

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Engaging Mustang*

A Novella

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

# I

“Damn! What magnificent horses!”

A half-second later, a startled contralto responded, “Damn! An American!”

Scraping congealed oats from the corner of Sarge’s stall, Mustang Duryea had flinched at the unexpected exclamation, thumping her head on the planks. She’d instantly wracked her brain for any utterance which might have summoned the trespasser. Satisfied she could not be blamed, she reveled in the man’s unaffected accent.

The locals’ Scottish burr irritated her ears, and it had been months since more welcome guests had delighted her with their Irish brogue.

A wave of homesickness washed her soul as she poked her auburn head around the corner. Backlit by the pale sun, an interesting silhouette hovered near the partially-open stable door.

“I knocked at the house, but no one answered,” explained the visitor with a trace of Brooklyn. “Is the owner at home?”

“We don’t give tours.”

“I just need a phone.”

“Don’t have one.”

The square-shouldered figure crossed the straw-sprinkled floor. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope.” Mustang straightened, laying aside her trowel and removing soiled work gloves. “If you’re in some kind of trouble, I don’t want to know...”

“Our bus slid off the road. Three tires are stuck in the mud.”

“And none of you tourists have cell phones?”

“Of course, we do. We can’t get a signal.”

“Nessie’s vibes interfere with the towers,” the young woman joked. “Doesn’t the driver have a radio?”

“Our promoter hired a private guide...”

“Promoter?”

“We’ve been performing around Britain for the past month, and he thought we needed a break...”

Mustang skirted the stalls, positioning herself near the exit. Deep set blue eyes tracked her and, his features finally illuminated by the afternoon overcast, she swallowed hard.

A wavy russet mop, falling from a natural middle part, crowned his wide forehead. His eyebrows were so light as to be barely visible above the straight nose. Prominent cheekbones and a set jaw framed thin lips curled in a minuscule

smile. She guessed, from his modest height and the muscular physique beneath a black leather jacket and jeans, he could've been an animal trainer for a circus...

And she really didn't want the details.

"Best thing to do is hike about two miles along the main road. Glenn MacDonough has a phone..."

He retorted, "If you don't mind, I'll wait and ask the owner."

"I *do* mind, and I *am* the owner," proclaimed the Mistress of Boleskine.

"Are you serious?"

"Very."

"You're too young..."

She would've preferred to show him just how old she felt, but repressed the impulse. "Please, leave."

"These your horses?"

"I told you..."

"If you don't have a phone, you can't call the cops to have me arrested. Where'd you get the Arabian?"

"I bought it."

He approached the regal white mount. "Must've cost a pretty penny."

"None of your business."

"Actually, it *is* my business. My family's been breeding Morgans on Long Island for three generations."

Mustang's tone softened slightly. "Why aren't you there... tending the stock?"

"Because I wanted to test a few other options before settling for the country life."

"There's nothing better than spending the day around horses. They're so... honest with their affection."

"Which is why you live here alone?"

"Exactly."

He bowed stiffly. "I apologize for disturbing your idyll. You say there's a phone up the road?"

"Glenn MacDonough's. You can't miss the sign; two miles on the dot."

"Thanks."

He extended his hand in an odd fashion: palm down, thumb at a right angle to the four curled fingers. He might've been reaching for the handle of a lawn mower, but Mustang sensed he intended it as a polite gesture.

His grip on her digits would've stopped the blood flow, had he not released it quickly.

She watched him tramp down the winding gravel drive, his rapid gait as unusual as his handshake. His chest jutted forward, propelled by squat legs, he might've been ready to break into a run at any moment.

Tugging the sweat jacket close around her torso, Mustang hoped assistance for the stranded vehicle would arrive before late October rains commenced anew. Last thing she wanted, come nightfall, was a troupe of players haunting her doorstep, begging shelter from the cold.

Horses fed and watered, their gratitude expressed in contented nuzzles and appreciative whinnies, the stable door was secured against persistent north winds. Inside Boleskine House, embers on the living room grate were stirred back to life, dry kindling sparking fresh flames.

She settled in the cane-backed rocking chair, an unfinished game of chess tempting on the table beside her. For some months, neither Mark Twain nor Erwin Rommel had sat opposite, calculating the next move of the black queen and her minions in defense of their king. All she need do is speak a name...

Her bones thawed, she resisted the idea. Best to cook dinner, then crawl in bed with a good book.

Too often had she let slip the magnitude of her power, bequeathed by her grandfather, Jack Parsons. Since returning from her cousin Rachel's wedding in Australia, she'd renewed the struggle not to avail upon nature for special favors. She hadn't so much as altered the color of her hair from auburn to black to be less conspicuous, yet the violations of her resolution had wreaked death and disaster.

In the kitchen, which some interior designers would cite as uncharacteristically contemporary for a historic Georgian dwelling, she selected eggs and bacon from the refrigerator and a cast iron skillet from a hook above the stove. Ten minutes elapsed, the meat sizzling and yolks intact, when a banging on the door sent the spatula through the tender membranes.

Expletives flew as Mustang extinguished the heat and squinted out the window above the sink. Too dark to see anything, she yanked the tarnished knob inward, and glared at the leather-clad man on the stoop.

"I knew it!" she groaned.

His apologies were profuse and sincere. "I'm really sorry about this. When I got back to the road, my friends were gone. They left a note about snagging a ride on a passing tour bus that couldn't wait. They're sending a tow truck tomorrow..."

Reluctantly, she hissed, "Come in."

Not only he entered, but two others behind him - initially shielded from Mustang's view because their complexions blended with brown suits in the evening gloom.

"Who are they?" queried their hostess.

"Ed and Hank Watts. Our manager sent them hunting for me, and they ended up stranded, too."

"Welcome."

"Thanks so much, ma'am." Hank pumped her hand enthusiastically. "I swear, I heard lions out there in the woods."

Not lions, Mustang knew, just her booby traps to deter nocturnal wanderers.

"Sit, please. I was fixing myself something to eat..."

Ed commandeered the spatula and approached the idle skillet. "We'll take care of that, if you don't mind. The least we can do to repay you for saving us."

