

The Mustang Chronicles:

Illegal Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Owning neither radio nor television, cell phone or computer left Mustang Duryea at a severe loss during Scotland's stormy season. She could not consult weather radar images to determine the intensity or duration of the January rains.

So, she stayed in the house and read books.

Stacks of books - mysteries, science fiction and non-fiction - which she'd instructed be delivered from the Dores general store each of the past three years. A blazing fire on the living room grate, she sat in her cane-backed rocker and devoured page after page.

She moved only to fix herself a snack, or venture to the stable to feed and water the horses.

No disturbances, no frustration at using her powers impulsively and wreaking havoc, or causing death.

The latter thought brought fresh tears to her hazel eyes. She closed the collection of Isaac Asimov short stories and let the droplets flow.

She hadn't cried this much since Jim Neville's senseless demise at a California convenience store. But, then, the circumstances were similar. She'd risked caring for a man - contemplating marriage, even - and he'd died.

Jerry Richards might've enjoyed a stellar Broadway career, if he hadn't met her.

Voices of Mark Twain, Francis of Assisi and Erwin Rommel each confirmed her lack of blame for the airplane crash near Belfast. They'd manifested on their own, without her summons, in recent months, to comfort and advise her.

The chess board remained untouched on the table beside her, hand-carved pieces dusty and scattered in a half-finished game.

Finally, she rose and shuffled to the bathroom, blowing her nose in a wad of toilet paper and washing her face. She stared briefly at herself in the medicine chest mirror, shuddering. She looked far older than her 25 years... 26, actually.

Today was her birthday.

Another reason she sequestered herself within the Georgian mansion for the month of January. She despised any manner of celebration - not that her parents had thrown her parties or allowed her to invite friends for sleep-overs back in Montana. There were still those who remembered the day, and reminded her of it.

Ben Espinoza, for instance.

The FBI academy instructor, promoted since their initial encounter at Boleskine's Gate Lodge, sent a greeting card to "Lady Elizabeth Neville", timing the mailing perfectly to arrive on the day.

If she hadn't known better, she would've thought he placed it in the rusty metal box personally that very morning.

Or, had one of his agents do so.

She'd come to recognize the envelopes and distinctive slanted script, tossing them into the fire, unopened.

Wandering into the kitchen, she didn't feel hungry. She slipped on her boots and plucked a parka from the hook beside the door. Her beloved horses might be warm with the heater she'd had installed when the barn was built, but they couldn't help themselves at the oat bin or activate the water spigot with their hooves.

Wind and icy rain assailed her as she navigated the compound. A disaster awaited her when she slid the brightly painted door aside moments later.

Four horses milled around the hay-covered floor, evidently ready to stampede.

The prize Arabian stallion met her gaze, snorting. Behind him, Sarge, Pietra and Crystal thumped the ground anxiously. Two animals remained in their stalls - intact stalls, as opposed to the shattered wood of the others.

"So, that's how it is, eh?" Mustang commented. "I know you want exercise, my friends. But, the rain..."

Perhaps it had been the deluge - lightning and thunder included - which had agitated the horses. She hadn't slept, herself, the previous night because of the constant noise.

Rain or no, the stables needed to be repaired, and soon. Not only could the horses be harmed by the jutting edges and exposed screws, but she also - as she learned when attempting to clear the debris.

A sharp splinter tore through her coat sleeve and wedged in her left forearm.

She grimaced at the sudden rush of pain, dropping a plank on her foot. Once the expletives echoed around the barn, she gingerly extracted the misshapen chunk of wood from her flesh, watching blood stain her skin and the cloth around the ugly gash. She plucked a rag used to clean the tack from a shelf, and applied what pressure she could.

Tying the make-shift bandage in place with a length of leather cut from an old set of reins, Mustang dumped buckets of oats and water in the troughs, and kicked the fragmented wood into a corner. She saddled Sarge with awkward

motions, closing the door on the other miscreants before riding toward the main road.

Glenn MacDonough should know an able carpenter, anxious for work during the annual lag in construction, who could restore the stable.

The trek took longer than cutting through her estate's forest, but the danger of half-melted slush filling potholes in the trails precluded taking that route. Reluctantly, the young woman paused beside the mailbox, snatching a flowered yellow missive from within the metal cylinder.

She crushed the damp paper into a wad and pitched it in the underbrush.

MacDonough saw his neighbor at infrequent intervals, always welcoming her like a concerned father. His company had performed the renovations at Boleskine when she'd accepted her exile, and he'd repeatedly attempted to convince her to install a phone.

"Aye, there be a man who will do fine work for ye," he responded to her question, as she dried her auburn tresses with a bath towel in his foyer.

"Only one? I would've thought your entire crew..."

"A score or more travel south durin' the winter. There always be ready money made in London."

"Why doesn't this other man..."

"He's... more a musician than a laborer. When he's not buildin' houses, he's playin' guitar at clubs hereabout."

Nice to have a hobby, Mustang though. "Send him over when you can."

"Ye shall see him before lunch, Your Ladyship."

Well before, as a matter of fact. She hadn't freed her mount of his bit when the battered yellow pickup truck bounced to a halt beside the corral. It might've been an abominable snowman emerging from behind the steering wheel, so bundled was the man in a white knit cap, long scarf and thickly-insulated white ski jacket. He carried a leather tool belt in one hand, and hoisted six two-by-twelves onto his shoulder with the other.

Mustang opened the door wider, allowing him passage.

"Buenos dias, Señorita," he greeted, deftly propping his burden against the wall.

Her ears comprehended the words, but not the bizarre accent. Mexican, to be sure - she'd met many Hispanics on her father's ranch, experienced hands who traveled the western states according to the seasons. A Scottish burr had infected the pronunciation of this man's R's, however, raising a chuckle from her throat.

Too much time spent with Glenn MacDonough.

"I am Pedro Jenaro Ricardo Merino y Gonzalez, and I am at your service."

He stripped off his outer wear in the toasty barn, revealing a tattered red sweatshirt and stained jeans tucked into black square-toed boots. Furrowed cheeks, sunken brown orbs and cord-like muscles in his neck indicated advanced age. A waist-length braided ponytail, blending strands of black, white and grey, snaked down his spine when released from its confinement, as well.

