

The Mustang Chronicles:

Contender Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Trotting along a trail bordering her neighbor's property, Mustang Duryea tugged on Sarge's reins. Glenn MacDonough approached from the opposite direction, exercising one of his own magnificent horses.

"G'day, Lady Elizabeth!" hailed the balding figure in a thick Scottish burr. "I was just comin' to see ye!"

This announcement raised goosebumps on the young woman's arms. Though she trusted the elder who worked as a project manager for a construction firm, she shunned human interaction, the source of too many tragic incidents.

"Glad I saved you the trip," she bluffed. "What can I do for you?"

MacDonough extracted a newspaper from his saddle bag. "There's an advert on the back page I thought might interest ye."

The full-color display touted an international martial arts tournament to be held in Inverness that weekend. Though Mustang had learned kung fu while traveling in China, she had no desire to compete against others...

"I... don't understand," she muttered.

"Ye need t' get out a wee bit," MacDonough declared. "Since the death o' that lady friend o' yours, ye ha' nae seen a soul."

"I... prefer..."

"M'nephew will be fighting at the black belt level. I thought ye would want t' come and cheer for him, since ye have an interest in the sport."

"Denis?"

"Aye."

With a sigh of relief, Mustang grinned. Denis Sommers, an orthopedic surgeon who tended the Manchester United football team, numbered among the few who knew about the power she had inherited from her grandfather, occultist and scientist Jack Parsons. He'd done her a good turn; she could do likewise for him.

"I'd love to come," she decided.

"I'll call for ye at ten on Saturday."

"I'll be ready."

Mustang steered her roan toward Boleskine House, newspaper tucked in the sleeve of her red flannel shirt. The only news she received of current events came with her bi-weekly grocery deliveries, when sheets from old editions were used to cushion bottles and cans in the boxes.

Over a late breakfast of bacon and eggs, she perused the pages, rife with reports of wars, casualties, trade negotiations and nuclear weapons tests.

She read details of the upcoming competition more closely, studying the photos of world-renowned martial artists who would be defending their titles.

The three women reminded her more of contestants in a beauty pageant, featuring professional makeup and perfectly coiffed hair. One of the men might have earned his living as a carnival strong man: head shaved, at least 250 pounds of muscle and over six feet tall. Another couldn't have been more than 17 years old, with peach fuzz and remnants of baby fat.

A black mustache and goatee giving the last a serious cast, his sculpted physique beneath the starched white gi confirmed years of training.

The caption listed his name as R.J. Howard, Jr. of Los Angeles, sixth degree black belt and five time U.S. Wing Chun champion.

Mustang doubted Denis Sommers could best such as that.

She folded the paper.

Unless...

"No. If there's any temptation to interfere, I won't go at all," she spoke aloud.

A German-accented baritone affirmed, "Wise choice."

"We can play chess later, General," she told the manifestation of Erwin Rommel.

"Not if you have a different strategy in mind."

"No... no." Mustang carried her plate to the sink, running water and squirting dish soap over the stack of dishes. "I... can't let my guard down in any way, shape or form."

"That is for the best."

A mournful edge tinged the contralto. "I know."

"Yet, you struggle with the decision."

"I struggle... with controlling my natural wish to make all things right."

"You are not judge and jury," the World War II tactician advised.

She nodded, placing dripping utensils in the rack to dry.

"The horses are waiting."

No better way to calm her nerves than with her stock. Mustang spent the rest of the morning cleaning six stalls, untangling and polishing the tack, and grooming the fine animals she had acquired since moving to the Loch Ness region.

A light spring rain blended with sunlight that afternoon, casting a rainbow in the east as she rode Molly to the hill where Parsons had practiced his Enochian rituals and, five years ago, died by her hand. The shattered wooden altar remained a stark reminder of that horrific day and how his power had derailed her life.

Her palms still ached from her most recent trip via lightning, the flesh blackened. Each time she tried to do good, she wreaked havoc, then spent twice as much effort correcting the problem.

Inhaling scents of budding April, Mustang realized the need to get off the property - albeit briefly - and away from her own thoughts for a dose of innocent fun.

Saturday couldn't come fast enough.

Clouds obscured the dawn, soon clearing though high humidity made even the cool temperature uncomfortable. Donning a plain yellow t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, she pulled her black tresses, changed from their natural auburn, into a ponytail.

A glance in the mirror confirmed she might have been any local in a crowd of well-wishers.

Glenn MacDonough's pickup could be heard on the gravel drive before she saw it round the curve. A gentleman, he started to exit the driver's side, but she pre-empted the gesture by hopping in on her own.

The drive to Inverness passed silently. Mustang marveled at the new life bursting along the highway, MacDonough talking on his mobile phone to some business associate about a project encountering unexpected delays.

The Inverness Royal Academy Sports Centre bustled with activity, competitors of every shape and size registering in the atrium, spectators gathering in the galleries of four large courts where mats had been laid to protect against hard falls.

Hard falls there were, a plenty, especially among the adults. Each division started with 64 entrants, sharing eight mats in their respective areas. Fists and feet moved so quickly, eyes couldn't focus on the precision strikes. Referees signaled the points as early rounds eliminated more than half the field.

MacDonough and Mustang located Denis Sommers' name on a huge bracket, and shoved through the crush to vacant spots on wooden bleachers.

"'Tis me lad!" the older man declared proudly, pointing over heads to the far side of the floor.

Sommers dodged the punches of a trim figure in a black gi with a large ying-yang emblem on the back. A swift roundhouse kick landed the latter on his knees, securing the winning point for the physician.

Both men returned to their lines and bowed to each other. Sommers snatched a towel off a chair and wiped perspiration from his face.

Mustang grinned at that stern jaw line which ended in a cleft chin. His nose broadened slightly at the tip, though straight. Straw-like bronzed hair combed off

his forehead revealed deep horizontal furrows. The blue eyes sparkled with delight as he strolled to the wall where volunteers in orange polo shirts updated the standings.

While waiting for Sommers' next match, Mustang glanced around the court. The women seemed to pull their punches, avoiding each other's faces. When one woman's fist contacted her opponent's nose, the referee halted their interaction as both broke into tears.

MacDonough squinted at his companion when she burst out laughing.

"Are ye all right, Lady Elizabeth?" he puzzled.