The two African-Americans, lean and energetic, set about raiding cabinets and preparing a three-course pasta dinner. Mustang and the third member of their party observed from seats at the dinette table.

"You introduced them, but not yourself," the young woman hinted.

He removed his jacket and draped it over the chair. A faded, grey flannel shirt perplexed her. Then again, the attire suited an animal trainer.

He disregarded her accusatory squint. "Jerry Richards."

"I'm known in these parts as Lady Elizabeth Neville."

"But you're not nobility. You're as American as we are."

She nodded.

"And, you're a professional when it comes to handling horses."

"You might say that."

"I could tell the instant I saw the layout of your barn. The tack well organized, the stock exercised and groomed. Grew up in the Midwest, did you?"

"Yes." Though her answer was straightforward, a niggling suspicion preyed on her mind. FBI agent Ben Espinoza could've sent a subordinate to check on her... A little alcohol might loosen his tongue. "Would you like a drink?"

"Milk, if you have any."

Stunned, Mustang rose. "Sure." She proceeded to fill four glasses from a jug, and set out plates and silverware. "Were you supposed to perform in Inverness tonight?"

"Last night," corrected Ed. "A packed house. Kind of nice."

"What... parts do you play?"

“We do a tribute to the Nicholas Brothers.” Not the reply she expected. She gazed at Richards.

“I’m not surprised you don’t recognize the name,” he remarked.

“Oh, I do. The classic musicals are my favorite movies. But, I don’t understand...”

“The show is called ‘Vaudeville: Resurrection’.”

“Vaudeville? Today?”

Ed served a platter of vermicelli, while Hank finished tossing a green salad. “We were a big hit in the States,” the latter said. “Makes people forget their troubles for a couple hours.”

“That, I understand.”

“Chuck your chest up to the wood,” invited Richards, grabbing a fork.

Mustang observed, “*Angels with Dirty Faces*.”

“Very good.”

“Testing me?”

“I hate when people fake politeness. You *must* like old movies to know that line.”

“Be clear on this point, Mr. Richards: I don’t *fake* politeness, and I don’t tolerate lying. While you’re under my roof, it’ll serve you well to abide by that rule.”

The three men raised their glasses in unison, clinking them against Mustang’s as a sign of agreement. Little conversation took place after that, so busy were they stuffing their mouths.

The Watts brothers patted their stomachs and yawned once the last drips of chocolate pudding were scraped from their bowls. Rising, Ed wondered, “Where do we crash, ma’am?”

“Down the hall, the two bedrooms on the right.”

Hank saluted wearily as they shuffled in that direction. “Thanks, and good night.”

Mustang and Richards left to contemplate the array of dirty dishes and pots, neither moved. “Why a house so big, if you’re all alone?” puzzled Richards.

“I... inherited it.”

“Ah!”

“I’ve never heard anyone twist that one syllable so completely into an insult,” she snapped. “I’m not some heiress living off my daddy’s bank account.”

With a deft motion, he flipped her right palm upward. “I can tell that by the callouses, and the...” His eyes widened as a stubby forefinger traced scars caused by lightning.

She withdrew her hand, rubbing it self-consciously. “We’d better get started on this mess.”

Water running from the tap, Mustang cleared the table. Richards emptied scraps from the saucepans and pots into a trash basket near the door.

“What do I call you, informally?” he ventured.

“Informally?”

“It doesn’t feel right calling a fellow American ‘Lady Elizabeth’.”

“Mustang.”

“That would place you further west, if it means what I think it means.”

“Montana.”

“How’d you end up...” She preempted the inquiry.

“My turn. What do you do in the show?”

“Routines from old George M. Cohan productions.”

Elbow deep in soapy bubbles, the young woman considered the import of Richards’ statement. Dwarfed by his agile companions, he didn’t strike her as a dancer, yet Cohan’s style of dancing - and singing, for that matter - differed vastly from the likes of Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly. She’d written a report in eighth grade music class about the patriotic composer and Broadway entertainer; the biographers she’d referenced agreed on that point.

When Richards delivered an assortment of utensils to the sink, she stood nose-to-nose with him, not having to look up so much as a quarter inch. Hastily, she averted her face.

“Now I get it,” he chuckled.

“Get what?”

“Why you’re out here, in the middle of nowhere, by yourself.”

She bit back her own laugh. “Elucidate, please.”

“You’re one of those naive gals who’s had a torrid affair with a married man, and has pledged never to let your guard down again.”

“Wrong.” Her encounter with Scottish First Minister Sloan MacTavish had transpired long after she’d consigned herself to a life of isolation.

“You say that, but I know better.”

“You’re so worldly wise at, what, 25 years old?” she mocked.

“Thirty. Typical mistake for a kid not old enough to drink.”

“You think that, do you?” Without drying her hands, Mustang jerked open the pantry and revealed a sealed bottle of Jameson Special Reserve Whiskey. “I can go shot for shot with you, if you dare.”

“I know teenagers who can do the same.”

“Get out!”

The conviction of her words gave Richards pause. He retreated two steps and adopted a humble mien.

"I... didn't mean to offend you, Lady Elizabeth. If you've ever been to Brooklyn, you'd hear people trading insults back and forth, in a friendly way. It's the same with the show's cast. I'm... unfamiliar with local customs..."

"It's got nothing to do with local customs," stated his hostess, reddening. "Your assumption I'm escaping from a cheap affair does a disservice to all women."

"You're escaping from *something*. No television, phone, computer... Not even a radio. You definitely don't want anyone to find you."

"You'd better get some rest. It's a long walk to the village in the morning."

"A long walk? I'll pay you gas money, if you'll drive us."

She sneered. "I don't own a car, either."

## II

Mustang toted a pile of sheets, blankets and pillows into the living room, depositing them on the green sofa.

"Glad to know you forgive me," snarled Richards.

"Forgive you for what?"

"You've got at least four bedrooms in this place, and I get the couch?"

"Five, actually. Only two are furnished, and I gave them to your friends."

"They could've doubled up."

