

The Mustang Chronicles:

Recluse Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Two men - an odd duo in untucked white tuxedo shirts and mud-caked dress slacks, bowties askew - stood on the property's edge, sharing sips from a quart of whiskey. The tall, lean blond still could claim a hint of lucidity, more and more having to steady his shorter, athletically-built, bronze-haired companion.

A gravel drive extended beyond their view, curving between thick foliage. The historied dwelling wasn't visible from the main road. A clearly abandoned cottage, nestled to the left of the undriven track, indicated the estate might be vacant, the gate barring access removed from its hinges.

"C'mon, then," urged the close-cropped blond.

"What, walk all that way just to find she's not there?"

"It's your decision. Stay here if you want."

Propped against a crooked fence post, the wobbly figure tried not to fall. As his friend disappeared from sight, he pitched forward, staggering in pursuit. "All right, all right! Wait for me!"

A half-mile along the shady path, off-key voices began an incoherent serenade to the birds. Either something from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, or an Irish drinking song, the garbled, bawdy lyrics wafted through the forest.

Galloping near the acreage's northern perimeter, a rider drew rein on her spirited white Arabian. Both she and her mount twitched their ears at the disconcerting sound. Not that trespassers bothered the landowner. Periodically, those curious about the notorious Aleister Crowley, or guitarist Jimmy Page, came hunting for "souvenirs" or to bask in the long-faded light of their presence, but they weren't always so noisy, and she enjoyed the undisturbed chorus provided by nature itself. With a snicker, she patted the horse's silky mane and turned toward the stables.

Maneuvering expertly over a small creek, around thorny undergrowth and past low branches, she emerged in a clearing atop a grassy hillock, the site of many memories. The highest point allowed for a comprehensive inspection of her holdings, and Loch Ness to the west. Her uninvited guests' tune mystified her, coming from many directions at once, it seemed.

Her trek's final leg took her through a canopy of tangled oaks and over a damaged section of split-rail fence. She'd seriously considered creating a series of jumps from various obstacles around the grounds, but contented herself with this one leap each day. Blood pounded in her ears as she leaned in the saddle and went airborne...

Terrified shouts disrupted the smooth motion; glass shattered when a hastily released liquor bottle impacted on a rock. Fortunately, the Arabian did not falter or injure himself coming to an abrupt halt, but his rider found herself subject to inertia, unseated and smashing unceremoniously into a bed of wild roses.

She remained conscious, swearing as she struggled to extricate her long, black tresses from the jumbled blooms. The two men could only stand by, attempting to keep their balance.

“What are you staring at?” she fumed, rising and plucking leaves from her grey wool sweater.

“A waste of good whiskey,” lamented the darker, his Celtic roots well in evidence.

“If you’re on your way home from an all-night bender, you can’t crash here.”

The taller hiccupped with an Irish brogue, “We came to see you... Mustang.”

“If it *is* you,” added his associate.

She hadn’t really looked at the pair, busy brushing dirt from her jeans and scarred palms. Lifting her head, she nearly fell back into the roses. “Oh, hell...”

Peter O’Donnell and Thomas Burton nudged each other. “It’s her,” they chuckled in unison.

It’d been years since Mustang Duryea had seen the filmmaker and the Shakespearian actor. She’d first met them at the wake for her father’s favorite cousin. Their second encounter hadn’t been as pleasant, and only she recalled the episode due to her unusual powers. For everyone else, the tragedy was buried in the deepest recesses of their minds.

“How’d you find me, after so long?” she queried.

“The townsfolk in Dores describe you as ‘Lady Elizabeth Neville, the Horsewoman,’” replied O’Donnell, his blue eyes as penetrating as she remembered them.

“What were you doing around Loch Ness, though? The Irish Tourism Council have you filming further afield these days?”

“I came over for Thomas’ performance in Edinburgh.”

“*King Lear*, don’t ye know.” Burton bowed precariously. “My greatest role.”

Mustang remained incredulous. “And you walked from the city to visit me?”

“We drove most of the way.”

“Until we ran out of petrol,” chortled Peter.

The young woman retrieved her horse's reins and started toward the corral. "Which is when you bought the booze?"

"The nights are chilly in the north country," Thomas explained.

The conversation didn't resume in earnest until the trio was settled in the spacious living room of Boleskine House, a Georgian mansion once inhabited by Mustang's grandfather, Jack Parsons, years after his mentor Crowley had left his mark. Mugs of steaming coffee were reluctantly consumed by the inebriated visitors, and their improved posture indicated a progressive return to sobriety.

"So, what shenanigans have you two been causing?" Mustang probed, seated in a cane-backed rocking chair, toying with chess pieces on a hand-made gaming table to her left.

Peter inhaled slowly. "How much have you kept in touch with the family?"

"Since I left the ranch, the FBI on my heels, I've had no contact with my parents, or any of the scattered relatives. I thought it best, to prevent a resurgence in the..."

"Surveillance?"

She nodded.

"Rachel thought as much."

"Rachel? Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Peter glowed. "She got her degree from Trinity - it's been two years, now - and took a position at an exclusive boarding school in Brisbane."

Mustang choked, "Australia?"

"She's been dating the headmaster's son for ten months, and they're weighing dates for the wedding."

"You don't intend to ask me to be her maid of honor, surely."

"No, though I'm sure she'd love if you'd be there to celebrate the nuptials."

Thomas growled, "Get on with it, Peter."

Hazel eyes met intense blue orbs. "What is it?"

"Rachel called me yesterday, concerned about you," continued Peter.

"Why? Did she have a vision?"

"No. She received an e-mail from one of the ranch hands in Montana..."

"Mom never did like the computer, and Dad only uses it to monitor the weather radar..." Though she feigned nonchalance, her fingers tightened around the black king, knuckles whiter for the contrast.

"Your father's dead, Mustang."

Thomas blurted out the statement, and Peter came near to punching him for such insensitivity.

“When? How?”

“There was a late spring snow, from what Rachel read to me,” said Peter. “Joe was hauling hay to the fields, when his heart stopped. Maggie asked the hands to go through the computer files, and write to anyone who’d sent messages over the past five years, to see if they could find you.”