“Ye have a hell of a mess, here,” he observed in cultured English - albeit with the same unusual inflection - assessing the worksite.

“How long will it take to fix?”

“Most people first ask, ‘How much?’”

“Keeping my horses safe is more important than any expense.”

“Ah, so Glenn wasn’t lying about the wealthy Lady Elizabetta.”

“Mr. MacDonough has no reason to lie...”

“To drag me from my comfortable bed on a wet morning, he would lie.”

“Your bed can’t be too far...”

“I rent a place in Torness.” He squatted beside the Arabian’s mutilated stall. “All the frames and hinges will need to be replaced. It will take... two or three days.”

“Finish in two, and I’ll pay double your normal rate.”

“These horses are so valuable?”

She nodded, not wishing to admit how much she despised having strangers on the property.

As he attacked the mangled gate, Mustang gently led the horses to the opposite end of the structure. The roans could share their stalls, but the Arabian... she admonished him for misbehaving and tied him near the tack room.

“If you need anything, I’ll be in the house.”

“I need nothing, Señorita.”

Enduring another drenching, Mustang showered and changed clothes before cooking a late breakfast, her arm still throbbing from its wound. She suspected part of the splinter remained embedded in her flesh, deep enough to make her muscles twinge when she reached for the cast iron skillet above the stove.

Feeble sunlight broke through the clouds that afternoon, and the Mistress of Boleskine broke from her reading to step onto the front porch and bask in its glow. Strains of a classical melody wafted from the stable - not a recording, but live guitar.

The music angered Mustang. She needed the repairs expedited, yet this man dared to waste time practicing for his next gig?

“What the hell...” she bellowed from the partially open barn door.

Pedro did not cease playing until the song's logical end. Setting the acoustic instrument aside, he rose and smiled at Mustang. "After gripping tools for hours, I must move my fingers in a different way, to alleviate the arthritic stiffness."

She gulped, not in reaction to his explanation, but his torso. He'd stripped off the sweatshirt at some point, and his well-defined pectoral muscles glistened with perspiration. From the shoulders down, he could pass for a twenty-year-old athlete.

He proceeded to display the restoration already completed. Pietra's stall would never again succumb to the Arabian's fits of pique. To be certain, though, she tested the hinges with a bit of extra strength drawn from nature.

Astounded, Pedro gripped her biceps. "I would not have thought one so... petite that strong."

She shook free. "Those who underestimate me often wind up dead."

Stalking into the murky afternoon, she swallowed her temper. The carpenter retrieved his power saw from the bench, and halved the next board.

The equipment's motor drowned out the noise of gravel being crunched beneath tires; a van winding up the drive with her bi-weekly order of supplies. Mustang had lost count of how many young men provided this service over the years, but they always kept her informed of local gossip - when she could grasp their unique dialect.

"Ha' ye seen any strangers aboot, lassie?" hailed the Dores' market owner's teenaged nephew, if she recalled correctly.

"Only tourists," she replied, as he lifted an overstuffed cardboard box off the rear seat. "Why?"

"Men have come to the village askin' aboot foreigners."

Mustang bit her lip. Herself a foreigner, it could be the FBI, or Interpol... "What sort of men?"

"Government types. Black suits, dark sunglasses. Like somethin' off a cinema screen."

Just as she feared.

"They're showin' a photo 'round, of a man they say is in country illegal." She let her lungs release the air they'd been unconsciously holding. "Scottish immigration officials?"

"Up from London, says me uncle. He couldn't understand much, with their heavy accents."

The laugh broke forth, and she didn't try to repress it. The variations of the English language, on the British Isles alone, would flabbergast most linguists.

“Did you see the photo?” she queried.

“The men had handbills. Left a stack to be posted in the windows and distributed to the neighbors.” Digging through bags and cans, the spindly youngster extracted a wrinkled sheet. Leading him into the house, Mustang smoothed the flyer and studied the black-and-white image.

She didn’t recognize the face, for good reason.

A typed caption below the dark-haired, distinguished visage dated the snapshot from two decades earlier. The authorities described him as currently 60 years old, 180 pounds, with brown eyes and black hair, of Spanish origins.

Trying to envision how the fugitive might’ve aged, Mustang didn’t like the result. She faltered abruptly on the kitchen threshold, causing the delivery boy to collide with her, sending the box’s contents flying in all directions.

She apologized and helped him gather the groceries. He left with a generous tip, as always, while she stared out a rain-stained window toward the stables.

If Pedro Jenaro Ricardo Merina y Gonzalez had been in Scotland so long, why were they seeking him now?

Now, when sheer coincidence had brought him into her life?

Now, when the slightest aggravation, combined with her aching heart, could see the world destroyed with a chance phrase?

The circular was unexpectedly commandeered by an insistent hand.

She whirled on Pedro, eyes afire, ski jacket partially zipped over his bare chest.

“What the hell...”

“Ye ha’ no... facilities in the barn, Señorita. I came to ask...”

“Down the hall,” she directed, struggling to regulate her breathing after the shock.

He didn’t move, transfixed by the old picture. When he spoke, he might’ve been a tiger growling at his prey. “Where did ye get this?”

II

“Is it you?” Mustang inquired, feigning calm.

Pedro deftly crumpled the paper into a neat ball. “Si, Señorita. Do ye intend to summon a constable?”

“Have you killed anyone?”

“No.”

“Committed robbery, blackmail, or passed counterfeit money?”

“No.”

She arranged frozen vegetables in the freezer. “Fine. Go back to work.”

“Gracias, Señorita. But, don’t ye want to know...”

“Not another word. I’m staying out of it, for the good of society.”

“Si, like so many Americans, ye would rather not be involved.” He detoured into the bathroom, before heading toward the front door.

“Hold on, there, *Señor*,” she hollered at his receding form. He spun from his course; she stopped with her nose inches from his chin. “I don’t appreciate that crack about not being involved. You have no idea...”