She plumped a pillow with deliberate roughness. "You'll be perfectly comfortable here."

"Where will you crash?"

"Don't worry about me."

The Mistress of Boleskine retired to her study, locking deadbolts against further intrusion. The love seat would require her feet to dangle over the arm, but she didn't intend such inconvenience to disrupt her slumber.

She had Jerry Richards for that.

The LCD clock on the end table flashed 2:41 when the doorframe rattled. Every stinkin' time someone spends the night... she mused, groggily stumbling across the carpet.

"What do you *want*?" she barked through reinforced steel.

"Aspirin. You got any?"

"Don't believe in it."

"Damn, woman. You primitive, or what?" scoffed Richards.

“I don’t whine simply because my head hurts.”

“Not my head. My legs. Too much walking.”

“If you can dance, you should be able to hike a mile or two...”

“Different muscles.” He rapped on the reinforced steel. “Why don’t you let me in? I don’t bite.”

“I don’t care if you do or not. Get back to bed.”

“Can’t sleep. I’ve worked out where black will have white mated in six moves...”

“Fine. Go play with yourself.”

Cruel, yes, but the exertion of scrubbing the entire barn had drained her energy, and her hazel orbs ached to close.

She discerned footsteps plodding toward the kitchen, curious if any food would be left in the cupboards come morning. The next delivery of supplies wasn’t due until the following week...

“Oh, hell...”

Tumblers shifted and she scurried down the hall. The kitchen remained dark but, turning, she heard a faint, syncopated tapping from the rear of the structure.

A lone bulb burned in the ceiling fixture. Insomnia pumping adrenaline through his veins, Mustang presumed, Richards had shut himself in the empty fifth bedroom, practicing dance routines. She peered through a narrow crack, marveling at the unconventional, straight-legged style.

He mimicked Cohan precisely.

She was drawing the door closed, when he abruptly wrenched it aside. “You guard your privacy. Am I, as your guest, not allowed mine?”

“When I hear noises in the wee hours, I reserve the right to investigate,” she countered.

“Point taken.” His flannel sleeve wiped perspiration from his furrowed brow. “You can stay, if you like.”

Mustang declined.

“Dancing isn’t your thing?”

“I admire those who can do it well. Sitting through rehearsals... Frankly, I could be otherwise occupied.”

He clasped her hands, enticing her to join him with an unyielding tug.

“No, I... can’t,” she protested. “I’m not... coordinated that way.”

“If you can sit a horse, you can dance.”

“Let go!”

It transpired before she could stop herself. The words verbalized, an electric shock crackled through Richards' fingers, giving him no alternative but to liberate her. Disappointed by her weakness, consumed with guilt, she fled to the study, securing all three locks.

She awoke with tear-stained pillows six hours later. Rested despite the knots in her stomach, she emerged from the cozy room to find a dejected Richards perched on a kitchen chair in the passage.

"What the hell..."

"I want you to know how sorry I am," he murmured, snapping to attention like a soldier at court martial. "I didn't mean to make you angry, or force you to do something you didn't want to do."

The young woman was touched by his earnest tone. "It's... okay. I live by one rule, and have broken it far too often: I mustn't get angry. I do horrible things when I'm angry."

"I won't ignore that warning. Performing in theatres half my life, I'm used to being around boisterous people who love to dance, or sing, or act. It never occurred to me those on the outside might not dream of hoofing it around a stage."

"Not in the middle of the night, at any rate." She managed a feeble grin. "Have you had breakfast?"

"A bowl of cereal."

"And your friends?"

"Them, too. We can pay you for what we ate..."

"No need."

"We'll be going, then." His fist gently chucked Mustang's upper arm.

The gesture stunned her. "Where... will you go?"

"Down to your neighbor's, to use his phone."

"Then, what?"

"We wait for our ride."

"That could take hours and, having lived here through many a changing season, I'd say you're rather... underdressed to stand outdoors more than ten seconds."

"Our luggage is at the hotel..."

She patted his scruffy cheek. "Impressive talent isn't automatically coupled with common sense, eh, Jerry?"

"What..."

"Give me ten minutes to grab a bite and dress, then we'll solve your problem with ease."

His jaw dropped; Mustang didn't give him a chance to vocalize the question. She scooted past him and continued into the kitchen.

Ed and Hank Watts sat at the table, sipping coffee from ceramic mugs. "Good morning, ma'am!" hailed the latter.

"You both must've slept well."

"Better beds than some of the hotels," Ed confirmed. "And nice, warm quilts."

"I'm glad." Mustang placed two slices of bread in the toaster. "By the way, which of you is which?"

"It's simple to tell us apart," quipped Hank. "I'm older, and he's taller."

"Good to know if I need to change a lightbulb. How'd you get into this vaudeville act?"

Augmenting each other's narratives with key details, they related tales of childhood in Philadelphia, learning to break dance on street corners, then moving into a studio for more formal lessons. They made the rounds of talent competitions, with reviewers commenting on their technique's resemblance to the Nicholas Brothers. Studying the famous pair, they bought two tickets to New York and auditioned for an off-Broadway vaudeville revival. The success of that show led to the present tour.

"There's been some interest in Hollywood about doing a bio-pic about the brothers," concluded Hank. "And we're at the top of their list if the financing ever comes through."

In that moment, Mustang envied the men. Being in the spotlight, surrounded by the adulation of the crowds...

She crashed back to reality at the thought of her power manifesting unintentionally - like hours earlier - and causing damage or, worse, unnecessary fatalities.

Ed noticed the wistful twinkle in her eye fade. "Are you okay?"

Groping for a knife in the drawer, she muttered, "Sure." Her toast buttered and smeared with grape jelly, she hurried from the room.

Showered, sporting blue jeans and a thick cable-knit sweater, auburn locks banded in a ponytail, Mustang signaled Richards from the living room doorway. He'd revived the fire on the grate, and she would've preferred to stretch out in the cane-backed rocker near the heat source. Instead, she tossed him a purple sweatshirt.

"What's this for?" he prodded.

"To wear."

"We going out?"