"Sure. Sure." She resumed watching the men battle for the title, impressed by their control and composure.

She hadn't practiced the kung fu taught her in China much since returning to Scotland, but grasped that the required discipline might enable her to attain the self-control she craved.

Settling back on the uncomfortable seat, she straightened once more, sighting R.J. Howard Jr. taking his place on the far mat.

His very posture exuded confidence, his gi so white it must've been brand new. After the customary bows, the champion never displayed fists, moving deftly on bare feet and blocking the African's initial kicks. Abruptly, three points were awarded in rapid succession as Howard floored the youth with open palms to his ribs and a sweep of his ankles.

"Damn!" Mustang murmured, amazed.

By the quarter finals in the adult men's division, Sommers, Howard, two Czechs, an Italian, an Indian from Mumbai and two Canadians remained. The action ceased in favor of lunch, with hundreds filing from the sports centre to patronize nearby restaurants or food vendors set up on the academy lawns.

In the interim, crews of volunteers removed most of the mats, repositioning the rest to serve as the central site for the respective divisions on each court.

Mustang permitted MacDonough to indulge his gallant nature and buy her a hot dog and soda from a cart near a row of benches beneath some flowering trees. He attempted to converse, though she continued to have difficulty comprehending him through the burr. Besides, her hazel eyes tracked Howard as his chest expanded with deep breaths of air while he maneuvered through a series of stretching exercises on the grass.

"Uncle Glenn!" Denis Sommers jogged toward them from the sports centre entrance.

"Ach, laddie!"

The two embraced; Mustang detected Sommers' flinch as the older man made contact with his left shoulder.

"You okay?" she queried.

The surgeon bent and kissed her hand. "A bit bruised. Some of those Tae Kwon Do practitioners are lethal with their feet."

Sommers refused an offer of lunch, preferring not to load his stomach before the next rounds of competition.

"You're sufficiently hydrated?" MacDonough hinted.

Sommers smiled, his straight, white teeth brilliant. "Yes, Uncle. There are cases of water and sports drinks in the locker room."

A voice over the loudspeaker signaled the end of the break. Crowds migrated indoors, the atmosphere almost electric with anticipation.

The tension unnerved Mustang. One impulsive utterance - or thought - in a rush of emotion could spark chaos...

"I'll be back," she whispered to MacDonough, before descending the bleachers.

The construction manager failed to respond, intent on his nephew's tete-a-tete with a lithe brunette in the waiting area.

He didn't see when Mustang, missing the last step, stumbled and collided with R.J. Howard, Jr., who caught her before she landed on the floor.

She quickly recovered her balance. "Excuse me," she muttered, shaking off his grasp.

"My pleasure." The rich, western American baritone sent a chill up her spine.

They continued their separate ways, with Mustang emerging from the sports centre to find herself dizzy and weak.

Steadied by the fresh air, the idea of returning indoors didn't appeal to her. She sank on a stone abutment where, raising her eyes, she saw a poster touting the next day's exhibition matches.

Howard would meet all challengers who donated 100 British pounds, proceeds benefitting the Scottish Children's Health Initiative.

The notion brought laughter to her lips.

It might be worth staying overnight in the city to observe that spectacle.

A surge of cheers penetrated the building's walls, signaling another match completed. She rose, testing her legs, and turned to see Glenn MacDonough striding in her direction.

"Lady Elizabeth! I was worried about ye!"

"I'm fine," she replied. "I'm... not used to being around so many people."

“Aye, ‘tis understandable after isolatin’ yourself so long. I would offer t’ drive ye back t’ Boleskine, but Denis will be competing in the semi-finals, as soon as the bairns and women finish their divisions.”

“I’m happy for him.”

“Me, too. Nae that he has a hope of winning, wi’ that Howard bloke still in contention.”

The young woman’s curiosity piqued. “Is that who Denis will fight next?”

“Nae, ‘tis Noel Fenton from Toronto.”

“And Howard will fight in the other match to see who...”

“Aye. But not for another hour or so. Would ye like t’ walk the campus wi’ me?”

“Sure.”

The pair strolled along the sidewalk past Royal Academy structures old and new, their history told via mounted plaques. MacDonough idly chatted about renovation projects his company had completed for the school, from plumbing retrofits to energy-efficient windows.

Mustang put forth every effort to listen to these meanderings, aware her escort meant to be polite; her own thoughts distracted her.

Until an airborne mobile phone sailed past her face, causing her to duck and MacDonough to utter a stream of Scottish expletives.

“What the divil...” being the mildest as the device shattered on the concrete.

From behind a row of carefully trimmed bushes, R.J. Howard, Jr. appeared, his noble mien marred by a sheepish grin. “Sorry,” he apologized, shuffling to retrieve his property. “A little... long distance argument...”

MacDonough blocked his path. “Ye need t’ be mindful o’ your behavior, laddie.”

What happened next took less than a second, to Mustang’s regret.

Howard, offended by MacDonough’s cheek, leveled a blow at his head.

Instinct took control; Mustang deflected the strike and countered with a backhand that landed the Wing Chun champion on the ground.

Retracting her arm, she flexed her fingers as they throbbed with pain. “Oh, hell...”

II

Black mustache and goatee twitching, Howard glared at the Mistress of Boleskine prior to leaping upright. He brushed off his jeans, examining blood oozing from a scrape on his left elbow.

“You should teach your granddaughter more respect, old man,” he snarled.

MacDonough bristled. “And ye should mind your manners, laddie. ‘Tis Lady Elizabeth Neville ye be insultin’.”

Mustang cringed at the use of the name by which she was known in the Loch Ness region.

Howard scoffed. “A lady? This... twig?”

Stray passersby on the Royal Academy campus had stopped to view the dispute, some aiming their mobile phone cameras at the trio.

The martial arts practitioner composed himself, muttering, “If any footage of what you did gets posted on the internet, I’ll sue.”

“The only one who’d profit off that threat would be your lawyer,” retorted the young woman.

“Then, let justice be served in the ring.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Tomorrow. After the exhibition matches. You and me.”

MacDonough intervened. “Laddie, you outweigh the lass by four stone, at least!”

“Weight doesn’t matter when it comes to martial arts,” Mustang countered.

“You got that right,” snorted Howard. “And I’ll prove I’m in the right tomorrow.”