He interrupted, “Oh, si, Señorita, I have a good idea. From the time I was thirteen, I lived in Arizona as what they call an ‘illegal alien’. My brother had sent me across the border to stay with his wife, who wanted to give birth to her son on American soil. They both died in hospital, and I was left with no money and no way home. The only people who would help me were those who wanted me to believe their particular brand of religion, or demanded I pay every penny I earned shining shoes and picking crops. The rest, the supposedly ‘good people’ of your country, looked away when I walked along the street, pretending I - and so many of my countrymen - didn’t exist.”

“Amigo, I *can’t* get involved. The danger...”

“Danger? To whom? To ye?”

“To *you*. To those hunting for you. To the buildings... everything.”

“Ye have killed?”

“I have caused people to die, yes.”

“Then, why do the constables not arrest ye?”

“They... have no evidence.”

“They have no evidence I am here,” Pedro declared. “I stowed away on a freighter from New York, and jumped ship in Plymouth, on England’s southern coast. Doing honest labor, I gradually moved north, thinking...”

“Why, suddenly, would they look for you?”

“Do ye not listen to the BBC News?”

Rather than explain the absence of technology, she shrugged.

“The new Parliament has promised to deport all illegals, and prevent others from entering the country.”

“They’ve been trying that in the States for ages. Hasn’t stopped the problem.”

“The more they catch, Señorita, the more popular the politicians will be.”

“True.” Last August’s influx of spies into the region, branded illegals for media purposes, had undoubtedly brought the issue to the fore in government circles.

Lingering repercussions of her failure to nurture self-control.

Being, actually, an illegal herself - transported to Boleskine courtesy of a lightning bolt, her passport seldom used to navigate customs - the constables might arrest her in their sweep of the area, as well as Pedro. She reached to pat his shoulder, flinching with a fresh wave of pain.

He prodded, “Ye are ill, Señorita?”

“No, just...” She showed him the blood-soaked bandage.

He ripped off the store-bought strips and examined the wound. “This is badly infected. There is much dirt and rust from the old hinges...” A pair of needle-nosed pliers from his tool belt dug beneath the skin and yanked out a sliver of wood. “Ye must see a doctor.”

“No. I...”

Discerning her losing consciousness, he scooped her off the floor and carried her into the living room. Stretched on the green sofa, she moaned in anguish.

“Where is the phone, Señorita? I will ring...”

“No, no. I won’t let you put yourself in danger...”

“I won’t be here when they come. I can return tomorrow and finish the barn.”

“I... can’t leave the horses. You finish. Fetch the doctor later.” Her eyelids drooped; her head sagged on the pillow.

She awoke after the sun had set, to strains of a guitar. Mostly in shadow, cast by the roaring fire he must have stoked with logs split himself, Pedro serenaded her in a minor key.

“What...” she croaked, glimpsing the open bottle of hydrogen peroxide on the coffee table, a silver bowl and... her flannel shirt. Glancing down, she saw a sleeveless blue blouse exposing gauze taped to her skin. “You... changed my clothes?”

“Your shirt, only. Cleaning the wound soaked the cloth.”

“Why aren’t you... working?”

“I finished the second stall around 8:00. I couldna leave until I knew ye had recovered.”

He set his instrument aside, and gathered the supplies onto a silver tray, - except for a chocolate-frosted cupcake with a candle stuck in the top.

“What’s that?” snapped Mustang

“Hunting for scissors, I found your passport in a drawer. Happy birthday.”

“Damn you!”

“I meant no offense. Ye had the ingredients, and the baking occupied me while ye were resting.”

She swallowed hard. “You... cook?”

“I learned as a young man, fending for myself as I traveled from place to place.”

“Congratulations.”

“‘Tis no special feat, Señorita. For the same reason, I learned to handle saw, hammer and plane. Survival.”

“Your travels kept you fit, as well,” she remarked.

“No, long hours of labor, using every muscle to scale ladders, construct walls and lay floors.”

Pedro carried the tray to the kitchen, while Mustang attempted to sit upright. He caught her as she climbed to her feet, stumbling sideways.

“Señorita, are ye mad?”

“I... must feed the horses.”

“‘Tis done, before I locked the barn.”

She clutched his arm and lowered herself onto the cushions. “Thank you.”

“De nada, Señorita. I have a daughter, somewhere in Nevada. She would be near your age. I would care for her no differently.”

“Why.... didn’t you stay?”

“My wife’s father reported me to the police days before she gave birth. She kissed me adios that night, and I’ve not seen her since.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need.” The furrows on his brow deepened. “Do ye wish me to help ye to bed?”

“No, thanks. It’s warm in here; I’ll be fine. You can... go.”

“Buenos tardes, then, Señorita. I will see ye mañana.”

“Good night.”

He departed with his uncased guitar, leaving her to study the slightly lopsided cupcake. The north wind pummeled the dwelling and added force to sleet beating a syncopated rhythm on the glass. A perfect end to a perfect birthday, she mused sarcastically.

Roused in the wee hours by criss-crossed lights from multiple vehicles shining through the living room curtains, Mustang heard the bullhorn crackle and a British baritone bark, “Come out with your hands up!”

He’d watched too many American police dramas, probably.

She didn't budge, waiting instead for the inevitable: her nocturnal booby-traps to manifest against unwelcome trespassers.

When the shrieks began, she snickered. Grown men shouldn't get so frightened of animal cries and ghostly branches scraping at their cars. Their engines revved and tires kicked up ice-crusting mud as they fled the scene.

Allowing her to sleep until daylight.

A frosty morning, but she needed fresh air to revitalize her spirit even more than her body as it healed. She hiked along the drive to ensure none of the authorities had remained behind to stake out the property, whatever their reason for intruding.

The only thing out of place was Pedro's yellow pickup, wedged between two gnarled tree trunks near the Gate Lodge. Had it stalled, or had a flat tire?

No obvious damage met her gaze.

Except to the tiny structure's front door.

The padlock had been wrenched free of the hasp.

Mustang pushed the warped door inward, calling softly, "Pedro?"

He was able, by a fraction of an inch, to avoid smashing her head with a leg broken off the kitchen table.

"Señorita, my apologies. I thought ye were the police..."

"What are you doing here?"