Stunned silence enveloped the bright, airy room - so different from the first time a naive teenage girl had walked through the door with Jack Parsons as tour guide, dusty windows obscuring the sunlight, the space cluttered by ramshackle furniture. Peter slid off the green velvet sofa onto his knees before the rocker, scooping up her free hand.

“I’m so damned sorry, Mustang. I know you didn’t get along...”

“He wanted a son,” she murmured, staring into space. “Nothing I did was ever good enough.”

“But, he did love you, in his way.”

She laughed, almost hysterically. “Do you remember the night at Balint’s mortuary?”

“Yes.”

“Rachel told me she could smell insincerity 100 yards away. She was referring to my parents. At least, I’ll be spared the humiliation of attending Dad’s funeral, the old aunts’ crocodile tears and phony condolences.”

Thomas rose. “You need a drink, girl. Have you any brandy on the premises?”

“Brandy? Foul stuff,” she winced, a deep breath helping restore her wits. “I took my example from a couple of rabble-rousers I met in bygone days: there’s a plentiful supply of Jameson in the kitchen pantry.”

O’Donnell’s shock at this declaration was evident. “You’re not old enough...”

“I’m 24, Peter. Time flies, doesn’t it?” She climbed to her feet. “Before we drink, though, I’m sure a decent meal is in order. I didn’t eat breakfast before my morning ride, and I have the distinct impression you two haven’t had a bite since before the first act curtain.”

The Irishman accompanied her to the kitchen, shining with modern amenities. Boleskine House may have been built in the 18th century; Lady Elizabeth made certain it suited her 21st century tastes.

“Explain something to me,” Peter began.

“Shoot.”

“You live here completely alone?”

“Yes.”

“Walking to town for groceries and supplies?”

“The shopkeeper has my standing order, sent out every two weeks.”

“You must tip the delivery boy well, for him to hike up the long drive.”

“I make it worth his while.”

“Care to tell me how you paid for the rest of these luxuries?” O’Donnell prodded, selecting china plates from a glass case. “You sell your power to the highest bidder?”

“No, but I suppose you’d say I violated your directive to use them for positive purposes.”

“How so?”

“I travel, now and again to Monte Carlo, Rio...”

“You cheat at the roulette tables?” chided Peter.

“Nope. Just a couple pulls on a one-armed bandit or rolls of the dice, and I’ve enough for a year, given my modest needs.”

“Regardless, it’s cheating!”

“Is it?”

He grit his teeth. “You’ve lost your moral center, young lady...”

“If I have, I’m not alone. Look at conditions around the globe: the wars, the crime, the corruption...”

“Be that as it may...”

“What happened to your hair?” Thomas sidled into the room, having lingered over a minor collection of Rembrandts and Van Goghs in the main hall.

“Less recognizable without the red head,” she stated.

“But, it was so beguiling...”

Cracking a few eggs, Mustang smiled to herself. “How *did* you find me, anyway? You had to know the general area before the townsfolk could point the way here.”

Peter poured orange juice from a carton into small glasses. “Jack Parsons’ journals.”

“What!” she erupted, the skillet crashing to the floor.

“When you didn’t return to the ranch, your parents decided to redo your bedroom as an office, or something. They were tearing out the closet walls, and found the books jammed in a hidden compartment. Thinking you might want them down the road, and that you’d be more likely to ring Rachel or me, they mailed them to the house in Dublin.”

“And you *read* them?”

“I never opened the box, until yesterday. Even then, I flipped pages mostly, looking for references to places you might go. Boleskine seemed the most

logical for starters, with Thomas already in country, and Scotland just hours from Eire by ferry.”

“Your ESP have anything to do with it?” Mustang hinted.

He smirked. “Maybe.”

“My one regret all this time was not taking the journals when I fled.” Her eyebrows arched hopefully. “Do you have them with you?”

“They’re at the hotel.”

Having cleaned up the yolky mess from the patterned tile, she unhooked a different pan from the hanging rack and grabbed another dozen eggs from the refrigerator. Thomas opened a package of bacon, laying the strips on an electric griddle. Slices of toast completed the impromptu feast, along with a fresh pot of coffee.

Thomas dominated the table talk with tales of his recent northern European tour. His physique enabling him to attractively fill a pair of tights, his opening night embarrassment in Berlin - stumbling into a scenery flat, snagging the green hosiery and performing *Hamlet* with a very visible run down his left leg - proved quite comical.

His stomach filled, the actor located the guest bedroom and was soon snoring. Peter and Mustang washed the dishes and discussed how to fetch Parsons’ writings from Edinburgh.

“I could have the car towed to a station and filled with petrol,” ventured O’Donnell.

His hostess countered, “Too expensive. I’ve a better idea.”

Tossing the lanky blond a lightweight jacket, she led him from the house to the three-acre corral, where six magnificent horses grazed contentedly. A modern barn contained stalls and a tack room, with hand-tooled leather saddles.

“Talk about expensive!” Peter scolded.

“My friends deserve the best.”

He blocked her from hoisting one of the saddles off its perch, iron fingers planted on her shoulders. “You’ve changed, y’know? All this... all this, when you used to appreciate the simple things in life.”

“It’s not hard to understand, Peter,” she retorted, breaking from his grip. “I chose voluntary exile after the FBI made my life - and the lives of those closest to me - miserable. Can you give me one reason, if I’m going to remain in seclusion, I shouldn’t have nice things?”

“Touche.”

“Now, let’s get going.”

He cringed, “Mustang, I haven’t sat one of these beasts in 30 years.”

“It’s like riding a bicycle,” she assured him. “You never forget.”

II

At a trot, the pair made good time to the rented Volvo, parked on a berm five miles beyond the tiny village of Dores. They’d stopped at a garage and purchased a small gas can, filled it, and now replenished the car’s fuel tank.

“I’ll top it off in town, then head to Edinburgh,” announced O’Donnell. “You can handle both horses?”

She grinned at him sarcastically.

“Sorry. Stupid question.”

Before retracing the route to Boleskine House, Mustang watched Peter pull away and round a curve. He’d been a friend to her - a surrogate father of sorts - when she most needed one during her awkward teenage years, her newly acquired power a source of very physical pain and gnawing mental anguish. Here he was again, doing her a good turn.

Too few and far between, people like him.

Thomas Burton, conversely...

The actor had awoken from his nap, and stepped out for a breath of delicately scented air. Unfamiliar with the estate’s layout, he roamed aimlessly, until he spied a horse grazing in the fenced enclosure.