He scooped up the broken phone but she grasped his arm before he could retreat. “The only way I’ll step onto the mat with you is if you donate a thousand pounds to that children’s charity.”

They clasped hands firmly, with Mustang deliberately adding a jolt of electricity to the gesture.

Howard recoiled, shaking his arm to dissipate the shock.

Multiple versions of the video clip went viral within minutes, much to Mustang’s chagrin.

As the amateur videographers punched commands into their mobiles, she tracked Howard’s route across the campus. Then, seeking some concealment, she whirled to meet the sideways grin of the dark-skinned Indian who had just advanced to the semi-finals.

His accent as incomprehensible as MacDonough's, but with a different inflection, he ventured, "Your technique is exceptional. I would be greatly honored if you would cheer for me when I meet that esteemed gentleman in the ring on the hour."

"He's no gentleman," sniffed Mustang.

"You are very intuitive." He bowed at the waist in his yellow satin gi and placed his hand over his heart. "I am very pleased to have met you."

She giggled. "We haven't really met."

"Ah, yes. I am Jandar Singh of Mumbai."

"Best of luck to you, Mr. Singh," she managed before MacDonough exerted his protective nature and led her away.

The pair returned to the sports centre as a minor British royal presented trophies and medals to winners in the youth, teen and women's divisions. The bleachers had cleared with just four men left to compete, parents transporting dejected offspring home after their exhausting losses.

Sommers defeated his Canadian adversary in three straight points, his strikes clean and kicks accurate. Howard, conversely, barely emerged victorious against Singh, anger clouding his judgment and fouling his aim.

Mustang chuckled quietly. She had practical experience of emotions leading to disaster.

Singh's dignified exit, after scanning the remnants in the seats and raising his hands in a prayer-like gesture toward her, made her wish more men could have such tranquility of soul.

A ten minute break preceded the final round. Tournament organizers took the opportunity to thank the sponsors and encourage participants to patronize local restaurants and entertainment venues that evening.

Sommers, with his connection to the Manchester United football team, received enthusiastic applause and cheers when he was introduced and approached the white line on the mat. Howard, rumors of his arrogance and temper rife, bowed to a smattering of claps.

That only riled him more.

And served him ill.

Sommers repelled the opening salvo with minimal exertion. Mustang saw the surgeon's blue eyes silently questioning Howard's sloppy form, as if waiting for some ploy to reveal the hidden strength in the champion's arsenal.

That revelation did not occur. Sommers received his due accolades as the new international martial arts champion, raising a huge trophy over his head, as the gold medal bounced on his heaving chest.

MacDonough and Mustang lingered near the locker room door until he appeared. His uncle grabbed the sports bag and trophy, leaving Sommers' arm free to hug the young woman's shoulders.

"I never would have believed this possible, if you hadn't come," he remarked, his smile so huge, it could have split his face.

"Me? I..."

"Shhh. You don't have to say a word. I know what you did for me, and I'm grateful."

"Doc, honestly, I didn't..."

"Don't be modest, Must... er, Lady Elizabeth. R.J. never loses it in a competition. This could've only happened because of you."

She halted near the pickup. "Doc, listen. The only thing I did was make him mad as hell. He sabotaged himself by not restoring his own equilibrium which, I was taught, is a central tenet in martial arts."

"Whatever it was, thanks."

Mustang squeezed between the two men on the bench seat, an uncomfortable arrangement. The trip to Sommers' hotel, however, took less than ten minutes.

"Dinner and then a comedy improv show at the Eden Court Theatre," Sommers announced as they alighted.

"Dinner, aye," agreed MacDonough. "Then, I'm t' bed."

Mustang stammered, "Bed?"

"Aye, lass. Dinnae I tell ye we ha' rooms for the night?"

"No, you didn't." She exhaled. "The horses..."

"Taken care of, lass. My assistant is tending both mine and yours 'til tomorrow night."

That eased part of her concern. "We... have separate rooms?"

"Nae. Denis and I will share his. Ye have a suite on the floor above."

Such extravagance always annoyed Mustang. MacDonough's belief that she qualified as nobility, due to the fictionalized tale of her marriage to a British lord, now dead, irked her.

At least, she could have a good meal and a decent rest before facing Howard on the morrow.

Meal, indeed.

Denis Sommers laid into the buffet served in the Ness Walk Hotel restaurant like one starved. "I haven't eaten all day," he admitted, scooping pasta atop roast beef and boiled potatoes.

Mustang contented herself with a salad and chocolate cake. She bid the men good night in the lift, ascending to the penthouse where elaborate floral bouquets greeted her, bearing messages of congratulations for putting R.J. Howard, Jr. in his place.

“Oh, hell,” she groaned.

A buxom blonde maid in a crisp uniform emerged from the bedroom, stumbling at Mustang’s casual appearance in the sitting room. “This suite is reserved, ma’am.”

“I know.”

“You... can’t be here.”

“Even if I’m Lady Elizabeth Neville?” She almost choked on the name.

“You... couldn’t be.”

“Actually, I am. If you turned down the bed, I won’t need you any more.”

Bobbing a slight curtsy, the maid withdrew. Mustang meandered to ceiling-high windows overlooking the city.

The lights fascinated her, twinkling from the buildings and moving along the lanes. Nonetheless, the need for sleep consumed her, and she jerked on the line to close thick velvet curtains.

Spinning 180 degrees, she found herself staring at the tuxedo-clad form of R.J. Howard, Jr. His ebony mane had been combed off his forehead, shining with hair gel. His mustache and goatee had been trimmed, as well. He might have been a respectable man-about-town calling for his date.

“What the hell...”

“You left the door unlocked, meaning you live in the country where you don’t have to worry about burglars,” the baritone stated matter-of-factly.

“I do live in the country, so to speak, but I also lock my doors.”

He allowed himself a minuscule smirk before he sank on the buttoned leather sofa. “You’re wise for your years. Wise enough, hopefully, to take the ten thousand dollars I’m offering you to go back to the country tonight.”

“What? And not enjoy teaching you a lesson tomorrow?” Mustang snickered.

“Exactly. I have multi-million dollar endorsement deals that your little stunt today has put in jeopardy. Once I win the rematch against Denis Sommers in the morning, my future will be assured, unless you ruin everything.”