“You like my horses so much, I plan to let you ride one.”

“Cool.”

He wrestled the garment over his head, and adjusted his flannel collar. Something about the way he used his hands intrigued Mustang. His thumb was consistently angled away from his palm, with his index finger almost pointing straight, while the other three digits curled slightly. It reminded her of how a child played cops and robbers, pretending to aim a pistol at his opponent.

They’d been in that position even when she’d watched him dancing, arms fluidly paralleling his body movements. The way he’d held his fork at dinner fit the mix, as well.

Distracted trying to rationalize this oddity, she zipped her parka and led him from Boleskine House to the stable, wind gusting and whipping colorful leaves into impromptu cyclones.

“How can you live here year ‘round?” queried Richards, tucking the collar of his leather jacket around his ears.

“It’s not as bad as Montana. By this time of year, we’d already have a foot of snow on the ground.”

The combined aroma of tooled leather, straw and horse manure assailed their nostrils when the door slid aside on well-oiled rollers. Mustang reached for Molly’s saddle, to have it commandeered by much stronger arms. Richards even boosted her onto the roan, before mounting Sarge.

He controlled the reins with that same unusual grip...

They rode side-by-side through naked trees, the paths partially frozen slush. From the corner of her eye, Mustang observed his erect posture, surmising he’d ridden show horses competitively.

They chatted about his youth in Brooklyn, trips to his family’s stables in Long Island, and his unsuccessful attempts to become a dramatic actor.

“Directors didn’t see me as leading man material.”

Mustang dodged a grilling about her background, making his subsequent deduction more unnerving.

“Your secret is secret no longer.”

“What secret?” she challenged.

“Since it wasn’t an affair that exiled you from the States, it has to be murder.”

Her head spun toward him. “Remember my warning, Jerry.”

Too late, she realized he’d been joking, and his face fell as a result of her sharp reprimand. His dejection cut to the depths of her soul like a dagger. Taking

the recent debacle with Sloan MacTavish to heart, she couldn't afford to embrace and comfort this man...

Glenn MacDonough's brick edifice appeared before them all too soon. They dismounted near his porch, and Mustang rang the bell.

"Glory be, Your Ladyship, but I'd be thinkin' this lad 'tis your brother," greeted the contractor. "That is, if I dinnae know ye dyed your hair that bonnie shade of red."

Mustang was content to let her neighbor hold this erroneous viewpoint. She introduced Richards and let MacDonough usher them into his office.

"Where be your people lodgin'?" their host inquired, grasping the cordless phone.

Richards admitted, "They're in Edinburgh by now. We've a show booked tonight."

"Best to call a taxi, or a limousine t drive you there," suggested Mustang.

"That'd cost a fortune."

"It's because of me you and your friends missed your ride. I... might even go with you, and see you perform."

The call placed, they refused MacDonough's invitation to breakfast. The sun had broken through threatening clouds, so the jaunt to Boleskine proved quite pleasant.

"Where you two been?" demanded Ed Watts when the couple bustled through the kitchen door. "This place gets kinda creepy when no one's around."

Mustang assured him, "Don't worry, there aren't any ghosts."

"I wouldn't be so sure," added Hank. "We heard some strange whistling..."

"The wind, through gaps in the window panes. The house has settled a bit since I had new ones installed..."

Richards caught Mustang's parka when she shed it, carrying it to the coat rack in the foyer. The brothers had brewed a fresh pot of coffee; she poured herself a cup and warmed her hands.

"Get your stuff together, boys," Richards advised when he reappeared. "We'll be leaving as soon as the limo shows."

"A limo?" echoed Hank.

"Courtesy of Lady Elizabeth."

"Gee, thanks, ma'am."

She grinned at the old-fashioned manners. "No problem."

"She might even come with us and sit front row center," proclaimed the Cohan impersonator.

"Don't jump the gun, Jerry. It was just an idea."

”A good one, too. For someone who likes old musicals, this’ll be a treat.”

“I... don’t know.”

“I’m kinda surprised you don’t have shelves full of titles and a personal DVD player, since you don’t own a TV.”

“That... never occurred to me. My days are occupied with the horses...”

“And whoever plays chess with you.” He filled a mug with steaming brew. “Leaving this... sanctuary once in awhile to get a taste of the real world would be beneficial.”

The laugh welled in her throat, difficult to repress. “For whom?”

“For anyone who saw you,” postulated Ed. “The more beautiful women out there, the better I like it.”

“I appreciate the compliment, but...”

“No buts, now,” Richards scolded, lifting her off the chair. “Go and pack a bag. I’m sure we’ll be able to find you a room at our hotel, so we can do this up right - dinner, the show, and a party afterward.”

“You... don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I promise, you’ll have a grand time. The way you’re resisting, you’d think the world would end if you set foot off the property.”

“Can you be so sure?” She whispered the sentiment, knowing he heard by the rapid shift in his expression.

### III

Accustomed to traveling long distances in the blink of an eye - or flash of a lightning bolt - Mustang slept most of the drive from Boleskine to Edinburgh. She didn’t realize she’d been resting her head against Richards’ chest until a sharp curve roused her suddenly.

She blushed profusely.

He slipped a muscular arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. “No harm in being comfortable.”

“I just saw a guy walking down the street in a kilt!” gushed Hank, nose pressed to the tinted window.

Mustang straightened, adjusting the twisted parka hood. “Scottish men wear their kilts everywhere.”

“You’re kidding!” Ed exclaimed. “Don’t their knees get cold?”

“I’ve never bothered to ask. Even if I did, I wouldn’t understand the answer.”

This reference to the local burr brought a devilish smile to Richards' lips, and he launched into an exact imitation of Glenn MacDonough. "Oy, lads, ye must nae make a fuss about our wee kilts. 'Tis much easier when we catch a bonnie lassie runnin' through the heather, because we dinnae have t' unbutton our troosers."

Their chauffeur glanced in his rear view mirror at the eruption of laughter which shook the vehicle.

"You've got a great ear for dialects," praised Mustang, her lungs heaving.

