised the horses she would exercise them at the first opportunity, and convinced Kathleen, drawn and haggard despite ten hours’ in bed and a hearty breakfast, to accompany her for a tour of the estate.

“I haven’t ridden since I was a kid,” she protested.

“They’re gentle, don’t worry.”

They saddled Sarge, the sorrel gelding, and Molly, one of three roans. A warm breeze tinged with wet heather delighted their noses as they mounted the grassy hillock where a pile of half-rotted wood marked the spot of Jack Parsons’ ceremonial altar - and death.

“What will you do, now you’re free of Andre Desrosiers?” queried Mustang, inhaling the Scottish air.

“I... don’t know.”

“You’d mentioned getting a job.”

“My... dismissal from the Home Secretary’s office may ruin my chances of securing a decent position ever again.”

“Why, what’d you do? Swear at the boss?”

Kathleen averted her gaze. “I showed up to work drunk, and with a black eye. The British are very strict about security in the government. Any sign an employee is... associating with undesirable elements, or those who might leak sensitive information to foreigners... Well...”

“So, it had nothing to do with job performance?”

“No.”

“Then, don’t concern yourself. I’ve faith you’ll find a job, and soon.”

“Where?”

“Wherever you want to live.”

“Not London,” sniffed Kathleen, a tear trickling down her cheek. “Never again, London.”

“Did you love it so much?”

“If you’ve never been, you can’t know.”

Mustang wasn’t about to recount the debacle at the British Museum, which led to a global chase worthy of a movie plot. Instead, she said, “I’ve heard the landmarks...”

“The landmarks are nothing. It’s the people. My father lived in London during World War II. He saw people killed by the German bombs, and others risking their lives to help children and women find safe shelter. When the situation is most dire, Londoners step up to aid each other. They have an enduring spirit unlike anywhere in the world.”

“Aren’t you... idealizing them a bit?”

“Not at all. You have to live among them day after day to really know them.”

“I’ve found, living with people day after day, their flaws drive you nuts.” Mustang had few fond memories of her mother and father, missing only the horses on the Montana ranch, and the vast acreage she’d wandered as a youth.

“I felt that way about Salisbury, especially in school. Perhaps, because young people are so...”

“Critical?”

They chuckled simultaneously.

Mustang steered Sarge down the hill toward the northern property line.

“Where are we going?” Kathleen inquired.

“To see a friend.”

“I’m... not in any condition.”

“You look fine. He has connections in these parts, and may know of some job openings.”

Kathleen’s eyes brightened. “You really think?”

“Trust me.”

“You *did* protect me, though not in the way I imagined.”

“With me, nothing’s ordinary.” Mustang added, spurring the horse to a canter, “But after, you have to run for your life.”

Glenn MacDonough’s ranch-style house appeared no worse for the storms, though the corral in which his own horses munched their oats would require fence repairs. Already, a crew was working on the huge barn door, which must’ve been blown off its rollers by gusting winds.

“Good morning, Lady Elizabeth!” the squat Scottish construction manager called, power drill in hand. “How fare ye?”

“Fine. Just fine.”

The two women dismounted and tied their reins to a slanted post. MacDonough joined them, his dress shirt soaked from exertion, fine wisps of hair matted to his wrinkled visage.

“Do you always ruin your business clothes with physical labor?” quipped Mustang.

“I dinnae ha’ plans t’ be working today. I was goin’ to my office, when I noticed the barn...”

One thing Mustang appreciated about this neighbor: he wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty, regardless of his managerial status.

“What can I do for ye?”

“Glenn, this is Kathleen Fitzwalter.”

The two shook hands.

“Are ye visitin’ Lady Elizabeth for a few days?”

“You could say that,” Kathleen replied.

Mustang clarified, “Actually, she’s recently moved from London, and is looking for work.”

“Ach, ’twill be difficult,” admitted MacDonough. “More companies ha’ gone into receivership in the last six months than in sixty years. No one is hirin’ in the north country.”