And detected the sound of metal scraping on rock.

Mustang didn’t mind cleaning these stalls, unlike days past, when the harsh Montana winters required her to rise, morning after morning, well before dawn to break through ice crusted on water troughs and ensure the stock had ample sustenance. Her father had expected, even demanded her assistance, despite employing as many as 15 ranch hands. Alone here, she freely chose the responsibility. Space heaters warming the barn were a decided plus.

She dropped her shovel in a manure pile when stealthy hands encircled her waist from behind. “Hello, Thomas,” she greeted, not turning.

“How’d you know...”

“If memory serves, this is how a certain incident began many years ago.” Too late, she guessed Thomas Burton, in his advanced state of intoxication, had probably forgotten *that* night, also.

“Then, it wasn’t merely a dream!” he exclaimed. “You and I... at Bryan’s house, after the funeral...”

She faced him solemnly. “Yes. Yours was my first kiss.”

“But not your last, I suspect.”

“No.”

“Why look so desolate? Love - sex - is to be relished, not mourned.”

“I mourn for having been a catalyst for the FBI brutally slaughtering the man I loved.”

Burton released her. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“There’s much you don’t know about me, Thomas, and if you did, you’d flee the district.”

Gentle, thick fingers caressed her neck. “You underestimate my feelings for you.”

Uncharacteristically, she shuddered with emotion, and burst into tears.

He engulfed her in a tender embrace, her face shielded by the long dark mane. He stroked her curls, muttered quiet consolations. “I do so wish you hadn’t dyed your hair,” he concluded. “I remember the fiery goddess on the steps of that huge mansion, wishing a stooped old minister 30 years younger, to better suit his BMW...”

“I had no choice,” she burred. “Being so conspicuous put others in danger.”

“Danger? What kind of danger could a young, country-bred beauty instigate?”

“You have no idea.”

He raised her chin, so his grey-green orbs gazed down into her moist hazel eyes. “You think me a drunk and a womanizer, don’t you, incapable of grasping the angst of the human heart.”

“I’ve tried not to think of you at all.”

“But, you couldn’t help yourself, and when you did...” he coaxed.

“I wondered what might’ve happened if...”

He guffawed triumphantly. “As have I, my love. You were 16, though, and the law would not have kindly viewed a man more than twice your age taking you from the safety of hearth and home. Nonetheless, your lips have haunted my sleep, and in odd moments through the day, I look for you as I rush to and from the theatre, thinking to glimpse you ducking around a corner.”

“Thomas, I’ve forced my heart to become stone, because the torture of losing Jim nearly drove me to madness. I swore to never let myself care about anyone, ever.”

“Jim? This man who was killed?”

She pursed her lips.

“And you grieve for him yet?”

“I dare not grieve the same way most people do. To rage against the injustice would mean countless lives would be laid waste as a result. I mustn't get angry. I do horrible things when I'm angry.”

Burton recoiled a pace. “What are you saying?”

She gazed past him at the barn door, where a somber Peter observed the scene. She invoked a quote popular in gangster movies, “If I told you, I'd have to kill you.” Retrieving the shovel from the manure, she left the two men to contemplate each other's motives.

As fleet as any horse she'd ever ridden, Mustang dashed through the forest, mounting the hillock where icy splintered remnants of a wooden altar littered the ground. “Damn you, Jack Parsons!” she screamed to the wind. “I didn't want any of this! I just wanted to be left alone and live out my days! Just when I think I've achieved a semblance of that dream, an old wound is ripped open again...”

She dissolved in a heap on the mound, body wrenching with sobs.

O'Donnell found her there, concerned when she didn't rejoin them at the house. He lifted her off the ground, and flicked dirt from the backside of her jeans while she wiped her nose on the knitted wool sleeve.

“We've... been waiting to say good-bye,” he muttered, passing her a cardboard parcel.

“Good-bye? But, you just arrived.”

“While in Edinburgh, my cell phone had a strong signal, and I checked voice mail. Rachel called; she and her beau have decided to elope this weekend. It's going to be a small wedding, just the immediate family, in a tiny country chapel.”

Mustang sniffed. “I'm happy for her.”

“I hate to leave you this way. Come with us, please.”

“Us? You mean, you and Thomas?”

“Last night ended his tour for this season. We were going fishing for a week before the editing is complete on my latest film, and then we'd hit the studio to record his narration. I can't leave him stranded, so he's going to wander the outback for a couple days, while I give Rachel away.”

“Peter, you know what would happen if I went with you. You know how Thomas feels about me...”

“He's like a schoolboy with his first crush around you,” O'Donnell snickered. “And I can understand why, since I've entertained a fondness for you myself since our first meeting. You're a grown woman now, and it's for you to decide, but the weekend would not be one of celebration if I went without you and had to worry about your state of mind.”

The plea reminded Mustang of her high school graduation, when Jim Neville implored her to attend his sister's wedding in Hannibal, Missouri. His assignment to protect her as the sole witness to a series of horse thefts meant his request for vacation time would have been denied had she not agreed.

"I'll have to ask my neighbor to feed the horses while I'm gone," she sighed.

"They've done it before when you've made your little... excursions to the gambling capitals of the world, haven't they?"

"No need. I've never been gone more than an hour or two."

He flipped her palms upward, distraught at the deep scars. "I can tell."

They ambled to Boleskine House, arm in arm. Thomas sat on the Volvo's bonnet, his fingers impatiently drumming the metal. "Did she say yes?" he huffed, when they appeared through the trees.

"She said yes," quipped Mustang.

Bronze hair highlighted auburn in the sun, he sprang toward her with the agility of a much younger man, and twirled her in jubilation.

Peter shooed him away. "Let the poor thing pack a bag, can't you?"

"What about you two?" the young woman asked.

"I retrieved our luggage when I left the hotel. All we need to do is return the rental, and board the plane..."

"What time is the flight?"

"Whenever we get to the airport," replied O'Donnell.

Mustang squinted at him.

"I called in a favor from a wealthy friend. He's loaning us his private jet."

"What? With the price of fuel sky-high?"

"It's a practical gesture on his part. The plane will pick up his business associate in Sydney after dropping us in Brisbane."