"Turning onto the road last night, I saw the line of black sedans on the berm. Fearing for my life, but not wishing to disturb ye, I parked out of sight and hid myself..."

By the tremor in his voice, she detected how cold he'd grown without access to any heat source. Foolish, perhaps, because the officials would return, she nonetheless invited him to the main house to thaw himself and eat.

Arthritic fingers fumbled to fasten the tool belt around his waist; he slung the guitar across his back by its woven strap.

Exiting the Gate Lodge, the lock useless, she wedged a twig in place to secure the door. It would have been easy for her to instruct the natural forces to restore the mechanism, but the vow she had sworn after each disaster she perpetrated would this time be kept.

"Who taught you to play?" Mustang wondered, hoping to distract her guest from the biting chill.

"My grandfather, when I was a child. For many years, he was a mariachi. His dying gift to me was this guitar."

"This estate, in a way, was my grandfather's gift to me."

"He must have been a wealthy man."

“Not wealthy, just... different.”

“As was the man who lived in your Gate Lodge. I found a candle and used it as a reading light after...”

Mustang shivered. She had intended, each spring, to clear out the four--room dwelling where Jack Parsons had spent his last days. Other... priorities prevented her from fulfilling the task. Having the occultist/scientist’s personal journals in her possession, what other texts could possibly distinguish him as extraordinary?

“What books?” she ventured.

“Physics, chemistry, religion.”

“Not unusual.”

“For the master’s library, no. For a caretaker...”

“There’s no law against a caretaker being educated.”

“Ye are right, Señorita. The volumes were published in America, half a century ago, which *is* unusual.”

The subject was dropped when they entered the five-bedroom mansion. Pedro migrated immediately to the living room, where Mustang rekindled the fire and added the last wood from the wrought iron rack.

The carpenter shed his jacket, to allow his limbs direct contact with the heat. His host brought a blanket from the bedroom, wrapping it around his shoulders, followed by a mug of hot coffee.

“Ye are most kind, Señorita,” murmured Pedro.

“Repayment for your kindness toward me last night.”

“The arm... is better?”

“Still throbbing, but not as painful.”

“I’m glad. Ye should still see a doctor...”

“In due time. Do you think you’ll be able to finish in the stables today?”

“Si, si. Once I have cooked ye breakfast...”

“I’ve had mine. Fix whatever you wish, and I’ll wash the dishes.”

“‘Tis not fair to ye.”

“It’s not fair to you those idiots from immigration are tracking you like a rabid dog. You’ve lived here twenty years, using your talents to support yourself, bothering no one. I’d say you’re more an upstanding citizen than some of the locals.”

“I shan’t argue the point, Señorita. Others would, quoting laws...”

“Stupid laws.” Mustang settled on the cane-backed rocker. “I can see, if a person crosses a border to commit crimes, or steal from taxpayers by collecting welfare with forged documents, deporting them. America, especially, is a country

of immigrants: hard-working people who wanted to better their lives and contribute to society.”

“The so-called ‘red tape’ ruins everything. People are not willing to wait...”

Herself guilty of that fault, the young woman smiled weakly. “We’re wasting daylight, amigo. There are far more important matters demanding our attention.”

He rose, his greying braid dripping moisture on the floor; raindrops had frozen to the strands overnight.

“Would you like a shower, or a clean shirt?” queried Mustang.

“No, Señorita. The sawdust coats everything... Ye could assist me with the horses, though.”

“The horses?”

“The noise from the power tools upsets them. Especially the Arabian. He acts like he might kick a hole through me.”

Mustang chuckled, quite familiar with the thoroughbred’s annoyed whinny and fitful pacing.

Once Pedro had consumed four eggs, toast and ten sausage links, washing it down with two tall tumblers of orange juice, the pair headed for the barn. The bay mare greeted them with relief. The roans hovered near their depleted troughs. The Arabian skulked in his corner.

Selecting a two-by-four and his tape measure, Pedro commenced rebuilding the third stall, while Mustang fed and soothed the animals. She stroked their manes and whispered comforting remarks in their ears as they nibbled slices of apple she’d brought from the house.

Even the Arabian succumbed to her charms, her confidence negating his fear of the electric motors.

Which stopped midway through sinking a wood screw in the frame. Pedro shook the battery-operated drill, puzzled. He straightened, brushing flecks of sweet-scented dust from his rippling chest, muttering, “I charged it overnight...”

“Shhh...” warned his companion, overhead lights dimming.

His head whipped left, then right toward the door. “What?”

From a vantage point near the window, she watched eight black sedans converge on Boleskine House, their headlights adding little illumination to the cloudy day. She placed a finger to her lips as men scrambled from the vehicles, surrounding the mansion.

That ridiculous bullhorn boomed, “Elizabeth Duryea, come out at once!”

Pedro crept closer, viewing the scene over her auburn head. “Who is Elizabeth Duryea?”

“No one they’ll ever find.”

“Then, they aren’t searching for me?”

“Not at this precise second. But, if they find you here, they won’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“True. True. Why sixteen men to arrest one woman?”

“Long story.”

The British voice called out again, before its owner directed the squad to broaden their search into the woods.

Mustang guessed the agents’ hesitancy stemmed from their experience during the night. Whatever punishment their commander threatened, they mustered sufficient courage to disappear among the trees.

“Why do they not go into the house?” hissed Pedro.

“No warrant, I expect. If I were a criminal, and not just an illegal, they would beat down the door.”

“The barn does not fall under the same restrictions...”

She had no need to reply, as his statement was proven correct by two black-suited figures who pulled aside the door on its well-oiled rollers.

“Stand absolutely still,” she advised. “They won’t see you.”

He started to protest; she squeezed his arm with a force that brooked no opposition.

Silencing a sneeze, however, took more than force of will. From inspecting each stall, the intruders aimed their pistols at the rear of the structure. “Hands up, if you please!” came the order.

“Name a city,” Mustang directed the carpenter.

“What?”

“Do it!” she cried, seizing his hand as the men closed upon them with handcuffs dangling.

“Beatty, Nevada!”

The lightning bolt split the stable roof, knocking both agents against the wall. When they opened their eyes, their would-be prisoners had vanished.