“Might we use your computer, then?”

“By all means.”

In an elegant den adjacent to MacDonough’s bedroom, a flat-panel monitor flashed to life while their host excused himself to continue the outdoor repairs. Mustang opened the internet browser and began typing search parameters.

“Why don’t you have a computer?” asked Kathleen.

“Because I hate them.”

“The same with television and phones?”

“No one I know would bother to call me, and news programs broadcast the worst of the day.”

“Not always.”

“I won’t dispute the point. Leave it that I enjoy what nature has to offer, more than human beings.”

Kathleen sneered, “When did you become such a pessimist?”

“By my eighth birthday, I think.”

“Sad.”

“Isn’t it?”

Having tried numerous searches and not liking the results, Mustang finally hit on useful information.

“Greta and Rolf Steckling?” Kathleen read on the flat screen.

“Friends.”

“The German authors?”

“Austrian, actually. We met... by chance.” Mustang spun the swivel chair toward Kathleen. “Have you a cell phone?”

“I... left it in London.”

“Then, we’ll use Glenn’s.”

“Shouldn’t you...”

“I’ll reimburse him for the charges.”

The country code and exchange punched into the handset, Mustang waited for the ringing to stop.

Rolf’s deep voice reached her ear in English. She responded, knowing he’d hear her in his native tongue.

“How are you and Greta?”

“Half-way through our next novel. We’re leaving for Hong Kong on Saturday to finish our research.”

“How would you like a secretary to keep things organized while you’re out of the country?”

Greta chimed in, obviously listening on the extension. “Since our books continue to increase in popularity, we’ve had trouble keeping up with the mail and the phone messages.”

“It’s amazing how many television producers ring us for interviews,” noted Rolf. “Our calendar is a mess.”

“We missed a date last week, because I couldn’t read Rolf’s scribble!”
Greta cackled.

“I know a marvelous woman who could maintain the clerical end, so you could write without having to worry about those annoying little details.”

“Does she have references?” prodded Rolf.

“A glowing recommendation from me.”

Greta, somewhat more practical, questioned, “Does she speak German?”

Mustang had been holding the phone away from her head, so Kathleen could hear. “*Jawohl*,” the prospective secretary confirmed.

“Any other languages?”

“French, Dutch...”

“Is she willing to learn more?” inquired Rolf.

“Sure.”

Arrangements were made to have Kathleen in Salzburg by Friday, giving her a minimum of time to familiarize herself with the routine before her employers departed for the East. Mustang ended the conversation with praises for the couple’s most recent mystery.

“Did you recognize yourself in the heroine?” Greta wondered.

“If only I could have such adventures in real life!”

“You will. You will.”

The connection broken, Mustang grinned openly at Kathleen, whose consternation could not be mistaken.

“What?” puzzled the young woman.

“How is it you have such influence over people, Lady Elizabeth?”

“They’re good people, and we... enjoyed an incredible cruise on the Mediterranean,” she searched her memory, “nearly two years ago.”

“That’s why they used you as a character in one of their stories?”

“How else do writers get their inspiration? From the people they encounter and places they visit.”

“How did you know they needed a secretary?”

“Greta and Rolf are very practical people. They do everything themselves. As their reputation has grown, and their books have been translated into other languages, the public aspects of their work have outpaced their energy.” Mustang guided Kathleen to the door. “Come on. We’ll tell Glenn about the phone call, then head home. There’s a lot to be done before Friday.”

“My clothes, for instance.”

“There are some fine shops in Inverness or, better, Edinburgh.”

“But, money?”

“Will 500 pounds be enough to outfit you?”

Kathleen gasped. “More... than enough.”

“Then, don’t worry. I’ll tell Glenn to contact the airline, also. One of his boys can give you a ride to the city...”

“What about you? Won’t you come with me?”

“Why? You don’t need my protection anymore.”

“I...”

