

The Mustang Chronicles:

Judas Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The concept of crying over spilled milk always escaped Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea.

She’d seen - and caused - numerous spills over the years, leaving a gallon atop her father’s pickup one time, only to view it explode on the asphalt as they left the grocery store’s parking lot, for instance.

When she opened the stainless steel refrigerator in Boleskine House’s kitchen that crisp March morning, she grabbed for the orange juice, knocking the milk jug off its shelf and onto the floor.

The contents sprayed on tile and counter, leaving nothing to drink.

And prompting a trek into the village of Dores to purchase a replacement, since her regular delivery wasn’t due for five days.

She enjoyed her cereal too much to go without, even if it meant breaking the unspoken rule not to leave the property.

Every time she did, awful events occurred.

But, then, even if she stayed in the Georgian mansion previously occupied by her grandfather, Jack Parsons, and his predecessor, occultist Aleister Crowley, people managed to find her and spark unseemly incidents.

Saddling Molly, one of six horses housed in the bright red barn, and urging her to a trot along off-road trails, Mustang covered the distance to the small settlement before noon, a pony tail of auburn tresses bouncing in the wind.

Her parka would have been a wise addition, that breeze biting, freezing her nose and fingertips.

She rubbed her hands together once she dismounted and shuffled into the grocer’s rustic establishment.

“Aye, Your Ladyship!” hailed the owner from behind the warped wooden counter to her left. “What brings ye to town on such a vile day?”

Vile? Mustang puzzled. The sun shone brightly, a definite change from the plethora of rainy days experienced in the Scottish Highlands.

“I’m out of milk,” the young woman admitted.

She grabbed a container from the cooler and, passing the candy aisle, snatched a few chocolate bars. Then, she detoured to the vegetable section, selecting a bunch of carrots for the horses.

“On your tab?” a chunky blond clerk, the owner’s son and delivery driver, queried as she passed.

“Please.”

“Good day, Your Ladyship.”

Mustang would have burst outdoors, had not a poster taped to the glass caught her attention and arrested her progress.

The colorful artwork touted a spring equinox festival and classic rock concert in the village park.

A bold proclamation - "Fun for All" - deterred the heir of Parsons' command over the natural forces from any plans to attend. Crowds made her nervous, with a single impulsive thought wreaking havoc.

High school history lessons of the 1960s and 70s, Woodstock and other "love-ins" - where hippies in tie-dye clothes, with long hair and headbands, smoked marijuana or took LSD, rock and roll blaring in the background - came to mind.

Her imagination created a scenario where elderly folk longing for their lost youth encircled a bonfire, stoned out of their minds. Witnessing some bizarre phenomenon manifested through her mistake, their jaws dropped in awe, eyes wide in wonder.

"Wild, man," they would mutter. "Groovy."

Mustang shook herself from the reverie. She would celebrate the equinox as she had these past few years: playing chess with Mark Twain, Erwin Rommel or Mahatma Gandhi.

The door opened and closed behind her. She secured her purchases in a leather saddle bag, maintaining a walking pace back to the estate, to prevent any further mishaps with the milk.

A caravan of vividly painted, vintage VW buses sputtered in the opposite direction on the B852 along the eastern shore of Loch Ness, reminding Mustang the equinox actually fell four days hence.

Reining Molly toward Glenn MacDonough's dwelling, she decided to find out a bit more about the sorts sponsoring the festival. In addition to the construction project manager's pickup truck, a sleek red Ferrari Testarossa was parked along the drive.

Hooves halted along the track. Not intending to interrupt a possible business meeting, Mustang steered her mount toward the trail which cut through Boleskine's 47 acres.

The front door of the brick ranch opened at that moment. MacDonough, swirls of white barely covering his cranium, and a youngish looking figure - a full foot shorter than his companion, blond mane extending past his shoulders in a shag-style cut, silver wire, pink tinted aviator-style frames adorning a roundish countenance with a slight double chin, and an embroidered Nehru shirt and trousers - emerged.

“Your Ladyship, wait!” her neighbor called.