"Living in New York, it comes naturally. Each neighborhood has its own accent and, if you're caught in the wrong place with the wrong one, you could end up dead."

"I suppose you can do Italian, and Polish..."

"And speak Yiddish, if the need arises."

She ruffled his russet curls. "Even the right accent wouldn't help you in Chinatown."

He nudged her in the ribs.

When the limousine braked at the University of Edinburgh's main gate, Mustang promptly ducked low. Barney Kerr's statue - for which she'd served as model three years previous - rose from its pedestal like a harbinger of doom.

"You're performing *here*?"

"College campuses, mostly," confirmed Ed.

His brother concurred. "The show was promoted as theatrical history, so some professors incorporated it into their curriculum."

"We'll check in with the stage manager, then get cleaned up at the hotel," Richards said.

Mustang hedged when he opened the door. "I'll... wait here."

"No need. Don't you want to pick out your seat for tonight?"

"I'll... take whatever's available."

Both the Watts and Richards hoisted her from the vehicle.

"Don't be a fraidy cat," snickered Hank.

She stopped on the pretense of tying her sneaker. "You go ahead. I'll catch up in a minute."

Squatting on the sidewalk, she fiddled with her laces as the trio strode toward the buildings. Believing herself unrecognized, she lowered her chin and shuffled quickly past the scholarship-winning monument, bumping into Richards, who stared up at the marble image.

"That's... you!" he breathed.

Mute in terror, she nodded.

“It’s gorgeous!”

“Thanks,” she sputtered meekly.

He approached the base, reading the bronze plaque. “‘The *Spirit of Education*, sculpted by Barney Kerr of Dores, Scotland.’ Isn’t that the village near your house?”

“Yes.”

“He must’ve seen you riding and been inspired...”

Mustang sighed in relief. No need to reveal the truth, she slipped her hand through the crook in Richards’ arm when he offered it.

“You’re probably more famous than I’ll ever be,” he commented, escorting her across the quad.

She regretted the words no more had they been uttered. “Notorious would be a better term.”

“Only if you were some gangster’s moll.” His pace faltered. “That’s not the reason... You’re not in the witness protection program?”

“No, Jerry. Would I have permitted my mug to be carved in stone and put on display if I was?”

“If he did it from memory, you wouldn’t have known.”

“Please, let’s get moving. I’m freezing.”

The robust, white-haired stage manager was fighting a tangle, literally, of ropes and backdrops, which had come off the lorry after being improperly loaded by the Inverness crew. “This’ll take hours to fix!” he moaned, waving the Watts into the wings.

Richards’ decision startled Mustang. He whirled toward her, fist brushing her arm. “I’ve got to stay and help. The limo will take you to the hotel. I’ll see you there, later.”

The anguish in his blue orbs attested to an unwavering dedication to his art - the old adage, “The show must go on.” She didn’t stir from her position near the green velvet curtain, watching him rally other cast members to assist with repairs and preparations. The wall clock above the stage door gave them four hours before the auditorium buzzed with expectant students.

Work lights suspended above the stage flickered and failed, drawing expletives from every mouth.

“Somebody check the circuit breakers!” hollered the stage manager.

Rustling noises and wind screaming through the rafters sent bodies crashing into each other in an effort to flee the scene. Mustang was nearly trampled when five men groped their way past her. Thirty seconds elapsed before the power was restored...

And all present gaped at tidy piles arranged in proper order on the floor. Richards' red head whipped stage left, in time to see Mustang creep into the shadows. He snagged a clump of her parka as she dashed from the building, knocking her accidentally into the brick wall.

She shook free of his grip. "Why so rough, Jerry?"

"I wanted to be sure you weren't hurt..."

"So, you hurt me?"

"Did you see..." he panted.

"Nobody saw anything, without the lights."

"It's... like a miracle."

"I don't believe in miracles." She scooted beyond his reach. "I'll see you at the hotel."

"I'll... come with you."

"Don't you have to..."

"Not since the ghosts lent a hand."

Turning up the collar of his leather jacket against the chill afternoon breeze, Richards fell into step with Mustang, guilt at another lapse in her resolve nauseating her.

Hadn't Peter O'Donnell wished for her to use the power in positive ways? What could be more positive than saving the performance?

"You're upset by what happened?" Richards probed.

She stared at the ground. "Jerry, in an era when being a gentleman isn't the norm, you're as close to a gentleman as I've met. I don't mean to be ungracious but, please, let me go back to Boleskine before..."

"Before what?"

"Suffice it to say, I'm... not good around people. I... have a condition..."

"Epilepsy? Panic attacks?"

"No, nothing like that."

Tender yet insistent fingers raised her chin level to his. "You've been kind to me and the boys, and I want to return the favor. I'd like you to stay, but if you absolutely don't feel you can, I'll... let you go."

Mustang burst into tears.

Richards cradled her in his arms, university students and professors eying them curiously in passing. Somewhere, a bell tolled 5:00. With a determined sniff, the young woman recovered her composure.

"I'm... sorry."

"I'm the one who should apologize," remarked Richards. "I forced you to come."

“Be assured of this much, Jerry: no one can force me to do anything.”

Together, they strolled to the waiting limousine, joined at a sprint by Ed and Hank Watts, who’d briefly remained at the theatre to help check the wiring for the lights.

“We wouldn’t want a blackout during our number,” Hank joked.

Ed interspersed, “Where are we eating dinner?”

“You’re hungry, again?” guffawed Richards.

“I haven’t had a bite in two hours.”

“Kelly mentioned a restaurant at the hotel. Said it’s kind of expensive...”

“My treat,” Mustang announced.

Hank protested, “We can’t let you...”

“You’re guests in this country, and I want to be a good hostess.”

“You’re a guest in this country, too,” corrected Richards.

“No, I’m a permanent resident.”

“You’ll never go back to Montana?”

Mustang smirked sadly. “No.”

“As wealthy as you must be, and you can’t... or won’t?”

“It’s my choice to live here. I... like it.”

“Bullshit,” snarled the dancer.

The conversation ended there, with the chauffeur holding the door for them to alight at the Howard Hotel Edinburgh.