III

When Mustang and Pedro opened *their* eyes, they were surrounded by acres of hot desert sand. The Mistress of Boleskine scrambled to her feet, shedding her torn parka - on which a scorpion had poised itself.

Her face already felt sunburnt; she must've been unconscious for an hour or more. Having not traveled via lightning bolt in months, the effect had knocked her out.

With his natural pigmentation, Pedro's skin didn't show the redness as hers did. The ultraviolet rays were still harmful, so she smacked his wrinkled cheek a few times to wake him, flinching. Her tolerance for the agony caused by fresh burns on her palms had diminished in the interim.

"What the hell's in Beatty, Nevada?" she asked, maneuvering him upright.

"Last I knew, my wife and daughter."

"That was twenty years ago!"

"They had no reason to leave the town. Her family had lived there for generations..."

"Except the young often crave something new and different."

Pedro scanned their surroundings. "How..."

"Long story. At least, the immigration goons won't be deporting you."

"Ye have taken care of that for them."

"You're free to return, if you wish."

"How?"

"Stowing away on a freighter, like last time," she quipped.

"I'm too old for that now."

"So am I." They waded through mounds of sand toward the tiny town's perimeter, where a cluster of people gazed toward the horizon.

What Mustang heard made her cringe.

"Never seen lightning without a cloud in the sky," said the cook from the nearby diner.

A portly, blonde matron concurred, "I've lived here my entire life and ain't seen the likes!"

"Might she know your wife?" suggested Mustang.

A combination of shock and remorse twisted Pedro's features. "She... *is* my wife."

He bolted forward; Mustang clamped blackened fingers around his arm.

"Not so fast, amigo. You don't want her to keel over in a dead faint."

"But..."

"Let me." She strolled up to the crowd, edging toward Señora Merina. "Excuse me, ma'am," she began, creating the regrettable lie as she went, "our car broke down a few miles back, and we're looking for a good mechanic."

The woman shifted her attention from the spot of the unusual phenomena to the auburn-haired visitor. "This time of day, he's still in bed," she responded. "Should be at his shop by noon."

"We'll get ourselves a bite to eat while we wait."

"We? Who's 'we'?"

"Myself and my good friend, Pedro Jenaro Ricardo Merina y Gonzalez."

The carpenter's wife glanced past Mustang, dubious. It took but a moment for her to recognize the brown eyes and the tender smile...

She rushed to his arms. "Pedro, my darling! Where have you been all these years?"

Like a scene from a classic romantic comedy, the pair hugged and chattered - in both Spanish and English - while the townspeople enjoyed the spectacle. Their excitement eventually tempered, Annie Merina led her husband toward the diner.

Mustang remained on the group's fringe, not wishing her presence to interfere with the reunion. Seconds later, however, Pedro jogged from the wood-shingled building to usher her inside.

"Amigo, go and enjoy yourself!" she protested.

"Ye made this possible, Señorita. Ye must celebrate with us!"

"No, I..."

"Come, my beloved wife has made a success of the restaurant she inherited from her father. The most famous breakfast burritos north of the border!"

Entranced by his boyish enthusiasm, Mustang acquiesced, hoping the knots in her stomach wouldn't be revealed by her eyes.

Ducking beneath the sagging lintel, Pedro accepted a red polo shirt with the diner's name embroidered on the pocket to cover his chest. He escorted Mustang to the booth where a waitress had already laid place settings for three; he plopped down beside his wife, nuzzling her neck.

She listened to their animated banter, so unlike dinners at home in Montana - her parents talking little, if at all. Annie, a genuinely empathetic individual, harbored no resentment against Pedro, knowing her husband fled to protect her and their daughter.

"Your daughter should be celebrating with you," Mustang remarked.

She'd misspoken; Pedro's expression darkened.

"She has... gone."

"Gone? As in 'gone east'? Or, gone as in 'dead'?"

"Gone, as in the U.S. Marines," declared Annie. "She was killed three months ago by a roadside bomb while on patrol in the Middle East."

“Oh, hell...”

“I am still grieving, but now we can grieve together,” she added, holding fast to Pedro.

He pried her fingers loose. “My beloved, I cannot stay long.”

“Why not?”

“I... have business to finish with Lady Elizabetta.”

Mustang shook her red tresses. “Someone else can finish the job.”

“I pledged ‘twould be done, and ‘twill be done.”

Sliding off the vinyl upholstery, Mustang signaled Pedro to accompany her.

“Please excuse us, Mrs. Merina,” she stated.

The woman smiled her acceptance.

Near a pinball machine and the restrooms, Mustang read Pedro the riot act.

“It wouldn’t be safe for you to go back the way we came,” she concluded.

“Yet, ye will take the risk.”

“I’ve... done it many times. And, I’m younger. I’ll recover from the jolt faster...”

“What about my grandfather’s guitar?”

“I’ll ship it to you.”

“Not if immigration catches ye.”

“They won’t.”

His vice-like digits clamped on her shoulders. “My Annabella has waited twenty years. She can wait another day or two. I owe ye... everything.”

“You owe me nothing. Like so many others, I’ve put you in danger...” She tried to wriggle free, unsuccessfully. She knew one way to break his grasp, another violation of her vow wouldn’t...

An honorable man, he’d not harmed her, and could not be blamed for his strength of character. She let her body relax, raising her hazel eyes to his.

“I may be able to solve our problem with a simple phone call,” she proposed.

Pedro pointed her to a pay phone. She picked up the scratched receiver and dialed the operator.

Contacting Ben Espinoza may have been the worst idea - or the best. She couldn’t be sure when their brief conversation ended. His first words through the line, once she’d identified herself, were, “A belated happy birthday, Mustang!”

He agreed to meet her at the diner that evening to discuss terms.

“Terms of what?” prodded Pedro when she returned to the table, a piping hot burrito before her.

“I’m in possession of... certain information he’s hounded me for since I was a teenager. If he can arrange to pull our names from the Brits’ immigration round-up, I may give him what he wants.”

“I cannot permit it!” objected the carpenter. “If I do go back to Scotland, ‘twill be for a few days only. Married to an American citizen, I am safe here.”