“A rematch against Denis? He would never agree...”

“A donation of one hundred thousand to his favorite charity says otherwise,” Howard boasted.

“You greedy bastard!”

“Greed is in the eye of the beholder. For me, it’s just good business.”

“Well, you can kiss your business good-bye, Mr. Howard. Unless you control your anger, you’ll never reclaim your championship status, and I’ll be at the sports centre bright and early to make sure you get my point.”

“How can such a scrawny kid be so over-confident?” he mocked. “You’re what? A green belt? Blue?”

“Belt color doesn’t matter to me.”

“It will, bitch. It will.” He rose, sauntering to the door, slamming it as he departed so the bric-a-brac on the end tables smashed to the floor.

She flopped on a gold recliner. “That’ll cost somebody a chunk of change.” Picking up the French-style phone, she punched a three-digit extension. “Denis? Are you really up for a rematch with Howard?”

The British doctor cleared his throat. “I know me winning was a fluke, Mustang. It’s only fair...”

“If that man has anger issues, it’s his own problem. You and I both know what happens when I get angry: horrible things. Him losing a fight is small potatoes compared to...”

“Every window in Inverness shattered?” A pause. “What can I do? I’ve already promised...”

“Get your uncle ready to go. We drive back to Loch Ness now.”

“He’s asleep. You don’t realize how tired he was from the excitement. And a few too many shots of Bushmill’s.”

“Damn!”

“Everything will work out fine. Howard will keep his contracts; a charity will be able to fund its operations for the next year.”

“Have it your own way.”

“Cheers, Mustang.” Sommers broke the connection.

She trudged to the bedroom and dropped on the mattress, covered with mauve silk sheets and a quilt.

Much more comfortable than the last bed she occupied in Inverness: the hospital’s psych ward.

Through the wee hours, she stared at the ceiling, cracks, pops and squeaks disrupting her slumber. Trying to convince herself the surroundings were the cause, she failed miserably.

“Show me proof someone has been in this room,” she breathed.

Rows of upturned carpet tacks glowed on the tile around the bed. Someone intended to injure her feet, preventing her from meeting Howard at the Royal Academy Sports Centre.

Grit teeth muffled her curses as the metal disks melted.

R.J. Howard, Jr. would feel her wrath.

She breakfasted early and trekked to the campus, unconcerned if her crumpled yellow t-shirt and jeans would be conducive to a martial arts competition. News crews from Edinburgh, London, New York and Los Angeles, among others, were setting up cameras while both male and female reporters applied make-up in front of a line of mirrors on tri-pods.

“Oh, hell,” Mustang lamented.

Slipping in the locker room entrance not an option, she ducked behind a school bus to wait for some distraction...

The arrival of Howard, for instance.

A freshly-starched gi on a plastic hanger nearly hit the ground when they swarmed him with their microphones. Mustang eavesdropped on the inane questions: “Why would you waste your time fighting a woman?” “Do you think your loss yesterday will impact your sponsors?” and so forth.

She didn’t repress her laughter, creeping toward the front of the vehicle and sprinting across the grass to the main doors.

Wall-mounted televisions either hadn’t been switched off the previous night or had already been powered up, showing Denis Sommers being mobbed as he exited MacDonough’s pickup in the parking lot.

“I’m doing this for charity,” the surgeon proclaimed. “Win or lose, hundreds of children will receive the care they need.”

MacDonough plowing a path through the throng, Sommers managed to reach the building. A uniformed security team converged, preventing the media from crossing the threshold.

Mustang joined the men in the lobby.

“Are ye all right, lass?” her neighbor pressed. “When the concierge told us ye had checked out, we feared...”

Sommers drew her aside. “Do you still intend to go through with this?”

“Do you?” she prodded.

“Of course.”

“Me, too.”

Howard marched toward them, dogged by an entourage of groupies and handlers. His superior air dissolved when he sighted Mustang. He stumbled, and those behind him piled up like a derailed freight train.

He sputtered, “You’re not...”

“Limping?” she ventured. “In hospital with my feet bloody and bandaged? No, I found your kind gift and disposed of them” - her contralto dropped to a lower register - “like I’m going to dispose of you.”

Brown orbs flickered with momentary guilt. His chest swelled with rage, and he flexed his fingers. “If you’re ready, we can let in the audience.”

Sommers intervened, two inches taller than Howard, the latter’s musculature more defined.

“This is no time to be macho,” Mustang admonished, grasping their shirts and yanking them past an astonished MacDonough.

Through the women’s locker room - where the men donned their gis as Mustang diverted to the sink to wash hands, face and tighten her black tresses in a ponytail - they proceeded to the court, met by a trio of referees, including Singh.

“Who’s first?” asked the senior official, fluorescent lights glinting off his shaved head.

Sommers deferred to Mustang, spectators filing onto the bleachers behind them.

“Make up your minds,” Howard snapped. “I don’t care in what order I trounce you.”

The young woman hissed, “Dream on.”

She advanced; Singh restrained her.

“Don’t interfere,” Mustang scolded.

The Indian murmured, “Let your companion spend his energy first.”

Sommers concurred. “My turn.”

He and Howard took their positions on white lines, referees ready to signal the score.

The competitors bowed to each other, clenched right fists covered by left palms.

“Wait!” Mustang edged between them.

Sommers swiped at her; she dodged. “Don’t do this, Mustang,” he begged.

“Shouldn’t those who paid for an exhibition match with Mr. Howard have a crack at him?”

An ovation blended with cat calls from the crowd.

Mustang drew Sommers off the mat. Howard bowed in submission, and the charity’s executive director led fifteen donors, ranging from 17 to 58, from the men’s locker room.

“Let them wear him out,” Mustang strategized in Singh’s ear. “Then, he’ll be more amenable to cancelling our bouts.”

“You willing to bet on that?” wondered Sommers, who’d overheard.

“I’m not a complete fool.”

III

The rules of the exhibition matches allowed the amateurs protective head gear and chest pads, to prevent injury. If any of them managed to score one point before Howard scored three, they would win an all-expense paid weekend in London.

Media cameras had abandoned the scene, their opportunity for a sensationalized breaking news headline postponed.

During the next hour, only two contenders even came close to throwing a punch at the Wing Chun practitioner, much less landing one: a 20-something Tai Chi instructor and a retired rugby player.