She felt better about the arrangements knowing this, and bustled into the house to stuff necessities into the same backpack she'd used on her first trip to Scotland eight years earlier.

Meanwhile, a heated discussion took place between her escorts.

"I don't intend to hurt her," swore Thomas.

"That's what you always say, and ample tears are shed every time you discard the latest 'love of your life'."

"This is different."

"I've heard that before, too. Besides, you're old enough to be her father. She deserves... stability."

“So, I should abandon what might be my one chance at true happiness?”
Burton argued.
“The agony she’s endured, she’d make you miserable. And she has secrets, Thomas, about which you know absolutely nothing.”
“And you do?”
“Yes.”
“So, it comes down to you wanting her for yourself.”
O’Donnell growled, “No. I want her to seize the world with both hands and enjoy every experience to the full.”
Dumbstruck, Burton scraped his shoe through the dirt. Mustang breezed through the door, spinning a key in the deadbolt. She threw the battered bag in the boot.
“You two drive out to the road, and head north two miles. I’ll meet you at the end of the drive marked ‘MacDonough’s Rest’.”
Peter glared at her.
“He’s the neighbor who’ll be taking care of the horses...” she reminded him.
“Ah!”
Setting off at a jog, she was out of sight before the Volvo reversed course and bounced toward the Gate Lodge.
Finally headed for the city, Mustang rubbed her aching muscles, legs stretched across the vinyl upholstery. “They do allow gambling in Australia, don’t they?” she joked. “I didn’t bring much cash with me.”
O’Donnell swallowed hard. “None of that, now.”
“None of what?” urged Thomas.
Shifting gears, Peter hushed him with a wave. “You brought your passport?”
“It’s been in the same pocket all these years.” She didn’t mention how the backpack had been released to her by FBI agent Ben Espinoza, after being confiscated by his team during a search of her parents’ ranch following her hasty departure to California, chasing Jack Parsons’ secret zero-gravity propulsion formula. “I thought it might have expired, but it’s got a year left. Thing is, I’m listed as ‘Elizabeth Duryea’.”
Peter wondered, “Why, then, do the Scots hereabouts call you Lady Neville?”
“To prevent curiosity seekers from connecting me to my former life.”
“Why Neville, specifically?”

Mustang paused, fighting the emotional upheaval. “Jim Neville would’ve been my husband, had he lived.”

“You were that serious?” challenged Thomas.

“Thrown together almost constantly for months, then dealing with the FBI’s insane tactics... we became very close.”

“Did he know...” Peter hinted.

“I told him everything.”

Thomas grew irate. “Everything, *what?*”

She tucked her knees up to her chin and smiled innocently, while the men in the front seat watched her in the mirror. “You know, I haven’t flown in a plane for a long time,” she changed the subject. “I hope I don’t get airsick.”

“I’m surprised you don’t get deathly ill, traveling... that other way,” remarked O’Donnell.

“What other way?” Burton snapped.

Mustang confessed, “It’d be faster if I did.”

“We’ll have to make a couple refueling stops en route, but it shouldn’t take more than 20 hours,” Peter informed her. “There’s a bedroom on the plane, and a sleeper-sofa, so it’s not like you’ll have to sit up the entire time. Satellite television, even a full bar.”

“Good,” grumbled the actor.

Thomas Burton didn’t wait for take-off before pouring himself a tumbler of whiskey and draining it in two gulps. Slumped on a tan buttoned-leather chair around a conference table, he glowered at Mustang, who peered out the oblong windows at the bustling tarmac.

Peter exited the cockpit, where he’d been chatting with the flight crew. He clapped Thomas roughly on the shoulder. “Don’t be so morose, man, or I’ll throw you out at 20,000 feet without a parachute.” He flopped onto the hide-a-bed.. “I’ve got a marvelous idea for an entertainment once we’re airborne.”

Burton and Mustang looked at him.

“Remember the one-man version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* you put together a decade or so ago, to do in small venues? Well, Mustang’s never seen you on stage, and I think it would be perfect, given the limited space we have.”

Thomas considered, his countenance gradually brightening. They fastened their lap belts as the craft taxied onto the runway, Mustang only relaxing again when they reached cruising altitude, high above a bank of stormy cumulus clouds threatening the French coast.

The trio laughed themselves to tears as darkness fell. Burton had difficulty keeping in character during his abridged presentation, his audience virtually rolling

on the carpet. He had a command of voices - both male and female - which made the roles come alive, especially Puck, Bottom and the Fairies.

For Mustang, the facial contortions overshadowed the recitation; after all, she hadn't touched Shakespeare since her high school English classes. This consummate thespian didn't need period costumes or elaborate scenery, he conveyed the story of romance, misunderstanding and frivolity completely unaided.

And received a standing ovation for his effort after Puck's closing monologue.

Still recovering from their merriment, Thomas bellied up to the bar. "The laborer is worth his wage," he announced.

Peter filled a glass with Bushmill's.

"The toast is: the future." Burton raised his drink in salute. Then, he hesitated. "Drink with me, both of you."

Peter smiled. "I won't refuse."

"And you, fair lady?" Thomas insisted. "You mentioned something back at the house about sharing a bottle with us..."

"I... was hoping you'd forgotten that," brooded Mustang.

"If I make one vow never to be broken, it is this: I shall never forget a second of our time together."

O'Donnell had filled more glasses, and passed one to Mustang. "Never mind," he cautioned his friend. "Here's to the future."

Tumblers aimed to clink together; the plane veered violently to the left and a loud explosion jarred the fuselage. Thrown against the bulkhead by the jolt, Peter stooped near a heat-warped window.

"The port engine's afire!" he shouted.

Thomas clutched instinctively for Mustang's hand. "So much for the future."

The young woman bent to view the turbine spewing flames and fuel, the jet rapidly losing altitude.

"Oh, hell..."

III

"Everybody buckle yourselves in," came the pilot's terse baritone over the intercom. "We're going to try and set her down in the Arabian desert."

The passengers pondered this news.

"Well?" Peter prompted.

Mustang needed more. "Well, what?"

“Can’t you fix it?”

“The forces of nature have nothing to do with... that.” She gestured toward the disabled assembly. “We’re too high for rain clouds to douse the blaze.” A similar situation years before, when a Cessna en route to Florida lost power over the ranch’s western horse pasture, came to mind. “The best I can do is help it land safely at the nearest airport, where repairs can be expedited.”