Mustang bristled. “If you knew that two decades ago, why did you leave? Your father-in-law reporting you to the police would have amounted to a small inconvenience...”

“He reported Pedro for bank robbery,” Annie supplied. “Not knowing where Pedro had gone, I couldn’t notify him the real thieves were convicted a year later. He could’ve come home, and we could’ve raised our baby together.”

The young woman stabbed her sauce-laden tortilla with a fork, bending the metal. This requisite detail, ten minutes earlier... “Write down the address of this place,” she growled, hoping her escalating rage wouldn’t bring the ceiling down on their heads. “I’ll have Glenn MacDonough pack the belongings from your flat and airmail them to you.”

Pedro attempted to speak; she silenced him with a scowl. “As ye wish, Señorita.”

“When an FBI agent named Ben Espinoza comes looking for me, play dumb.” Tossing a paper napkin onto her plate, she rose. “Missing another chance to get his mitts on my grandfather’s journals will piss him off, but he’s used to it.”

“What about immigration?” Annie interjected.

“They were scared by trifles last night; they’ll soil their britches next time they step onto the estate.”

“Ye dunna seem the vindictive sort, Señorita,” opined Pedro.

“Only because my goal has been to contain my anger. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“Ye are angry at me?”

“I’ve met few men with such integrity, amigo. That virtue doesn’t count for much with the Feds, though. When they arrive, I suggest you keep your hands in the air every second, so you don’t get shot by accident.”

“Ye think they would...”

Memories of Jim Neville, his body riddled with bullets... “If they do, I’ll lay waste to every last one of them.”

She was out the door and striding toward the desert when Pedro caught her. She didn’t try to escape, nor did she face him.

“Are ye sure about this?”

“Si, amigo.”

“Will I ever see ye again?”

“If you’re lucky, no.”

“Then, I pray I’m unlucky.”

She spun around, tears trickling down her cheeks. “Don’t say that. Too many in my life have been unluckier for knowing me. Most are dead.”

“This... power ye manifest?”

“You can’t tell anyone.” She flipped his palms skyward, the scorched flesh healing instantly. “Tell them you hitchhiked, or hopped a train. Don’t mention my name, if you want to protect yourself and the wife you’ve regained.”

That furrowed mien bent to kiss her forehead. “I mayn’t speak it, but I will remember it. Vaya con Dios.”

“You’ll have your guitar within the week.”

“Keep it, with my gratitude. Señor Glenn will know what to do with the truck and the power tools. My clothes can be used as rags on the jobsites.”

“What about money? Didn’t you have any saved?”

“A few thousand pounds tucked in a cigar box under my mattress. Donate it to your favorite charity.”

“You can’t come back to your wife stone broke,” Mustang admonished.

“We are rich with love, Señorita. ‘Tis all we need.”

With a cheery wave, he retraced his steps to the diner.

Living on a horse ranch her first eighteen years had taught Mustang numerous lessons about people and life, the most important being: always pay your debts. She owed Pedro for his labor, and she would pay it.

With interest.

They’d left Scotland in mid-afternoon; in Nevada, it was still morning. The white Cadillac limousine which materialized on the dusty highway would give her an opportunity to nap before tackling Las Vegas’ one-armed bandits.

She cursed herself for the recurring impulsiveness which made it necessary to rectify awkward situations. Doing so with a dramatic flare... why not?

She could not deny her flannel shirt smelled of horses, and was too warm for the desert climate. Still, browsing The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, she opted for black jeans and a scoop-necked blouse with ample sleeves gathered at the cuff, making her arms resemble wings when she raised them.

Since her first trip to this gambling capital, she’d devised a system whereby security would not suspect her of tampering with the slot machines. She played hands of blackjack, dropped some chips on roulette, and rolled snake eyes five straight times at a craps table. Once every ten minutes or so, she’d select a machine at random and collect the jackpot.

She paid no heed to the figure in diamond and gold-sequined tuxedo jacket traversing the aisle between the rows of video gaming devices - until one of his entourage bumped her stool. Losing her balance, she fell backward, colliding with what she believed to be another Vegas oddball.

“If you want an autograph, you should provide your own pen,” came the hoarse bass behind heavy pancake stage make-up.

Mustang righted herself immediately. “I might, if I recognized you.”

Her reaction astonished the man.

“This is Johnny Rosemont,” beamed a retired boxer-bodyguard.

The name rang a vague bell, of low-budget science fiction films. “Shouldn’t you be killing aliens on a movie set somewhere?” she jibed.

“He’s doing the rock ‘n roll tribute this week in the casino,” added another of the cloned hirelings. “Supporting cancer charities.”

“He just finished a matinee,” the first chimed.

“For senior citizens.”

“Bravo.” Mustang clapped three times, mocking.

“If you don’t want an autograph, would the cynic crack a smile if I invited her up to my suite?” pondered Rosemont, flipping aside a drooping lock of longish, lank black hair.

Her lips didn’t curve in the slightest. “Sorry. Once I collect my winnings, I’m out of here. I’m on a tight schedule.”

“Well, congratulations.” The sentiment may have been sincere; she couldn’t be certain. Cradling her cheeks between his soft, uncalloused palms - so unlike Pedro’s well-blistered flesh - he planted his lips briefly on hers, conveying a hint of unspoken promise. His men pried him loose and jostled him forward. He managed to shift 180 degrees, talking as he backed toward the elevator. “I hope I see you again.”

She could only stare after him, trying to slow her pulse.

A gaggle of women clustered around her, like animals during feeding time at the zoo. They babbled incoherently about how she’d been kissed by the greatest star since Cary Grant, and one giggling school girl used a handkerchief to take an imprint of Mustang’s mouth.

She shoved through the throng and retreated to a stall in the ladies room, astounded by the shallowness of some people. Not further assaulted during a ten minute span, she crept from the chamber, taking a circuitous route to the cashier’s cage.

Emerging from the air conditioned casino with just shy of \$100,000 inscribed on a check bearing Pedro’s full name, the chauffeur commented on her

new outfit as he held the door. She didn't feel more feminine, merely appropriately costumed as the avenging spirit she envisioned herself.

That chance kiss had already been - mostly - forgotten.