Mopping his forehead with a towel, Howard thanked the crowd for their courage and indulgence. He asked for a ten minute break while he prepared for the next matches.

Mustang noted the swing in the audience’s attitude. Genuine applause accompanied Howard from the court into the locker room.

It would shift again, soon enough, she predicted.

When Howard’s temper flared anew in his attempt to reclaim the title against Sommers, sentiment would swing to the man who won honestly, without resorting to bribes to save his questionable honor and lucrative income.

She hadn’t noticed Sommers and MacDonough huddled in the corner, conversing in hushed tones. When the surgeon approached, she patted his arm.

“I’ve got it figured, Doc,” she began. “After I put Howard in his place, he won’t dare fight you. That’ll eliminate the need for you to risk your hands...”

“Nae, Lady Elizabeth,” MacDonough objected. “Denis will fight first. Once he thrashes that arrogant git a second time, there’ll be no need for ye t’ fight him.”

Mustang’s hazel eyes studied Sommers’ stony expression. “Is this how you want it, Doc?”

“It’s for the best. You shouldn’t have to compete against such a heartless...”

Howard breezed from the locker room, hair combed and face washed. “Let’s do this,” he barked in passing. “I’ve got a plane to catch.”

Kicking off her sneakers, Mustang made to follow.

Sommers seized her arm. “No, Mustang.”

“Yes, Doc.”

Released thanks to an electrical current, she assumed a ready posture on the line.

Singh's lean features constricted as the referees took their positions, but Howard remained at ease.

"You're fighting in *that*?" he scoffed.

"Clothes don't make the fighter."

"So be it."

Neither got to throw a punch.

"R.J. Howard!"

A squad of constables guarded each escape route, their sergeant preparing handcuffs as he traversed the court.

"What *is* this?" The martial artist shifted his gaze to the uniforms.

"You're under arrest."

Howard's anger could not be mistaken. "You're out of your mind." He thrust an accusing finger at Mustang. "It's her. She set this up to stop..."

His right hand was shackled and yanked behind his back and joined by its partner. "You're charged with assault of the night shift desk clerk and a maid at the Ness Walk Hotel," the sergeant announced to the gasps of the spectators.

Mustang, Singh, Sommers and MacDonough were just as stunned as the others. Yet, somehow, it made sense.

Posted beside the hotel's check-in desk, she'd perused a framed document while MacDonough signed in Saturday evening. It pledged the guests total privacy, the staff vowed to confidentiality.

When Howard visited the penthouse to offer his bribe, he wouldn't have known the suite number unless...

He was led from the structure accompanied by a chorus of boos and curses. The referees withdrew to the locker room. Mustang signaled her companions to do likewise.

"What... are ye goin' t' do?" queried MacDonough.

"Give the police a statement."

Sommers puzzled, "But, you're not a witness."

"No, but I was the reason he committed the crime."

"How so?"

"He came to my room last night."

"After he came to ours," MacDonough clarified.

"Then, change your clothes, Doc. We're going for a ride."

Singh quietly observed their egress, inclining his head as Mustang passed.

She retraced her steps to him. "If I had time, I would seek your counsel on..."

His teeth shone the brighter framed by his dark skin. "I know, milady. It shall be well for you."

"I hope so."

"I know so."

That serenity soothed her troubled spirit temporarily.

Another memory resurrected upon their arrival at the police station, though the holding cell Mustang destroyed after she tried to report Jack Parsons' death had long since been repaired.

Except for two supervisors, none of the constables exceeded 30 years of age. Chances slim to none any of them were on duty that fateful day when she realized her power could transcend all barriers, she approached a metal desk where she had the ideal view of Howard railing at a quartet urging him through the metal-barred doorway.

"May I help ye, ma'am?" a sweet soprano burr greeted.

"'Tis Lady Elizabeth Neville you're addressing," supplied MacDonough.

The female constable rose. "Your Ladyship."

"Please, sit." Mustang, again on edge, reconsidered her idea. "I'm here about the incident at the Ness Walk Hotel last night."

Resuming her seat, the woman rifled a stack of manila files, opening one. "Oh, yes. The assault stemmed from Mr. Howard's effort to obtain your room number and that of a Denis Sommers from hotel staff. When the offer of a hundred pounds failed, he broke the desk clerk's nose, and tried to breach the database register's security. Unsuccessful, he rode the elevator up and berated the maid, shoved her against a wall and upset her cleaning cart, until she acquiesced."

"Bastard," Sommers grumbled.

Mustang bit her lip to keep from smiling. "What is the process for these charges?"

"Mr. Howard will appear before the magistrate tomorrow morning, where bail - if any - will be set. He will have an opportunity to enter a plea and, if he maintains his innocence, a trial date will be set."

From the depths of the building, a baritone shout: "I've got a plane to catch, you idiots! I'm due in Los Angeles tonight!"

Mustang consulted her escorts. "How 'bout another night in Inverness?"

Sommers refused. "I've got a team training session tomorrow in Manchester."

"What time?"

“It’s set for eleven o’clock.”

“Plenty of time to hang around for court, then have a private plane fly you south.”

“Must... Lady Elizabeth, are you daft? The expense...”

“I’ll cover it. You need to be there, as a gesture of support for a fellow martial artist...”

“A man who doesn’t grasp the purpose of studying martial arts.”

“Agreed, Doc. How ‘bout we teach him?”

Sommers’ blue eyes widened, and he broke into a laugh. He accepted Mustang’s outstretched hand; MacDonough placed a calloused mitt atop theirs.

The Mistress of Boleskine slept well Sunday night, secure in the knowledge no carpet tacks would be scattered on her floor or uninvited guests cause a nuisance.

Rather than wear the same t-shirt and jeans three days straight, she requested the concierge select an outfit appropriate for court from nearby shops. When the maid delivered the packages, she suspected the worst.

At least, it wasn’t a skirt.

Black slacks and matching blazer with a kelly green turtleneck, along with black leather loafers wouldn’t have been her choice. Appraising herself in the full-length bathroom mirror ten minutes later, she resembled a television lawyer.

In fact, it might have been a team of lawyers climbing the steps of the Inverness courthouse 30 minutes later. Sommers and MacDonough flanked her in the gallery of the darkly paneled chamber where a bewigged judge meted out justice from the bench.