“Do it, then!”

Once again, Thomas listened to the exchange, out of the loop. “What are you talking about?” he steamed.

Mustang spun from him, avoiding eye contact. As the muffled phrase escaped her lips, the aircraft righted its orientation, and glided toward the bright lights of Dubai.

“Smoothest landing ever, Captain,” praised the astounded co-pilot, sweeping from the cockpit once the Lear jet had coasted into a maintenance hangar. “Congratulations.”

The pilot shook his tawny head, befuddled. “We should be dead.”

The hatch popped open; the crew waited as Mustang and Thomas disembarked.

“You’ll have mechanics assess the damage?” verified Peter.

“Yes, sir, but it might not be until morning,” the pilot acknowledged.

“What about chartering another plane for the remainder of the trip?”

“In Dubai, things are three times as expensive as other parts of the world, sir. Might run you as much as 10,000 Euros.”

Dejected, O’Donnell’s shoulders drooped.

“Is gambling legal here?” queried Mustang.

The co-pilot confided in hushed tones, “Muslim law frowns on gambling, Miss, but there are a couple discreet clubs...”

“No!” Peter objected.

She raised a silencing finger. “Three pulls on the slot machine, no more. I promise.”

“That’s not enough to win five quid,” mocked Burton.

“Give me any coin you choose, and I’ll turn it into five figures.”

He dug in his trouser pocket and extracted a silver Euro, tossing it to her.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” she promised.

O’Donnell contended, “I’m coming with you.”

“So am I,” Thomas interjected. “This, I’ve got to see.”

Directed to the heart of “downtown Dubai”, where the world’s tallest building was under construction, the trio strolled past bars and nightclubs pouring

patrons onto the streets, along with loud, decidedly Western music. They entered a relatively nondescript structure - compared to its high-gloss neighbors - and sat at the neon-lit metal bar.

“What’s yours?” the bartender grunted with a thick Arabic accent.

Peter spoke, “Three whiskeys and” - the password - “a royal flush.”

Within ten minutes, they stood in a bustling, sound-proofed chamber which would’ve made most Las Vegas casinos blush in shame.

Mustang shuffled along rows of slot machines, dismissing the different themes - television shows, movies, NASCAR racing, and pop music groups. At random, she halted and inserted the coin. The lever pulled, gears chattered, and sirens commenced blaring. From that \$3,500 jackpot, she used two more coins, increasing the total to \$18,000. Finances enough to complete their journey.

“How’d you do that?” Burton hissed in her ear as they hurried to the airport.

Peter supplied, “Pure luck.”

“Nonsense,” refuted his friend.

“I’ll explain tomorrow,” Mustang conceded. “Right now, I’m tired and, once we take off, I’m sacking out for a few hours.”

Before the aircraft had completed its ascent, she’d changed into t-shirt and sweats in the cozy on-board bedroom, and slipped beneath a thick quilt on the king-size mattress. Peter poked his blond head around the utilitarian door.

“Do you really intend to tell Thomas how you...”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she countered, vigorously plumping the pillows.

“He’s a simple man, Mustang. He trods the boards by night, sleeps by day, chases women and drinks in between. He won’t understand.”

“Maybe it’ll get him off my back.”

“I thought you liked the attention.”

“Peter, except for rare occasions, I’ve spent six years avoiding human interaction. The last person I conversed with at length was Mark Twain, during a game of chess weeks ago. Without the complications ordinary people call life, I seldom use my powers, and relish the peace and quiet. Throwing Thomas into the mix would...”

“Disrupt your idyllic routine?”

“Exactly.”

“I still say, don’t tell him. Discourage him some other way.” He mulled ideas briefly. “While we’re down under, get him lost in the outback, then abandon him. Make him believe you’re unworthy of his affection.”

“Why don’t you have Rachel introduce him to some pretty young teacher at the school where she’s working? I’m sure there are women who’d swoon outright if a bona fide Shakespearian actor agreed to make presentations of the classics to their English students.”

“Maybe I will,” O’Donnell snorted. Pulling the panel shut, he added, “You’ve changed, Mustang. And not for the better.”

“The same could be said for the world as a whole.”

“Touche.”

“Good night.”

Sleep did not come, however. Lying on her back, the jet engines’ drone provided a backdrop for the murmur of Celtic-tinged voices, swapping stories, jokes and even opposing points of view. Uncertain how many time zones they’d crossed, the LCD clock read 3:00 AM when Thomas Burton staggered into the chamber. She smelled the alcohol before he got close enough to breathe on her, and rolled her eyes when he collapsed, unconscious, atop the blankets.

The sensation of something brushing her nose roused the young woman abruptly. Sunlight poured through aircraft windows and, bronze mop disheveled, Thomas’ angular face hovered inches above her. He’d removed his shirt and slacks during the night, clad now in blue plaid cotton boxers. His athlete’s physique hadn’t deteriorated too much with age, possibly from the frequent exertion of rehearsing and performing on stage.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

“Mornin’.”

He kissed her lightly. “Well rested?”

“Well enough.”

“Good, because you made me a promise...”

Mustang bolted agilely off the bed. “Let my brain kick into gear, can’t you?” she protested. “Maybe I’d like to eat some breakfast.”

“Then, when?”

This was the very type of pressure she’d avoided living alone. She debated options and decided on the most feasible. “Look, what I have to say is serious and earth-shattering, given the reactions of those I’ve told over the years. You’ll need to be totally sober, which means not touching a drop until, say, midnight. If you do that, we’ll sit down and have a nice, long talk.”

“If I do *that*, you’ll have to give me more than just information.”

“What, for instance?”

“You’ll have to dye your hair back to its original red.”

For as long as they were thrown together, anyway. “Okay.”

“And...”

He didn't have to elaborate; his eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“I predict you won't be in the mood, after...”

“But, if I am...”

“Then, I'll be glad to... oblige.”

Knocking interrupted the banter. “We're starting our descent,” announced Peter. “The pilot wants us buckled in.”

Mustang waited to dress until they landed in Brisbane. Burton, at least, pulled on his trousers before selecting a seat beside her, holding her hand as they made the runway approach.

Scotland's wintry conditions made Australia's green summer a delightful shock for the travelers. The flight crew led them to customs, where agents inspected their passports and baggage. Just beyond the gate, Rachel fidgeted excitedly, her arm jostling her fiancé, Mustang assumed.