“If your promoter can afford five-star accommodations for you, I may reconsider picking up the check tonight,” hinted Mustang.

“Some cultural foundation is covering the tab,” Hank stated.

“Are you guys getting any pay?”

Richards noted, “Most of the cast is earning college credits for themselves, while having a chance to travel. The old geezers, like me, will have a crack at the best agents and be given priority at upcoming Broadway auditions.”

“Sounds like a raw deal.”

”Not when it’s almost impossible to squeeze through an agent’s door these days unless you’ve worked as a professional, and it’s impossible to get work as a professional unless you’ve signed with a top agent.”

“Catch-22.”

“Exactly.”

Mustang grabbed her backpack from the limousine, only to have it seized by Richards. Her strength too drained to wrestle for it, she let him lead the way through the elaborate lobby. They bypassed the desk, however.

“What about a room for me?” she wondered.

“We’ll call down from my room. They’re too busy right now.”

Richards shared his suite with Sean Kelly, the stage manager, who reputedly hooked up with attractive local students or cast members, spending nights in their beds. “He’ll show up around eight in the morning, to shower and shave,” concluded Richards.

“No worries about his snoring, then.”

“That’s another plus.”

“Another plus?” Mustang repeated. “Gives you the freedom to bring in your own... dates?”

“The women don’t give me a second look, and you’ll understand why when you see the show. The other guys are tall, lean and willing. Girls fall over themselves trying to... well, you know.”

“Don’t underestimate the female sex, Jerry. Quite a few prefer the... rugged look.”

“You, for instance?”

“I... don’t worry about such things.”

“A frustrated lesbian, then, hiding from unrequited love.”

She raised her hand to slap him, and stopped short. “Give it up, already!”

“I’ve got to know why you’ve sequestered yourself, when you have so much to give the world.” He grasped her wrist and flung it aside.

“Trouble is all I’ve given the world.”

“What, you’re a terrorist?”

Mustang hoisted her backpack off the mattress and stalked toward the door. “You’re a nice guy, Jerry, but I don’t need this.”

He blocked her exodus. “Don’t go, please. I’m sorry for being so nosy. It’s important for me to know what makes a person tick.”

“Why me? After tonight, you’ll never see me again.”

“Habit, I guess. It’s the same with characters I play. I swear, I’ll shut up.”

“Okay.” She dropped her burden beside a chest of drawers. “Where can I clean up?”

He pointed toward the bathroom.

Unbidden memories, of a spectre brought forward in time from ancient Salisbury, compelled Mustang to lock the door. She didn’t want to harm Richards, if he entertained similar ideas to that erstwhile, handsome rogue.

Best to have the evening done and over, and bid him farewell. Still, the sensation caused by his proximity...

He was a man of honor, besides. Unlike others who had crossed her path since she acquired the power over nature from her grandfather, Jack Parsons,

Richards wanted nothing. He was content with his life. He didn't need her to defend or protect him, solve his problems... or cause more turmoil as a result of her impulsive actions.

Wrapped in a huge, white terry towel after a soothing hot bath, she tiptoed across the carpet to fetch her bag. Her hair dripped profusely.

Richards, watching the BBC news broadcast, chuckled. "When you're home by yourself, do you roam naked down the hall?"

"I'm... not usually so flustered I forget my clothes."

"If you'd asked, I would've delivered them." His pale eyebrows arched at her horrified mien. "The backpack, not the clothes. I wouldn't risk further censure by rummaging through your... unmentionables."

"Good to know." She vanished behind the door, goose bumps caused not by the cold, but her own churning emotions.

A far less pleasant emotion set her nerves on edge within the hour.

A fast-food meal with the Watts brothers lacked the elegance of the hotel's classy dining room, but sated the group for the task ahead. Lighthearted banter provided additional fortification, with Richards periodically clasping Mustang's hand amid the revelry.

Upon their arrival at the university theatre, a bevy of beautiful showgirls - how else to describe them? - in skimpy net leotards and dangerously high-heeled shoes, swarmed around Richards, shoving Mustang aside. They paraded him to the stage door, where he barely had a chance to give her an apologetic wink before being hustled indoors.

She couldn't blame him, didn't blame him - and yet, she did. He'd behaved so gallantly; had it all been an act?

A new experience, this uncertainty and yearning. She pondered whether it could be fear, being suddenly abandoned in unknown territory, basically against her will. As she collected her ticket at the box office, she found herself envying couples arriving hand-in-hand for the show.

Had she allowed herself - resisting the notion since Jim Neville's death - to become too attached to Jerry Richards, cherishing his candor, his bluntness so similar to her own...

She'd been on the receiving end of affectionate advances, from James of Salisbury, Lyndon Bixby White and his father, also Thomas Burton, and shunned them of necessity. She'd lowered her guard with Sloan MacTavish, and caused his death. Why again would she make a fool of herself?

Why again - and so soon - succumb to infatuation, risking dire consequences?

Why resent other females fawning over Richards in a wave of senseless jealousy?

## IV

Mustang stood at the rear of the university auditorium, feeling terribly overdressed in mauve satin blouse and black slacks. T-shirts and jeans seemed the norm among the young spectators.

The programme presented by a freshly-scrubbed usher boasted a selection from vaudeville's heyday. Not only the Nicholas Brothers and George M. Cohan, but Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Fanny Brice and skits guaranteed to make the audience laugh until they cried.

Mustang did, but most students sitting in the same section didn't. They enjoyed the dancing and the chorus girls; much of the American humor eluded them. Punch lines which should have elicited roars merited only twitters.

Nonetheless, the cast received a respectable ovation during their single curtain call. Mustang recognized confusion and disappointment not just in the set of Richards' square jaw, but in his gait stomping off the stage.

A question-and-answer session convened in the green room, attended by a standing-room-only throng. Mustang jostled her way atop an end table, to be able to see the actors as they responded to the students' inquiries.

Almost unrecognizable beneath the lights' harsh fluorescent glare, thanks to his heavy greasepaint, Richards said nothing throughout the event. Analysis of the dancing techniques, the comic style, and song choices were debated intelligently by the others. Finally, a professor dismissed his pupils, and the cast dispersed to their dressing rooms.