Mustang considered spurring Molly to a gallop to avoid any possible complications, then acquiesced.

“Good morning, Glenn!” she called, retracing her steps.

“Good t’ see ye oot and about.” MacDonough’s thick Scottish burr often made their conversations rather one-sided, since Mustang couldn’t understand his words.

Tethering the horse to a nearby bush, she approached the pair.

“Had ye need o’ me services?” the elder asked.

“I had a question, but it can wait.”

“Then, let me introduce Hamilton Swan.”

Swan extended very soft, pudgy digits toward Mustang, who grasped them so firmly, he winced.

“Sorry,” she apologized hastily.

Flexing his fingers to restore circulation, Swan oozed, “Don’t be.”

“We’re renovatin’ an old factory for Mr. Swan,” MacDonough explained.

Unimpressed, Mustang didn’t like idle chatter. “Are you in manufacturing?”

“‘Twill be the finest recordin’ studio north of the border,” the construction executive supplied. “He’s put up the money for the equinox festival on Saturday and is bringin’ a group o’ musicians from his label t’ perform. The whole event will be turned int’ an album.”

That, at least, eliminated Mustang’s doubt about the sponsorship. She denied the temptation to voice further inquiries.

Something about Swan set her teeth on edge.

“Nice meeting you,” she muttered, swinging into the saddle. “I’ve got to get my groceries in the refrigerator.”

“Will you be joinin’ us at the festival?” MacDonough called in parting.

Her answer remained inaudible: “No way in hell.”

Within the hour, delectable chocolate substituting for breakfast and lunch, Mustang adjourned to the barn to groom and feed the horses. Nowhere else on the planet was she as content as with these magnificent animals, who loved unconditionally and nurtured no hidden agendas.

So absorbed in the task, she didn’t hear wheels crunching gravel on the winding drive. Thus, when she ventured back to the house, she glimpsed the red Ferrari idling near the entrance, Swan’s fist raised to knock.

“Oh, hell...” she grumbled, wiping scarred palms on her flannel shirt and plucking straw from her tousled mop.

Swan turned at the sound of her approach. "Ah, Lady Elizabeth!"
His almost nasal tenor irritated her. A slight Irish accent tinged his speech, as well.

She regretted her brief visit to Glenn MacDonough.

"What do you want, Mr. Swan?" she spat, inserting her key into the deadbolt.

"Just Swan." He retreated from the steps, scanning the structure. "I attended some fantastic parties here in the 70s, and just wondered..."

Mustang bristled. "Lies don't cut it with me, Swan. You're not old enough..."

"It might surprise you to know that I am. Jack Parsons..."

Lips pursed, she exhaled slowly. Had her grandfather, decades earlier, used one of his rituals to preserve this man's youth?

"If you knew him, you'd know the name he used in these parts, to protect his identity," she challenged.

"Jock White."

Damn, she thought, resigned. "What were you wondering?"

"Whether some of my production crew could crash in your spare bedrooms."

"Not on your life," she replied flatly.

"Any particular reason?"

"For one, most have no beds."

"They can bring sleeping bags."

"If they have sleeping bags, they can camp out on the festival grounds."

"It's not them, so much, as the equipment. The cold..."

"Then, you should've scheduled the festival during warmer months."

He inched closer. "Your Ladyship, please. Glenn believed..."

"I'm not responsible for what Glenn MacDonough believes about me." No chance she could slip inside and secure the steel door without Swan forcing his way across the threshold. He might be small, but she sensed a strength...

"I'll pay one hundred pounds a night, per room," he offered.

"Nope."

"This festival, and my new studio, will bring thousands in revenue to the district."

"Is that some kind of threat?"

He hesitated. "No, I..."

"Like so many other influential people, you think your money can buy cooperation. I don't work that way."

“What about that Gate Lodge near the highway? Could we use that?”

“It’s a wreck.”

“I can have a crew here before nightfall to clean and make any necessary repairs.”

Why so insistent? Mustang mused. The four-room Gate Lodge, where she’d first met her grandfather after flying from the States at her dying grandmother’s insistence, had been left to deteriorate after Parsons’ death. She’d never bothered to restore it to its cozy hominess.