She and Peter were the recipients of enthusiastic hugs. They were introduced to Ben Henderson, the dashing groom-to-be, who exuberantly pumped their hands.

“If you're not too exhausted, we're driving straight out to the country...” declared Rachel. She wore a blue dress-suit; brunette curls flowed over her shoulders

“We slept on the plane,” Peter stated. “We'll be fine, but for a shower and fresh clothes.”

“We've reserved rooms at a B and B in the nearest town. We'll all clean up there, then walk to the chapel.”

“Will there be any other guests?” queried Mustang.

“No,” Ben replied. “My parents are... busy this weekend with a fund raiser for the school.”

“They're busy every weekend, with something or other,” added Rachel. “That's why we decided to marry on the quick. Choosing a date for a formal wedding which fit their schedule caused more arguments...”

“It's a once in a lifetime event,” Mustang commented. “Are you sure you wouldn't want them there?”

“Of course, we'd want them there,” snapped Ben. “They're so stiff-necked sometimes, though.”

Rachel's brown eyes met her cousin's twinkling orbs. “We could make a detour to the school, if you think...”

“Wouldn't it be for the best?”

“What are you prattling on about?” injected Ben.

“Forget it,” his bride-to-be chided. “Let’s get to the car.”

Thomas, having spouted off to an official, had been detained for a search of his suitcase, bringing up the rear as the group burst into the sultry mid-day. He tossed his burden in the limousine trunk as the chauffeur was securing the lid. When he slid in the back next to Mustang, Rachel scowled.

“Trust me, he’ll be on his best behavior,” Peter noted, “We’re headed fishing immediately after the nuptials.”

The drive to the prestigious Brisbane Scholastic Academy provided a chance to get acquainted with the headmaster’s son. He served as physical education teacher at the facility, and coach of the tennis team. His sandy hair and high cheekbones gave him a boyish appearance, though he was 34 years old.

Built less than fifty years previous, the academy’s design might have been taken from a 19th century British rendering of the finest educational complexes. That students - or, their parents, more precisely - paid thousands of Australian dollars for instruction, room and board, did not surprise the visitors. They alighted at the administration building, where expensively attired couples pranced up and down stone steps, through an arched doorway.

“I don’t know what you hope to accomplish,” admonished Ben as they trooped after Mustang into the airy grand hall.

“Which ones are they?” she inquired, scanning the room of pretentious snobs.

Ben pointed without seeming to do so. “There.”

“Wait here.”

They marveled from the threshold how Mustang’s jeans and polo shirt transformed into a dignified beige suit and frilly blouse as she passed between the guests. “Ah, Headmaster Henderson!” she bubbled. “I’ve been looking for you!”

The white-haired gentleman, wearing a forced smile while his brow furrowed with worry, accepted her outstretched fingers. “And, you are?”

“Lady Elizabeth Neville. Flew over from Scotland for a wedding. I’ve heard spectacular things about your institution, and am willing to donate one million pounds if you’ll do me a small favor.”

“One million *pounds*?” Edith Henderson choked.

“Indeed. The check is here in my pocket.”

“What’s the favor?”

“Give me a tour of the campus.”

“Of course.”

The Hendersons excused themselves from the cluster of potential patrons, sauntering past their own son without a glance. Outdoors, they paused when

Mustang confronted them on the top step, surrounded by her improvised entourage.

“The wedding I came to attend is Ben and Rachel’s,” she spat. “You shall have the donation at sunset, after you’ve kissed the bride and congratulated the groom.”

“We’ve been through all this before!” stormed Edith. “We told the children we could accommodate them if they were willing to postpone the ceremony until next spring...”

“They aren’t willing to wait,” O’Donnell barked. “Get in the car.”

The headmaster refused.

“I *can* force you, and it wouldn’t be pleasant,” warned Mustang. “Just remember, one million pounds is more than you’d raise from this rag-tag crowd with a dozen afternoon teas.”

Resigned, the older couple climbed into the limousine. Rachel squeezed Mustang’s arm in gratitude.

Peter snarled quietly, “Where do you plan to raise one million pounds?”

“I won’t need to. They’ll be so overjoyed by the wedding, they’ll release me from the promise.”

“You don’t know my father,” snickered Ben.

“You don’t know Mustang,” his fiancée retorted.

Their heads together conspiratorially, the Duryea cousins chattered about odds and ends as the vehicle bore north along the Queensland coast to the town of Montville.

“The flight down wasn’t dull,” Rachel proclaimed at one point.

Mustang admitted, “It had its... moments. You had a vision?”

“They’ve stopped completely. I could tell by Peter’s expression, things haven’t been... calm.”

“That’s due more to Thomas than me.”

“Those two vying for your attention?”

“Peter’s thrown in the towel. He understands my desire for solitude. Thomas...”

“Is an incurable cad.”

They giggled.

“Why no more visions?” Mustang prodded. “Psychic gifts aren’t something people outgrow with age.”

“The same reason we’re rushing the wedding. I’ve been diagnosed with ALS.”

Mustang's jaw sagged, and Peter noticed. Blue eyes posed the unspoken question. She shook her head to dissuade him from pursuing the matter.

"What about treatment?"

"There are no viable treatments. I've got a year to live, or less."

"No!" This exclamation was loud enough for all to hear. "I won't let that happen."

"Shh... It's not like you can stop it."

"Like hell, I can't."

IV

The cousins shared a bathroom at the quaint bed and breakfast in Montville. While Mustang showered, Rachel fussed with a blow-dryer and bobby-pins in front of the mirror.

"Aren't there any medications or therapies?" the younger asked.

"They're doing continual research, but haven't developed anything which merits human testing."

Mustang stepped from the tub, wrapped in a huge towel. "What are the symptoms?"

"The nerves degenerate, and it's started in my lower spine."

"Taking out your legs?"

"It will, eventually."

"Well, not anymore."

Rachel glared at Mustang. "How can you say..."

"We haven't seen each other for eight years, and during that time..."

"You learned the limits of your power?"

"I learned my power has no limits."

"You *have* raised the dead, then?"

"In a manner of speaking. There've been deaths, but more healing - everything from scraped hands to bullet wounds."