The Cessna jet descended for a landing on the private airstrip west of Beatty as the limousine deposited her at the town's eastern edge. Bewildered faces pressed against locked panes of glass when she strode past, nature drawing down shades and draperies, or slamming shutters to prevent any casual spectators from witnessing the coming confrontation. Knobs jiggled as people struggled to escape their businesses and homes, in vain. Every entrance was sealed tight.

Ben Espinoza, in shirt sleeves and ball cap, marched along the cracked main thoroughfare, flanked by more formally attired subordinates. He knew better than to show a weapon, though holsters bulged beneath his comrades' suit coats.

Mustang had mounted a stray ladder to the diner's roof. She'd erected an invisible shield around the structure, so no stray gunfire would penetrate the walls. Extending her hands, the sun's angle illuminated her with an ethereal glow, casting her shadow in Espinoza's path.

He recoiled swiftly, scanning the street for the spectre's origin.

"When visited by an angel, it's customary to look heavenward," Mustang snickered.

IV

FBI agent Ben Espinoza retorted, "You're no angel, Miss Duryea. That's why I anticipated a chasm to hell opening beneath me."

"If you think that's where you belong, Ben..." quipped Mustang.

"What are you doing in Nevada?"

"Helping a friend out of a jam."

"A jam you caused?" Espinoza taunted, perspiration sparkling on his wavy black hair.

"No, this one's the British government's fault."

"What, unfair taxation?"

"No, a round-up of illegal immigrants to impress the voters."

"Why call me?"

"Somewhere along the line, your supposedly efficient operation botched my status, too. The Brits have me on their list for deportation. Stormed Boleskine with guns blazing hours ago."

"You offered me... certain materials if I hopped a plane out here."

The young woman sank on her haunches. “Have you ever known me to lie?”

“You tend to twist the truth to your own ends.”

“And, you don’t?”

The Fed knew he’d been busted, lowering his chin. “Can’t we get out of this heat?”

“Not until you ring London and convince them to call off their dogs.”

“Me calling attention to your presence will only make them curious. You could solve this yourself, the same way you deleted your records from our database. Why didn’t you erase their file?”

“If they thought it a computer glitch, they’d just reconstruct it. Word has to come from the top before the matter will be dropped.”

“You’re a smart kid, Miss Duryea. For my efforts, what do I get?”

Mustang smirked. “You get to stay alive.”

Perhaps not his associates, but this particular agent knew she had the means - without twitching a finger - to deprive him of existence. And, even if she committed the act before witnesses, she could never be prosecuted. No district attorney would believe the tale.

He hadn’t believed it when, during the trial for a gang of horse thieves, she’d quashed a raid to free the defendants by nearly suffocating their rescuers. Their lying attorney had wound up naked before the judge, when every seam on his Armani suit had ruptured simultaneously.

“I need those journals,” he pressed.

“There’s nothing in them worth your time.”

“The formula...”

“You saw me destroy it.”

“There are other copies.”

“Dial your phone, and I might remember where.”

Espinoza dug an iPhone from his trouser pocket, snarling, “Don’t yank me around, Mustang. You’re not immortal.”

Pacing the street while FBI headquarters connected him to British immigration, he didn’t notice Pedro’s silver-crested head pop through a skylight inches from Mustang’s perch.

“Senorita, are ye mad?” he sputtered. “Those men...”

“Are old acquaintances.” She slipped him the check, which had been tucked in her cuff. “Merry Christmas.”

He unfolded the paper, and his boot must've slid off the ladder rung; he almost fell. Gripping the window frame with trembling hands, he panted, "Mi amiga, I canna accept."

"What you don't need, give to your favorite charity." She shoved his cranium through the hole. "Get inside. It may get noisy real soon."

"Be careful, Senorita!" came the muffled plea as the glass wedged shut. Mustang straightened, balancing precariously on the slanted roof. "I want direct confirmation they won't set foot on my property!" she shouted at Espinoza.

He interrupted his conversation to glance at her. "I can't..."

"Toss me the phone!"

"It's government issue. You break it, you buy me a new one!" He pitched the black plastic case ten feet in the air.

She snatched it from a curved trajectory. "Who's this?" she aimed at the app-peppered screen.

"Harrison Larrabee, assistant to the Home Secretary."

Mustang was impressed. "You go to the top, Ben!" she yelled at the agent.

Sullenly, he responded, "When special circumstances dictate..."

"I can assure you, Miss Duryea, our immigration enforcement team will no longer trouble you," Larrabee was saying.

"Good. Good. I'll hold you to that."

The wireless device drifted down to Espinoza.

"Satisfied?" he spat.

"Definitely."

"Where's the formula?"

She tapped her temple.

"Come down, and write it out for me," he instructed.

"Don't think so."

A predetermined signal, she assumed, sent agents rushing the diner, weapons drawn. They crashed into her protective barrier, and landed unceremoniously on their backsides, groaning and stunned.

"Something you want inside there, Ben?" she probed. "Hostages, maybe?"

"You... witch!"

"I know how trigger-happy your boys are, Ben. I'm not going to let people get hurt. Not my people, anyway."

She leapt onto the ground, within inches of a beefy rookie, wiping grit-encrusted palms on his sleeves. It didn't take more than basic agility to commandeer his pistol.

Espinoza lunged toward her, she didn't bother to aim the barrel at him. "I don't need this, do I, Ben?" she queried. "Neither does he." The gun went airborne, clattering on the sidewalk a block away.

"He's just a kid, Mustang. I'll... let you go, if you release him."

"Release him?" She feigned innocence. "I'm not even touching him."

He knew physical contact wasn't necessary.

"We're just going for a pleasant afternoon stroll," she continued.

He circled around to block her egress. "Where?"

"Out to the desert. The worst thing that'll happen is he'll get stung by a scorpion."

"What about the lightning?"

"If you behave, he'll be nowhere near it."

Espinoza exploded as she sauntered from Beatty, windows and doors suddenly flying open. "Next time, Elizabeth Duryea, your ass is mine!" reverberated between sand dunes.

She glimpsed Pedro and Annie Merina gaping through the restaurant's service door. "Muchas gracias, Senorita!" hailed the carpenter, his arm barely able to encompass his wife's waist.