Reaching the horses, Mustang patted Kathleen’s arm. “Wait here. I’ll be a minute.”

The guest of Boleskine House ogled a wad of bills Mustang passed to Glenn MacDonough while they chatted. The Scot, for his part, was unflustered by the munificence. He nodded his head, verifying the plans.

“It’s all set,” said Mustang, swinging into the saddle. “You’ll leave Thursday morning, spend the day shopping in Edinburgh, and fly out early Friday.”

“Where will I sleep Thursday night?”

“Glenn will reserve a room at the Howard Hotel Edinburgh. It’s his favorite place to stay in the capital.”

“That’s a five-star hotel!”

“Is it?”

“Part of my job for the Home Secretary was making reservations for visiting dignitaries. The Howard was at the top of our list if the meetings were held in Scotland.”

“Then, you can see how the other half lives.”

“But, the expense!”

The horses trotting toward Boleskine land, Mustang stroked Sarge’s mane. “Money is an unfortunate fact of life. If we lived in the prehistoric era, we’d be trading beads. I have enough to survive, and can always get more. Why shouldn’t you enjoy yourself, after what you’ve endured?”

“Always get more? Are you an heiress with an unlimited trust fund?”

“No, I’m a gambler. A few rolls of the dice, or pulls on the slot machine, and I’m set for another year.”

“That’s crazy!” choked Kathleen.

“You’ve finally discovered my secret.”

Not certain what Mustang meant, the woman fell silent. They rode to the barn and, exhausted, Kathleen left the horses’ owner to groom them while she shuffled to the house.

Being without a drink for two days set her nerves on edge, and Mustang couldn’t help her recover from this illness. Three days until Thursday, the Mistress

of Boleskine hoped the alcohol would have worked its way from her system, and she'd resemble a vital, productive individual once more.

That involved feeding her healthy meals and rehydrating her with glass after glass of water. They sat in the living room, a chess board untouched between them, reviewing the defining moments of their lives.

Kathleen told Mustang of her teenage years near Salisbury. She'd worked summers at the Stonehenge visitor's center, where they sold all manner of souvenirs, including chocolate bars shaped like the stone circle. She described the ancient Salisbury Cathedral, with its museum and original copy of the Magna Carta, and spectacular organ.

"I got to play it once," she related. "Our music teacher from school knew the choir director, and he let us in one evening for a private tour. Just running my fingers across the keys for a couple minutes filled my soul with beauty."

"Why didn't you focus on music in college?" probed Mustang.

"There's no future in it, really. You either have to be part of a band that gets noticed, or be able to sing - and my voice sucks."

"Playing in church is an honorable occupation."

"That doesn't pay much. I... wanted nice things. That's how I got sucked into Andre's world. He bought me the best clothes, the best wine, the best apartment..."

"Then, beat you."

Kathleen bowed her head.

"You never have to go back to that. Just remember: if any man demeans you or insults you, walk away. If two people do not respect themselves and each other, there's no future in *that*."

Thursday morning, a pickup truck bearing the logo of MacDonough's construction firm parked on the drive near the front door. Mustang had loaned Kathleen a yellow sweat suit to wear until she resupplied her wardrobe, and the camel hair coat hung over one arm. Showered and fed, she looked infinitely happier than when she'd arrived.

The pair embraced. Mustang had lost count of similar farewells - those who sought her assistance, then gratefully departed.

The gratitude was not solely theirs. She was grateful they were leaving.

She doubted her wisdom in tearing the gate off its hinges that day she'd come to Boleskine as a permanent resident. Perhaps she should reconnect the electrical wires which would prevent uninvited visitors from trespassing on the estate.

The idea was discarded. Just as she'd once chanced upon Jack Parsons through her grandmother's intervention, people managed to find her for reasons undetermined. If she threw up barriers to nature's normal course, what consequences would there be?

The vehicle bouncing down the drive, Mustang closed the door. She could hope Kathleen would be the last, but she wasn't a fool.