Rachel sank on the toilet cover. "Oh, my God..."

"Don't get your stomach in knots over this. You'll be fine. Where's your wedding dress?"

"I don't have one. We wanted to save our money to pay whatever hospital costs..."

"What were you going to wear?"

"My best summer frock."

“Bull.” Mustang pulled open the door. “You finish your hair. I’ll see to the details.”

What Rachel found displayed on the bed was a delicate satin and lace floor-length gown, a wreath of white roses with net veil lain across it. Tears flowed in abundance.

“Stop that!” Mustang scolded. “Don’t keep your groom waiting.”

Ben, Peter, Thomas and the Hendersons had gone ahead to the tiny white-shingle church, surrounded by lush trees and the traditional graveyard. When Mustang delivered Rachel into her step-father’s waiting hands, the blond filmmaker beamed with pride.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thanks to Mustang.”

An antique organ could barely be heard when the Wedding March began; Mustang augmented the melody with a full orchestra from nature itself. The minister nearly dropped his prayer book at the angelic sight filling the aisle; Ben couldn’t contain his awe.

Even his parents were mollified by the splendor.

The groom faltered on the phrase “‘til death do us part,” believing his new wife might leave him within twelve months. A salty droplet cascaded from one eye.

Rachel’s delicate finger lovingly stroked his chin. “We’ll be together for decades to come,” she confided. “I’ve been cured.”

“Are you sure?” he blurted, ignoring the rubrics.

“Positive.”

Ben didn’t wait to be told to kiss the bride. He lifted her and swung her around three times before Peter caught him and convinced him to settle down.

In the second pew, Thomas slipped his arm around Mustang’s waist. “More of your doing?”

“Seeing it unimpaired is different from dealing with it drunk, isn’t it?”

“More intriguing, if anything.”

“All will be revealed before long.”

By the time the minister announced, “I present to you, Rachel and Benjamin Henderson,” the entire party had wet cheeks. This was, initially, to be the end of the celebration, but Peter and Thomas had arranged for a special wedding dinner at one of Montville’s finer restaurants. The revelers adjourned there, to be welcomed by the felicitations of other patrons and staff.

Wine and liquor flowed freely; Burton moved the glasses out of reach. He felt Mustang’s hazel eyes upon him more than once as he nursed a cup of coffee.

Following multiple courses, the chef wheeled in a three-tiered wedding cake, and Rachel wept with pleasure.

Her new husband soothed her. Mustang envied the couple, in a way, calling to mind how Jim Neville had repeatedly consoled her when the FBI or her powers frazzled her nerves. No other man on the planet had been so understanding - so tolerant - of her dilemma.

She *had* changed in the years since a barrage of gunfire at a California convenience store had robbed her of Jim's company. Though she'd acquired a reputation for kindness in the district around Dores, and humored those who sought her assistance, she mostly kept everyone at a distance, a hermit whose sole companions were horses.

"You're looking pensive," Peter muttered in her ear.

"Just thinking it'll be nice to get home."

"That reminds me: you mentioned something at Boleskine about playing chess with Mark Twain..."

"What about it?"

"Were you pulling my leg?"

"Not at all. Mr. Twain and I met - on accident - at another wedding, as a matter of fact, in Hannibal, Missouri. Periodically, I welcome him, and others, into my home."

"Others? Who, for instance?"

"General Rommel - he's an avid chess enthusiast. Mahatma Gandhi enjoys discussing world events. Francis of Assisi prefers playing cards."

"You mean, you conjure them?"

"Put it however you want."

"You conjured Rachel's dress?"

"Transformed it from... something more ordinary."

"Thank you. I've never seen her more radiant."

"I owe you two a lot. You helped me get a grip on my power, when I thought it might destroy me."

"What about Thomas?" O'Donnell wondered.

She stole a glance at the sober actor. "He'll soon be remembering things he'd much rather forget, and he may repent a great many of his actions."

"So, you've not told him?"

"Not yet."

The way Burton leapt from the table and rushed from the dining room, Mustang guessed she wouldn't have to tell him at all. Patting Peter's hand, she scampered after Thomas into the balmy night air.

“You all right?”

“I... remembered... snakes...” he moaned.

“And it wasn’t a dream, was it?”

“No.”

“What else?”

“I feel like my head’s about to explode, there’s so much...”

“And it’ll take you weeks, months, even years to digest it all.”

“What *are* you, girl?”

“There’s still an hour until midnight.”

“Don’t torture me this way!”

“You’ll be asleep by then, anyway,” she chuckled.

They meandered aimlessly, Mustang watching Thomas’ facial tics betray his inner anguish. She steered him to their lodgings where - the turmoil having drained him - he dozed in an armchair near the window of the room he was sharing with Peter.

“Is he drunk?” O’Donnell inquired of the vigilant young woman when he trudged in around 1:30.

“Mentally bankrupt might be a better term. He’s been through a lot in a short period.”

“And you didn’t tell him?”

“I didn’t have to.”

“First thing tomorrow, I’ll send you home. Better you not be here when he wakes.”

“I owe the Hendersons a million pounds. I’ll not welsh on my promise.”

“When they left, Edith was crying so hard, Leo could hardly hold her upright. They told me they’ve never seen Ben so happy. It’s all they’ve ever wanted, deep down.”

“I’ll send them the money, someday,” Mustang vowed.

“That’s your choice. They wanted to thank you for what you did...”

“Given the countless accidents I caused with this... power, to be able to live up to your expectations and do good is thanks enough.”

“Then, should I call the airport and have the plane ready?”

“I’ll... go my own way, if it’s okay by you. After I say good-bye to Rachel.”

Peter gave sentiment free reign. “Will I ever get an invitation to a wedding at Boleskine?”

“If you were twenty years younger, you’d be the groom,” Mustang smirked.

“Living alone is a tough road.”

“My grandfather did it for fifty years; given his example, it’s for the best.”

“Relying on figments of your imagination for occasional company?”

“They’re very real, Peter. Some of the greatest minds in history.”

“Oh, to be a fly on the wall!”

“You’ll be welcome anytime. You know that, don’t you?”

“You can be sure, I’ll take you up on it. For now, this old man needs the welcome of a friendly pillow.”

Mustang embraced Peter before groping along the dim corridor to her own room. At first light, having not slept, she crept downstairs to the kitchen and raided the refrigerator for orange juice and cheese.