“Call R.J. Howard, Junior to the dock,” a clerk declared after a grizzled defendant was led through a side door by the bailiffs.

His gi replaced by a white prison jumpsuit, Howard’s black mop hung over his forehead, uncombed, and unshaven stubble marred the line of his mustache and goatee.

“You are Robert John Howard, Junior?” read the clerk from a file.

“I am.”

“Are you represented by counsel?”

“I’m not the least bit interested in being represented by some phony-baloney solicitor, or barrister, or whatever the hell you call them over here.”

The judge admonished, “You will show respect for these proceedings, sir, or be held in contempt.”

“I have the utmost contempt for any society that harasses foreigners just to pick their pockets before they’re allowed to leave the country.”

Sommers leaned toward Mustang. "He's getting himself in quite deep."

The gavel banged, reverberating around the room. "One more word, sir, and your pocket will be picked quite clean thanks to the fines I will impose."

Mustang whispered a command, and Howard's larynx constricted, preventing him from verbalizing, though his lips continued to move.

"That's better." The judge directed his clerk to read the charges, which included not only assault on the hotel staff members, but illegally accessing the hotel's computer system, destruction of property and attempted bribery.

"The maximum penalty for these crimes is three years in a penitentiary and a fine of fifty thousand pounds," stated the judge.

Mustang expressed Howard's reaction. "Oh, hell."

"The trial will be scheduled six weeks from today. Because you are a visitor to our shores, your passport has been confiscated, so you must remain in the city. A suitable bond of twenty-five thousand pounds must be paid before your release, to ensure you will appear for all subsequent hearings."

"I... can't afford that!" Howard squeaked.

"Then, you will avail yourself of our hospitality by remaining in jail."

The gavel resounded, and bailiffs approached.

Howard shook free of their grasp, thrusting his index finger toward the gallery. "She's to blame for this! She cost me the championship, my endorsements, everything!"

"Silence!" shouted the judge. "You... Americans have no respect for true justice. You think you can behave as you will, without consequences. You shall learn differently, sir."

The bailiffs hauled Howard bodily from the courtroom.

MacDonough held Mustang in place. "Ye dinnae intend t' pay his bail?"

"Yes. And get the charges dropped."

"How?" Sommers inquired.

She met his gaze and winked.

"Oh, no..."

"Why not, Doc?"

"He's not worth it."

"I know that, and you know that. Maybe being shown a little kindness might... wake him up."

"Like you woke up Lord Guthrie?" Sommers recalled.

"Not quite so... dramatic."

"Let's hope so."

MacDonough guided the pair to the office where bail could be arranged.

“Uncle Glenn, I’m surprised you know...” quipped Sommers.

“Ach, I’ve had a few carpenters and the like get drunk on Saturday nights.”

Neither man challenged where Mustang got the required funds, presuming her wealthy. When Howard shuffled from the jail an hour later, his gi wrinkled and smudged with dirt from resisting his captors, he brushed past them and headed for the street.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” Sommers posed.

“Anywhere off this island.”

MacDonough rumbled, “Ye can nae do that.”

“Unless you want to be tracked by Interpol as an international criminal,” Mustang chuckled. “Which is no fun, I can tell you.”

“You bitch!” stormed Howard, confronting her, fists raised. “We go, right here, right now!”

Sommers’ punch to Howard’s jaw ended the altercation. The surgeon gripped him by the collar and dragged him toward MacDonough’s pickup.

“There’s not enough room for four of us...” Mustang remarked.

Howard was shoved to the middle of the bench seat. “If you don’t mind riding in the bed as far as the hotel, I’ll grab my car.”

“Sure.”

“You can’t do this!” Howard yowled. “I’m an American citizen!”

Mustang huffed, “A real credit to the country.”

“How would you know, *Lady Elizabeth*.”

She scrutinized MacDonough and his nephew. “Maybe we *should* go now. There’s a park not far from here. I can put out his lights and be done with it.”

“You said you’d get the charges dropped,” Sommers reminded her. “Then, you can do what you please. As for me, you promised me a plane to Manchester.”

“Fine. We’ll fetch your car, and the charter will be ready when you reach the airport.”

He bent to kiss her cheek. “Thanks.”

Monday evening, the pickup bounced up the gravel drive to Boleskine House, Howard asleep between MacDonough, at the wheel, and Mustang.

“Ye can nae handle him alone,” the construction manager observed. “Once I check in at work, I’ll be back...”

“No need, Glenn. All he needs is a home cooked meal and a comfortable bed. Tomorrow, he’ll be on his way back to the States.”

“How can ye be so positive?”

“Because the clerical error that caused his arrest will be corrected before the computers update themselves at midnight.”

The computers, and the memories of those involved.

“Ye must have very powerful connections in the government.”

She woke Howard from his nap with a slap to his cheek and tugged him from the pickup’s cab. “Tell your assistant I’m grateful for his care of the horses.”

Howard staggered through Boleskine House’s steel front door after Mustang unlocked the deadbolt. “This is yours?” he mumbled.

“It’s where I live.”

“It’s where you’ll die, if you think you can hold me prisoner...”

“You’re not a prisoner. You’re free to hike to Inverness, if your legs are so inclined. You might even get lucky and hitch a ride.” She switched on the wall sconces and moved toward the kitchen. “Especially in that outfit. The folks in these parts will think you a demented vagrant.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he yelled after her.

After a quarter hour, she found him on the threshold, inhaling the aroma of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“I thought you’d be long gone,” she chuckled.

“I... haven’t the faintest idea where I am. My phone is in my bag at the sports centre...”

“And without a program to provide directions...”

“I have no choice but to accept your hospitality.”

She set two loaded plates on the dinette table, where napkins and forks awaited.

They ate with gusto, both having nothing since before the court hearing. As Mustang washed the dishes, she instructed, “There’s a robe in the master bath. You can shower and I’ll wash the gi, or you can borrow a pair of my sweats. They should fit you.”

“I presume there’s a bedroom where I can sleep?”

She nodded.

“Then, in the morning, we’ll finish our business and I’ll be on my way.”

“Meaning, the fight?”

“Precisely. I must be sure I’m still the best, and that punch you threw Saturday was just a fluke.”

“Oh, it was no fluke, Mr. Howard.”