“You don’t take no for an answer, do you, Swan?”

“Not in fifty years.”

“Well, that’s my final word, so you better be off.”

That presumed strength manifested when he grasped her forearm as she gripped the doorknob.

Instinctively, she shot a charge of electricity through him.

He recoiled as if mortally wounded.

“What the hell?” he croaked.

The steel panel slammed in his face.

Within, Mustang sank against the smooth surface, cognizant she had made a fatal error in judgment - her second that day. She struggled not to think about the consequences.

The pounding rattled her bones. “How would you like to head up my security team for the festival?” Swan’s rasp penetrated the door.

“You’re out of your mind!” she bellowed.

“Anyone who can invent a system to deter physical assault would be worth every quid.”

“Buzz off!”

“Ten thousand, just to ensure none of my equipment is touched, and the bands aren’t harassed by groupies.”

A tempting sum, meaning Mustang wouldn’t have to transport herself via lightning bolt to the Monte Carlo casinos for awhile.

“Are *you* out of your mind?” came Mark Twain’s American twang, the white-suited author stroking his bushy white mustache. “Hippies on drugs can - and will - do just about anything to defy those in authority, including security guards. Can you imagine the trouble you’d cause if...”

As she deliberated, resting on the cold tile, Swan appeared before her in Twain’s place.

“How the devil...”

“Your kitchen door was unlocked,” chuckled the diminutive producer.

“That, or you’re a practiced pick-lock.”

He ran both hands through his hair. “Could be.”

“Then, you can supervise your own security team.”

“Thing is, I won’t have time. I’ve got to coordinate the sound crew, stage hands, so everything flows smoothly and the crowds don’t... lose their groove.”

Rising effortlessly, Mustang towered over this uninvited guest. “Oh, sure. Because once the groove is lost, they stop buying liquor and souvenirs, and your profit margin evaporates.”

“You assume my motivation is money.”

“That’s all you’ve been talking about since you arrived. How much you could pay me for rooms, or my services...”

“Because ordinary people are more... amenable when cash is on the table.”

“I’m not ordinary,” Mustang scoffed.

“I can see that.”

“Next thing, you’ll be suggesting some sort of... domestic arrangement,” she snorted.

“Oh, so you naturally presume my mind works on the premise if money can’t convince you, sex will?”

She shrugged.

“I suppose a virgin would jump to that conclusion,” mocked Swan.

Receiving a resounding slap across his fleshy cheek for the effort.

He staggered backward, gingerly massaging the red mark. “You... remind me of someone... I knew years ago. She... didn’t reject my money or my affection, though. You... you...”

“Don’t care about that crap.”

“Why? It’s human nature.”

“It’s not my nature. I don’t need anyone, and prefer to be left alone.” She freed the deadbolt and pulled the door inward. “Get out, and stay off my property.”

Swan complied, pausing on the stoop. “Your bravado conceals a vulnerability, Lady Elizabeth...”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll be back.”

“Then, you’ll soon be dead.”

Stunned, he stumbled down the steps, twisting his ankle, and limped to his Ferrari.

She watched until the high-priced Italian sportscar vanished along the gravel drive. “Good riddance.”

A gnawing sensation at the base of her neck confirmed she hadn't seen the last of Hamilton Swan.

II

Not an hour passed, the sun setting over the corral, when a timid knock echoed through the mansion.

"Oh, hell!" Mustang screamed, sweeping chess pieces from the inlaid table in the living room.

"Control your temper, *Signorina*," soothed St. Francis of Assisi, seated opposite her cane-backed rocking chair.

She rose, agitated. "You admonish me, then wonder why I react so violently when men push and push, until I'm at the end of my rope!"

Storming into the foyer, she wrenched open the door, a stream of expletives ready to devour the intruder, only to fall silent at the sight of Glenn MacDonough, ballcap in hand.

"Lady Elizabeth, I'm sorry to disturb ye," he greeted. "I was tasked with bringin' ye a bit o' news..."