By the time Mustang located Richards, he'd smeared cold cream over his skin, resembling the cop who'd been hit by a pie in the robbery sketch. The difference: Richards' blue orbs smoldered with disdain.

The Mistress of Boleskine crept to his chair, sympathetically gripping his shoulders through the thick towel safeguarding his costume from stains.

"I've lived in this country seven years," she said. "I still don't understand the natives."

He growled, "I'll be glad to get back to the stateside colleges, where they know a good joke when they hear it."

"They liked your dancing."

"I could tell. The show is about more than specific acts, though. It's a whole, and when one actor bombs, the entire cast feels it."

“Which is why, in the old days, billing was so important.”

“Exactly!” Richards swiveled on the wooden chair, flecks of white dotting his nose after he’d rubbed off dark eyeliner and thick base. “To follow a lousy act meant the crowd would be less receptive to whatever you did, even if it was the most hilarious routine on the planet...”

“These kids are too young - and, possibly, lack the proper education - to enjoy such nostalgia.”

“You’re young, and you enjoyed it,” he countered.

“I’ve... traveled the world and experienced what few others have. I know it’s fatal to take life too seriously.”

“Yet, you’re so serious.”

“It’s... a long story.”

“You can tell me over dinner.”

Mustang retorted, “What about the party?”

“Screw that. I’m not in the mood for drunken chatter.”

Fearing the worst, she acquiesced.

“Give me five minutes.” Richards spun toward the mirror.

Meeting the Watts brothers in the wings, Mustang congratulated them on a stupendous performance.

“Glad the nobility liked us, at least,” muttered Ed.

“Everyone did,” she affirmed.

Hank disagreed. “There’s been a false politeness to the applause this whole tour. We being the only two blacks in the show...”

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” snapped Mustang. “I was out there, and I’d have to say those theatrical history students have to broaden their focus beyond Shakespeare and opera. They’re downright ignorant not to stand up and cheer after your routine.”

“Thanks, ma’am.” Hank hugged her. “And, thanks for putting up with us.”

“More like, you two had to put up with me. I’m too used to being alone...”

Ed prodded, “You’re coming to the party?”

“No. Jerry asked me to dinner.”

“If you’re ever in Philadelphia, will you visit us?”

“What, you’re not going back to New York?”

“Our grandmother wants us to finish our education first. Once we have degrees, we’re thinking of starting a performing arts program for high school kids...”

“Fantastic!”

Ed’s embrace nearly smothered her, and they giggled together.

As they departed, the Watts saluted Richards, joining Mustang in brown double-breasted suit and yellow tie.

He twined his fingers through hers. "Ready?"

"Sure."

She wasn't ready for a confrontation, however. Outside the stage door, three chorus girls had been cornered by amorous locals, proposing a night on the town. The females' adamant refusals were ignored, until Richards strode up to them, fists clenched.

Though the Scots stood a head taller than their opponent, his demeanor deterred them from pressing the issue. Mustang watched their mortified retreat, jealousy flaring anew.

"Which of those gals is yours?" she queried when he neared.

Richards stated, "I'm not a cradle robber."

"Girls like older men who aren't afraid to defend their honor."

"That's my part-time job, in a nutshell. Most of them under twenty, they see me as a father figure, or big brother. I make sure they don't get in trouble."

"And they don't try to... show their gratitude?"

"The promoter has been quite savvy, this tour. The girls sleep in a different hotel than the men."

"But, didn't you say Kelly still manages..."

"Kelly doesn't have a non-fraternization clause in his contract."

The trek to Edinburgh's New Town, where Richards had reserved a table at the Howard Hotel's intimate Atholl Restaurant, permitted the couple to enjoy a sky filled with stars. Seated at a linen-draped table, the waiter presented the wine list; Richards declined.

"You don't drink, ever?" puzzled Mustang.

"Nope."

"Alcoholism?"

"My grandfather." He perused the menu's gourmet fare. "And, I'm capable of having fun without it."

"I prefer hot chocolate, myself."

"Which is why you keep a bottle of Jameson in your pantry?"

"To sustain a certain pair of old friends."

"Then, you *do* have visitors?"

"Rarely. They dropped by last February. Before that, it had been six years."

"Damn!"

"Don't pity me, Jerry..."

"I don't. I'd like to know why, that's all."

The waiter filled their water goblets from a crystal pitcher and took their order: steak, baked potatoes and salad.

Mustang unfolded the swan-shaped napkin and laid it on her lap. “Throughout history, there have been hermits, recluses... Some people are suited to living alone.”

“For religious reasons, yes. You don’t strike me as particularly spiritual. I didn’t see a bible in the house...”

“Those who can’t deal with society’s hypocrisy have been known to retire in the wilderness...”

Richards leaned forward, sandwiching both Mustang’s hands between his. “You have so much to offer the world., you shouldn’t hide.”

“I...” Self-consciously, she extricated her fingers.

A string quartet played on a triangular stage across the room, the small dance floor vacant. “Come on,” suggested Richards.

“I don’t...”

“Nothing fancy. It’s a waltz. You should remember how to waltz from your senior prom...”

“I never made it to the senior prom.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t have a date.”

“I did, but...”

“Oh, you made a detour to a hotel?” smirked Richards.

“No! There’d been some horse thefts, and I was a witness...”

”Excuses, excuses.” He drew her off the cushion and slid his arm around her waist.

Mustang had danced with Peter O’Donnell at her cousin Rachel’s wedding, and with the groom, but she’d never been held this close during a turn around the floor. She hoped an unanticipated rush of emotion would not bring the ceiling down on their heads.

Richards whispered, “Your heart is racing.”

“I... There’s something in your pocket.”

He paused in mid-step and extracted the blue cube from inside his suit jacket. “I was saving this until later, but...” The lid snapped open to reveal a ½ carat diamond set in a white gold band. “I don’t want you to be alone ever again. After our tour is finished, I want you to come to States with me.”