"De nada," she replied, waving.

"Misguided idiots," rumbled the tawny-haired agent.

"Why misguided?"

"They respect you - like the peasants respected Robin Hood, who was nothing but a common thief."

"They should respect you kill-crazy law enforcement representatives?" she scoffed.

"We're not 'kill-crazy'."

"Give it a minute."

Indeed, gunshots could be heard behind them, Ben Espinoza and his crew rousting out citizens for interrogation, some of whom tried to flee.

Two ended up wounded in the leg.

Mustang's voice practically deafened her hostage, booming more loudly than any bullhorn through the settlement. "You never listen, eh, Ben?"

In a flash, an invisible rope lofted the youthful agent's feet over his head, so he dangled upside down in mid-air. His terrified screams amused the Mistress of Boleskine, but curdled his peers' blood. Espinoza raced around the corner, coming nose-to-nose with the triumphant Mustang.

"You've got five minutes to get these thugs on your plane," she stated, her captive flopping in the dirt, still bound at the ankles. "No sense entertaining

thoughts of returning here after I'm gone, either. You know where to find me, and so do my friends. If they notify me anyone's been hurt or harassed in an effort to gather information, I won't need a GPS to find you."

Ben ventured, "Why the antagonism? *You* phoned me, remember?"

"I shouldn't have to phone you. You promised, if I laid low in Scotland, no one would bother me... and yet, I'm bothered - a lot."

"I applaud your efforts to avoid the radar, but those periodic blips when you pop to Monte Carlo for a night of gambling and who-knows-what, or Australia for a wedding..."

"Your boys have infiltrated the weather service?"

"We have one dedicated to monitoring... electrical aberrations."

"Why did I waste the fifty cents? If I'd waited, you'd have shown up eventually."

"The departmental text message hit my cell two minutes before the switchboard transferred you to my line."

"Ain't technology grand?"

"I'd have dropped by last summer, if I hadn't been on assignment in Nicaragua. The tempest you whipped up in September... Who pissed you off that time?"

Mustang stifled memories of Sloan MacTavish's incredible passion. "It doesn't happen only when I'm mad, Ben." She yawned. In her own time zone, she should've been in bed three hours ago. "Clock's ticking. We'll call this one a draw and go our separate ways."

"It's not a draw, Mustang. You owe me that formula, and I will get it come hell or high water."

"No government needs anti-grav propulsion. Where the hell would we go with it?"

"That's not the point..."

"One minute left, Ben, or you'll be walking back to D.C."

"The day will come when your power won't save you, and I want to be there to see it."

"I'll send you an engraved invitation."

At a full sprint, the last man scurried up the Cessna's steps 78 seconds later. The pilot taxied into position and the jet went airborne before Mustang vanished, the sole evidence of her presence a blob of heat-congealed sand.

No warmth - or light - welcomed her at Boleskine. The bolt which had ripped through the barn's roof had fried the space heater and the wiring to the

ceiling fixtures. The horses hadn't been exposed too long to the icy winds, but they weren't content to have their home in shambles, and empty troughs.

Her parka buried somewhere in the Nevada desert, she shivered in the silk blouse and twill slacks. With a word, the natural forces repaired the stable to new condition so, one by one, she could lead her prized animals to their respective stalls.

"Rest well, my friends," she noted, calmer but not relieved of her frustration.

"Violence is never the answer," came the quiet tenor of Mahatma Gandhi from the shadows.

"Another failure, Gandhiji. I am well aware..."

"Your hatred for authority will be your undoing. After all these years, you still cannot control your temper."

"Or my impulsive tongue."

"Impulsive thoughts, more precisely. Once you embark upon that road, you do nothing to restrain yourself from further infractions. You needn't have robed yourself like some vengeful seraphim on this occasion, or threatened the agents with death."

"Ben Espinoza wouldn't have taken me seriously if I hadn't..."

"He takes you very seriously, Mustang-ji. He views you as the greatest danger to global security since the creation of the atomic bomb. He may wear a courageous mask in your presence, but being within a mile of your location petrifies him."

"Good."

"Do not gloat because you fill men's hearts with fear. Desire, instead, to serve humanity with your gifts."

"I only want *certain* men to fear me, so they don't harm the innocent who suffer in my wake."

"Do not justify your flaws!" the balding elder snapped.

"I'm sorry, Gandhiji."

"If you do not master yourself, your future is uncertain. So undisciplined has become your mind, you don't even have to consciously summon we who care deeply for you and enjoy the odd game of chess. We are here whether you wish it or not."

"I was wondering about that. Though, it's been a great comfort since..."

"Jerry's death, and the others, seem unfair and senseless, it's true. They are not punishment for your actions, merely jarring ruts on life's path. You will bypass

future ruts by not focusing on your failures and consciously nurturing discipline. Thereby, you will ease the ache which consumes your heart at this moment.”

“How can I achieve any kind of discipline when, each time I deal with the stupidity, the ignorance...”

“It is not your task to rectify the shortcomings of others,” he admonished. “Go, now. Sit beside your fireplace and meditate on this. Otherwise, Mr. Espinoza’s prediction may come true, and you’ll not see your 27th birthday.”

“All I want is to be left alone...”

“A laudable dream, but impractical. It is a human’s destiny to cross paths with others. Each encounter, however, must not end in disaster.”

She bent to kiss the ghost’s bony hand. “I shall try, Gandhiji.”

“The time for trying is past. You must do.” How badly she wanted to accomplish positive things, as Peter O’Donnell had recommended, but she couldn’t so much as hire a carpenter without ensuing tragedy.

As Gandhi lingered, Mustang scanned the barn for Pedro’s guitar. Further confirmation of her carelessness: the heirloom instrument - how many decades’ old she couldn’t be sure - had been torn asunder by the bolt which had carried them to Nevada.

“Oh, hell,” she lamented.

Had she wanted to grasp it by the inlaid neck, her scorched palms and the still-throbbing splinter wound would have made it agonizing.

More expletives bursting from her lips, she sloshed through puddles to the house, locking herself inside for the foreseeable future.