“I’m R.J. to my friends.” He rose and stretched, rubbing a cramp from his shoulder. “You’re a martial artist?”

“Kung fu.”

“Who’s your sifu?”

“I got my training in Beijing, if that matters.”

“Impressive. I’ll... enjoy this.”

She smiled, viewing the pastel-hued sunset through the kitchen window.
“More than you know.”

IV

“Do you have a room where I can practice?” asked R.J. Howard, Jr.

His hostess replied, “Right after eating? That’s not advisable.”

“I plan to shower first. Besides, I always do some stretches before bed.”

Drying her hands on a tea towel, Mustang Duryea led her guest to the hall.
“The bathroom is the second door. There should be clean towels on the rack. The last room on the left doubles as my dojo, among other things.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m going over to check on the horses before it gets too dark.”

They parted, Mustang not really trusting Howard to stay put. If he decided to leave, though, security measures in place to deter nocturnal trespassers would drive him back to the house quickly enough.

Glenn MacDonough’s assistant had done an excellent job of caring for her six friends in the barn during her absence. They greeted her affectionately, regardless, nuzzling her hand with their noses and hoping for a special treat.

She’d brought a bag of carrots from the refrigerator, giving each one as she refilled their water troughs and topped off their oat buckets.

Tomorrow, once Howard left, she could get back to riding them and enjoying a much simpler life.

“A life where you don’t have to interfere with others?” came the German-accented voice of Erwin Rommel.

“I... didn’t interfere, initially,” Mustang responded, switching off the tack room light.

“Punching a man wouldn’t exactly meet Gandhi’s definition of non-violence.”

“You’re saying I triggered this by protecting a friend?”

“The trigger was your persistent lack of self-control.”

She kicked a pile of straw into the corner. “If I hadn’t hit Howard, he wouldn’t have challenged me to a fight. He wouldn’t have gotten angry, and wouldn’t have lost to Doc Sommers...”

“That is the logical conclusion.”

“So, I should have stayed home.”

“Possibly.”

Her own temper flaring, she tramped across the gravel. "I can't hide here indefinitely, or I'll go insane!"

"Not if you understand the true reason for your isolation, and learn to control yourself."

Slamming Boleskine House's steel front door served no practical purpose, other than rattling the window panes. Mustang continued toward the bathroom to wash her hands, eager for a good night's sleep.

She heard heavy breathing from the spare bedroom, one of three she'd never bothered to furnish when she moved to Scotland at the FBI's insistence. Peeking through the gap, she watched Howard, shirtless and grey sweatpants tied at the waist, bending fully double and hugging his knees.

Stretching, indeed!

Unfolding himself, he launched into a kata, muscles rippling with each motion.

Such combinations meant to simulate combat, Mustang slipped across the threshold to join the fray, as it were. Howard caught on instantly, his blocks and punches countered by hers in almost perfect symmetry.

"You're very adept," he praised, aiming for her head and shoulders.

"A wise man once told me that martial arts and a game of eight-ball share a similar strategy. Anticipating your opponent's moves and planning ahead are key to victory."

"Very true."

From unseen stereo speakers, an orchestra played a waltz. Howard's hand dropped to Mustang's waist, and they gracefully danced around the floor.

Until Howard broke free, retrieving a towel off the door knob and mopping perspiration from his face.

"Are you feeling okay?" Mustang prodded, noting her own lack of exertion.

"It's... been a long, frustrating day. I think I'll hit the sack."

She guided him to the guest room, where he assessed the double bed and firm pillows. "This will do nicely. Thanks."

"I'm usually up early. I hope I don't wake you."

"Nothing will wake me, as tired as I am." He spun to the door. "No locks?"

She chuckled. "We're in the country, remember?"

Invisible locks provided safety, without Howard's knowledge. In a few hours, he would be gone, and she wouldn't have to spend an excess of energy cleaning up the mess.

Except, perhaps, the viral video that had been recorded by spectators' mobiles on Saturday afternoon...

The files were deleted from the internet at her murmured command.

News crews had left the Royal Academy Sports Centre prior to Sunday's exhibition matches, thus were unaware of Howard's arrest - she hoped.

Any videos recorded by those on the bleachers also vanished with a word.

As midnight approached, the Mistress of Boleskine lay on her mattress, staring at the ceiling. Computers would malfunction, police and judicial personnel would never realize they were missing files...

Her slumber disrupted by strange images and disjointed dreams, Mustang shot upright at six o'clock, a glint of sunlight illuminating the window.

Then, she remembered. Every second Tuesday morning, Ben MacPherson's feed store in Dores delivered supplies for the horses.

She scrambled from bed and pulled on jeans and a purple flannel shirt. The pickup truck idled on the gravel drive, a burly young man already unloading 50 pound bags of oats atop bales of straw.

"Good mornin', Your Ladyship!" he called.

She groaned, wishing people would stop addressing her that way. Unless she intended for international agencies to descend upon her *en masse*, she had to maintain that fiction.

"Good morning!"

"A chilly one this mornin'."

"For sure."

She felt Howard behind her before she heard him, stealth being a trait of martial artists.

"What's the rumpus?" he queried.

An idea struck her in that instant. "My bi-weekly delivery," she explained. "A perfect way for you to get to the village, then catch a ride back to Inverness."

"Are you crazy? Without breakfast?"

"There's an inn that serves fantastic food," she bluffed. "You can eat while you're waiting."

"So much for Scottish hospitality!"

She didn't dispute his assessment of her rudeness. She wanted him gone.

Approaching the driver, she passed him a 20 pound note for the inconvenience of transporting Howard up the road. He tugged his bronze forelock in salute, then climbed in the pickup's cab to update his paperwork.

Howard dragged himself from the Georgian mansion, uttering not a word as he slid onto the passenger's seat.

Mustang remained on the stoop, listening to tires crunching beyond the curve as her latest travesty ended.

Or, so she thought.

A canter through dew-coated Boleskine acreage refreshed her spirits, Pietra glad to be out of her stall, as well. Sun glistened off leaves bursting forth on the trees, and birds sang to the spring winds.

The idyll was shattered by a shrill horn.

“Oh, hell,” Mustang spat, tugging the reins to the left so her mount would descend from the hillock.