Rachel found her there. “Why are you up so early?” she remonstrated.

“Back at you. Isn’t there a husband around somewhere you should be snuggling?”

“He’s snoring peacefully, thank you.”

“What’s with the get-up?”

Indeed, Rachel resembled an outback tour guide, in khaki hiking shorts, matching shirt and wide-brimmed hat crammed atop her brunette pony tail. “I’m headed for the chapel.”

“Why? It’s not Sunday.”

“Even if it was, that wouldn’t be the reason, as well you know. Last night, getting ready for bed, I discovered I’d lost one of my earrings. I’m thinking it must’ve been during the service, while Ben was swinging me around. I’ve got to find it...”

“It’s just an earring.”

“Not so. Peter gave them to me when I graduated from Trinity; they were Mom’s favorites. I’ll be heartbroken if it’s not there.” Rachel accepted the glass Mustang offered. “Why don’t you come with me?”

Having eaten a light breakfast, they set out at a brisk pace, Mustang with her backpack in tow. Birds twittered overhead, and the younger woman could’ve sworn she saw a koala clinging to the branch of a eucalyptus tree.

“Where are you going on your honeymoon?”

“We’re driving down to Sydney for the week, that is, once I’ve seen the doctor and...”

Mustang sniffed. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I do, but trying to explain it to Ben would...”

“Cause your first argument?”

Playfully, Rachel jogged onward, calling back, “You should stay here in Australia. I could get you a job teaching at the school...”

“I don’t have a degree. I barely finished high school!”

“With your power, you could lecture on any subject you chose, and the kids would soak it up like sponges.”

“And what would happen to those who misbehaved? I don’t think your headmaster father-in-law would approve me torching his high-paying pupils.” Mustang chased her cousin through a grove of orange trees. “Sorry, Rachel, I don’t have the temperament for being around people anymore.”

“Then, you *have* fulfilled those visions I had of you, so long ago.”

Mustang mulled over the statement. “Yes, I suppose I have. I’ve stood in the presence of great men and, these days, I ride my horses with wild abandon around the estate.”

“Don’t you get lonely?” Rachel pressed, hanging from a low branch.

“There’s a big difference between being alone, and being lonely. I’ve known people who are lonely in a crowded, noisy room.”

“Will you write to me?”

“Nothing exciting happens at Boleskine. I ride my horses, clean their stalls and enjoy nature.”

Rachel continued toward the chapel. “If I write to you?”

“I’ll read every word with eagerness.” Mustang held open the door. “Are you going to e-mail my mom?”

“Should I?”

“Poor thing, she loved my dad, but she married too young. She didn’t know what it meant to be a wife, a mother or an individual, so he walked all over her for nearly 30 years. I can see her, skulking from room to room in that empty house, unable to tell the ranch hands what to do, or tend to the disposition of the horses...”

“Once upon a time, you planned to run the ranch after graduation,” Rachel recalled. “Couldn’t you go back to Montana and help your mom take care of things, even for a few weeks?”

“I’d end up walking all over her, no differently than dad. This is her chance to finally grow up, though it’s going to be agonizing. She may discover she doesn’t like the person she became while married, and chuck the whole lot for life in... Chicago!”

They laughed together, entering the quiet wood-frame structure. Mustang persisted, “You can write and tell her you saw me, and I’m fine. Since I’m not

sorry about missing the funeral - or that dad's dead, really - you can ignore that topic."

"Have you become so heartless?"

"What I've become, I think, is pragmatic. If I care about people; I put them in danger. I have what I need at Boleskine. I don't need more. Some foolish souls spend their entire lives chasing illusions of love, wealth and power; I've got contentment."

"Then, you and Thomas..."

"Thomas will be doing some growing up of his own in the coming months. His mind has been opened to the realization he's led a less-than-stellar existence, and I'd cause him more trouble than I'm worth. I don't think he'll ever drink alcohol again, either."

On her knees, Rachel crawled between the pews. "Won't that affect his acting?"

"Next time he's performing in Edinburgh, I'll have to go and see."

Falling silent as the search proceeded, they encountered more dust balls than valuables. Eventually, though, caught in a loop of the sanctuary carpet, a glittering diamond reflected the sunlight.

"There!" Rachel cried, snatching it gleefully.

Cavorting exultantly in the open air, the pair wove between rain-smoothed grave markers, and jumped a white-washed fence. At a crossroad, they paused, knowing it was, truly, a parting of the ways.

They hugged, clinging to each other for a long time. "You know, Mustang, you're responsible for everything that's happened to me the past eight years," said Rachel.

"Don't sell yourself short, cousin. You're an incredible person."

"Because of the courage I saw in you that first time, at Dad's funeral, I went back to college. I had the courage to apply for a teaching position thousands of miles from my home. I had the courage to say yes when Ben asked me to marry him."

"You had the courage to love. In that regard, I'm a coward."

They separated, standing eye-to-eye. "You loved, and lost, from what Peter told me. It's never too late to travel that path again."

"As I told Peter, I'd only risk it with him - if he shaved two decades off his age."

Mirth lit both their faces when Mustang struck out beyond Montville's perimeter to a spouting field where the damage from her electrifying mode of transportation would be minimal.

The last loose ends were tied off now, she determined. Rachel would live many years with her husband, and raise any number of healthy children. Peter had film production to occupy his days and, eventually, might move to Queensland to be closer to his step-grandchildren. Thomas' personal quest would negate any puerile affection he'd entertained for her, and she hadn't been compelled to divulge the secret of her power.

Pop-up summer storms a frequent occurrence along the Australian coast, weather service personnel didn't flinch when a rogue lightning bolt blipped on their radar.

The first thing Mustang did upon descending the hillock to Boleskine House was pull on a clean sweater. A terrible chill had set in, with cold mist and blustery winds. In the barn, the horses were warm and well fed; Glenn MacDonough was a good neighbor.

A fire on the living room grate thawed her. No television, no phone, no computer - peace. Jack Parsons' journals lay where she'd left them on the end table. She flipped the yellowed pages of the top volume twirling a lock of auburn hair around her finger.

Her travels done, no reason to alter the color again.

Her life might not be productive or successful - as defined by society - but she would grow old, undisturbed, in this wee corner of Scotland, and let the world go its own way.