“Where... did you get...”

“There’s a little shop down the street. I sneaked out while you were dressing...”

“You’ve known me a little over 24 hours,” she objected, staring at the ring with moist eyes. “How can you be so certain?”

“You’re intelligent, beautiful, and you love horses. Those few attributes speak volumes more about our compatibility than months of pretentious courting.”

Her knees gave way, and he supported her back to the table. The jeweler’s box remained beside her plate as she toyed with the green salad and nervously attempted to butter a slice of warm bread.

“I don’t expect an answer right away,” Richards assured her. “Tomorrow morning, the cast flies to Belfast, then we do Dublin, Cork, and Cardiff in Wales. We fly to New York from London in two weeks...”

“Jerry, would there be a chance you’d be willing to live with me here?”

“What would I do about a job?”

“London has a prestigious theatre scene...”

“What, commute that distance? I want to be with you every day, not just between runs.” He gazed into her hazel eyes. “If you go back to States, what will happen?”

Mustang sighed. “Very likely nothing, unless I...”

“The police?”

“FBI.”

“Pretty serious.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“What crime?”

”No crime, really. I always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and... people ended up dead.”

Richards blinked slowly, fork suspended in midair. “Who, for instance?”

“No one you’d know. By isolating myself at Boleskine, I’d hoped to... solve the problem.”

“A magnet for trouble, eh?” He contemplated her quivering lips. “I could live with that.”

“Here, or in the States?”

“Here, to start. I might write a musical, in between breeding and selling horses. When you’re ready, we could give Broadway a shot.”

Mustang bowed her head, face hidden behind auburn tresses. Richards barely detected her “Yes.”

A split second later, he knelt beside her. He placed the ring on her finger and smothered her with kisses. The waiter was at odds, hovering over the table with two sizzling platters.

“Get up, Jerry,” urged his fiancée. “You’ll need your strength to keep me in line.”

The meal proceeded in silence. Thick slices of chocolate cake cleared to the last crumb, Mustang sent Richards to his room. They agreed to set a wedding date and discuss other details when he returned from Ireland.

She clung to him on the stairs, savoring his scent and creating a mental portrait of his transcendent smile in the absence of a camera. The chauffeur appeared at the lobby entrance, per previous arrangement, for the ride to Loch Ness.

“Get some sleep,” Richards advised in parting. “And dream of me.”

Adrenaline pumping in her veins, Mustang didn’t close an eye the entire distance to Dores. The landscape rushed by eerily, wind-whipped trees bending threateningly toward the road. Sunrise eased her tension, but not her excitement.

“Stop here!” she directed as they cruised through the village.

“Ma’am?”

“I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“Are you sure, ma’am? It’s awfully cold...”

Fumbling in her backpack, she slipped on the cable knit sweater, adding the parka as another layer. “I’ll be fine.”

Alighting near a shop displaying Nessie souvenirs in the window, she turned south for a good stretch of the legs.

Glenn MacDonough’s pickup truck slowed beside her an hour later, bound for Inverness. “Good mornin’, Your Ladyship.”

“Good morning.”

“Ha’ ye heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Concerns the friend ye brought t’ me house yesterday.”

“He’s on his way to Belfast this morning.”

“Part o’ a theatrical troupe, nae?”

“Yes.”

MacDonough reached across the seat and opened the passenger door. “Ye best get in, Your Ladyship.”

“Why?”

“I would nae want ye faintin’ on the berm.”

“Fainting? Why would I faint?” Terrifying scenarios flashed in her mind’s eye as she climbed onto the seat. “What’s happened?”

“The news broadcast a report as I was leavin’ for work. The aircraft hit a flock o’ gulls on approach t’ Belfast airport. Lost both engines.” The construction manager inhaled deeply. “The crash killed those aboard.”

“It... can’t be the same flight...”

“Mention was made o’ performers from the States.”

“Not again. Not again,” Mustang murmured, glancing at the engagement ring as she slumped, unconscious, against her neighbor’s chest.

The pickup executed a perfect U-turn, covering the distance to Boleskine’s meandering drive at top speed. Bouncing along the gravel didn’t wake the young woman, nor did MacDonough searching her jacket for a house key.

Carried awkwardly inside by the older man, Mustang flopped on the green living room sofa with a groan. “What the...”

“Are ye all right, Your Ladyship?”

“I’ve been dreaming...”

“I’m afraid nae.”

“You mean, it’s real...”

MacDonough’s white wisps dipped solemnly.

“Oh, hell...”

He comforted her as best he could, sobs convulsing her slender frame. Eventually exhausted, she dozed, and he arranged a pillow under her tousled head.

A note laid on the chess table instructed her to summon him if needed. When her eyelids fluttered open around noon, she banished the hazy memories and remembered her neglected horses.

Fed and watered in the heated barn, Mustang spoke to the animals as if nursing them through mourning a loved one. She wrapped her arms around Sarge’s neck, smelling remnants of Jerry Richards in his mane.

“You could manifest him,” commented a cultured baritone.

Mark Twain stood in the exact spot she’d first seen Richards 48 hours earlier.

“I know, Sam.”

“But, you won’t. Why?”

“Since I received this power nine years ago and realized its danger, my goal has been not to use it. I compromised that goal too often, like the fiasco with the time machine after Jim Neville died. I never manifested him, because I couldn’t bear the pain of letting him go twice.”

His white suit and hair giving the aura of a ghost, Twain sidled up behind her, lighting a cigar in the process. “You wouldn’t have to let him go.”

“The dead deserve their rest. You’ve complained, yourself, about aching bones in the brief time we’ve spent together...”

“Indeed. Don’t you wish to bid the young man farewell?”

“I... was foolish to care for him, knowing...”

“Isn’t it more foolish not to care about those you’ve helped?”

“It’s safer for them.”

“Who’s to say?” A cloud of acrid smoke enveloped her. “Come, we’ve a chess game to finish.”

Mustang hesitated, removing the diamond ring and tying it to Sarge’s bridle. Then, she followed Twain to the house, positive she’d nevermore set foot off Boleskine property.