Glenn MacDonough, his blue coveralls suited more for a construction site, paced on the drive, periodically banging on the front door and shouting, “Lady Elizabeth!”

“What is it, Glenn?” she answered, emerging from the trail.

“A tragedy.”

She swung from the saddle and crossed to her agitated neighbor.

“What tragedy?”

“Denis rang me earlier.”

“Is he hurt?”

“Nae, fortunately. It seems, in the flurry of activity on Monday, he forgot t’ tell ye somethin’.”

She waited, but he didn’t elaborate. Finally, she urged, “Well?”

“Since ye dunna ha’ a phone, he asked me t’ give ye the message.”

Another pause.

“Well?” she pressed.

“When Denis and Mr. Howard were changin’ in the men’s locker room on Sunday, Denis got a good look at Mr. Howard’s...”

Embarrassed, MacDonough fell silent again.

Mustang could only imagine what the orthopedic surgeon had seen in their state of disrobement. She smirked.

“Oh, not that, lass!” MacDonough corrected. “He saw Mr. Howard’s bruises, and some wounds...”

“How is that possible? His opponents in the tournament barely touched him...”

“That’s what concerned Denis. When he got back t’ Manchester, he rang a colleague for advice.”

Mustang’s fingers twitched in anticipation. “And?”

“By Denis’ diagnosis, Mr. Howard could die at any moment.”

“That’s... ridiculous! He’s the most healthy...” Then, she recalled the previous night. Howard did have a number of discolorations on his torso as they interacted during the kata...

“Is he here?” wondered MacDonough.

“He... left about an hour ago. He’s probably in Dores, eating breakfast.”

“We must find him and get him t’ hospital...”

Mustang grunted, following him to the construction company’s pickup. “Easier said than done.”

En route to the village, MacDonough detailed his conversation with his nephew. Sommers had contacted Howard’s agent in California, who admitted the Inverness event was to have been Howard’s final bout before retiring as champion.

“That’s why he was so upset about losing,” mused the young woman. “Instead of going out on a high note, he would fade into obscurity, just another flash in the pan.”

“Aye,” MacDonough agreed.

“He would die in poverty, as opposed to raking in the dough with lucrative endorsement contracts from firms who weren’t aware of his illness.”

“Aye.”

A three-car pile-up on the highway delayed their progress; a tourist had braked to snap a photo of Loch Ness, and two other cars had rear-ended him. Constables were diverting traffic around the blockage, as tow trucks maneuvered to clear the scene.

Pulling into a vacant spot near the Dores Inn, both MacDonough and Mustang hesitated before alighting.

An ambulance was parked near the structure’s main entrance, paramedics wheeling a gurney through the doors.

“Oh, hell...”

A fresh-faced, uniformed constable attempted to halt their ingress, but Mustang distracted him with a stray dog chasing a cat up the lane. The interior gloom did not prevent the pair from distinguishing a round table, a plate of steak, eggs, fried potatoes and toast, a half-full glass of orange juice, and a toppled wooden chair, its occupant sprawled on the tile.

The emergency team rolled him on his spine, then retreated.

“We’ll radio the coroner,” said the stocky medic. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Mustang knelt beside R.J. Howard, Jr. whose brown eyes remained open, sightless. She *could* do something. She could restore his life, cure his ills...

Had she the right?

“Come, lass. We be only in the way here,” suggested MacDonough, a tender hand on her shoulder.

She straightened. “What did Doc say was wrong with him?”

“Cancer, heart, and the early stages of Multiple Sclerosis.”

“That... can’t be true. Only the strongest soul could do what he did, against those odds.”

“He may ha’ been an arrogant git, but he was a valiant man.”

Together, they returned to the pickup. MacDonough drove Mustang to Boleskine, protesting when she refused his offer of company as she processed this horrific death.

He couldn’t know how her guilt would plague her, how she would blame herself for yet another disaster.

She lost her appetite and took to wandering the grounds aimlessly, though she tended her horses with loving care. They were, in her mind, the only creatures who didn’t seek to harm others while loving unconditionally.

Her groceries were delivered on Friday, with the store owner’s eldest son handling the task in the absence of younger employees whose days were occupied with school.

“Did ye hear about the autopsy on the lad who died at the Inn?”

His heavy burr made the question almost indistinguishable.

“No,” she ventured.

“He must’ve been so hungry, he practically inhaled his food, and choked on a bite of potato.”

Mustang sank on the stoop. “What?”

“The report was printed in yesterday’s Inverness paper.”

“Is that all it said?”

“Ach, nae. He wasn’t a well man, it seems. Pancreatic cancer had spread, and there was a blockage in the main artery t’ his heart. A gust of wind could’ve killed him.”

After the boxes were deposited on the kitchen counter and dinette table, Mustang ushered the man out and concentrated on sorting perishables and non-perishables into the cupboards and refrigerator. Tucked in the side of the last box, Thursday’s newspaper, inadvertently left but welcome.

She left the last bag of vegetables, scouring columns of details on the post mortem of R.J. Howard, Jr.

While the man had appeared in his prime, his internal organs must have been deteriorating for years. His kidneys were close to failing due to severe high

blood pressure. An examination of his heart showed left ventricular hypertrophy from the same cause.

The list went on, with lengthy Latin terms the Mistress of Boleskine did not comprehend.

A conclusion that Howard's death amounted to natural causes, exacerbated by trying to swallow large chunks of potatoes with a throat swollen by a bacterial infection, only partially relieved her angst.

"We who have fought in war have a firm grasp of what is obvious in this case, my dear," soothed Rommel, admiring a ripe tomato over her shoulder. "People live; people die. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

She wept, "I could've done something, if I'd known."

"You would have pitied him, perhaps, and cured his ills, but would that have alleviated the issue between you? Or between him and Dr. Sommers? Far beyond his physical illness, he did not understand - as you grasped so well - the truth of the martial arts. Even if he had been perfectly healthy, his soul would have been empty, his mind corrupted by greed."

"You're saying he's better off dead?"

"To some extent, yes."

Mustang rose, snatching up the vegetables and dumping them in the refrigerator's crisper bin. "Tell that to all the people who are dead because of me. They may no longer have to suffer through this hell we call life, but maybe they deserved that chance."

Tossing the plastic bag into the trash can, she retired to her bedroom, wetting the pillow cases with her tears.