"It's for me to apologize, Glenn. I was... expecting someone else. Please, come in."

She guided her neighbor into the living room, waving him to the green sofa. He sank on the cushions and glanced around the homey chamber.

"Any repairs needed these days?" MacDonough stammered, unsure of himself.

"Everything is fine, just as your craftsmen finished the job." She resumed her place in the rocker. "Now, what's up?"

"We had a meeting o' the festival committee this afternoon," he began.

Mustang's heart sank. "And?"

"By unanimous vote, we wish ye t' be guest of honor."

Swan, Mustang knew. "What is... entailed in such an honor?"

"Ye cut the ribbon at the commencement, and welcome those in attendance. Then, ye sit in a special box wi' the local dignitaries..."

"No, Glenn. That's impossible. I would be tongue-tied in front of a crowd, and couldn't possibly spend an entire day on display for the ogling masses."

"But, ye are nobility. Ye should be accustomed..."

"I married a noble man," she retorted - or, would have, if Montana State Police detective Jim Neville hadn't been shot down like a dog by overzealous FBI agents. "We weren't wed long enough for me to learn the... intricacies of that life."

“Still, ye are the most noble woman I ha’ met, even as young as ye are. Your presence would grace the stage...”

“No, Glenn. That’s my final word on the matter.”

Clearly disappointed, MacDonough made his exit. He paused twice, mouth open as if to argue, then shambled toward his pickup.

The Mistress of Boleskine trudged to the kitchen, a cup of hot cocoa hopefully restoring her frazzled nerves.

“It would serve Swan right if I showed up at that festival in a fringed leather jacket and bell-bottom jeans and blew out the bands’ amplifiers.”

A German-accented voice countered, “When your mean streak shows, it’s not very pretty.”

“Sorry, General,” she told the tangible image of Erwin Rommel. “I just can’t help it sometimes, dealing with stupid or insistent people.”

“I commiserate fully. Best for you to get some sleep and forget...”

“Except, Swan won’t forget and, until the last drink is served at Dores Park on Saturday, I’ve got to keep up my guard.”

“Wise, but don’t let it make you paranoid.”

Mustang emptied the ceramic mug and wiped flecks of chocolate from her lips. “I already am, General. I already am.”

Rightfully so, she soon discovered.

Security measures she had put in place upon her arrival on the property prevented trespassers from traversing the grounds at night. Access to the drive, however, was not restricted - an oversight she vowed to resolve as two burly thugs loomed above her bed shortly after midnight.

She hadn’t heard the car, and could only guess how they’d gained entrance: Swan, the pick-lock.

Indeed, he stood between the two, a dwarf protected by two giants.

“Restrain her,” he instructed quietly.

She bolted upright, threatening, “I dare them to try.”

As tattooed arms reached for her, their wrists suddenly wrenched upward, as if heavy shackles bound them to the ceiling.

“Boss, what the fuck?” one shrieked.

“Never mind,” Swan sighed, dropping on the mattress. He extracted a rolled magazine from the inside pocket of his camel hair overcoat. “When we first met, I thought I recognized you. After our little chat this afternoon, I was certain you’re not who you claim to be.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” raged Mustang.

The issue of *Rolling Stone* dated from 1974. Swan adorned the cover, titled "Man of the Year." Flipping to the centerfold, his thick index finger thumped a full color photo, where the visage inside a hastily drawn circle was Mustang's own face - one of hundreds attending a concert of Swan's top band at the time.

"You joked about me looking too young to have been involved in the scene back then," Swan hissed. "What about you?"

"That's not me. My mom, maybe."

Except Maggie Duryea did not have red hair.

"Bullshit." Swan seized her shoulder. "You're coming with me."

"Where?"

"To sort this out, once and for all."

She jerked free. "No way."

"If you don't, I'll expose you for what you are..."

"What am I?" she taunted.

"Nothing good."

"Neither are you."

Swan removed his tinted spectacles, blue eyes strangely lit in the dimness of her bedroom. "How 'bout we make a bargain?" he ventured. "You tell me your secret, and I'll tell you mine."

Mustang's green orbs rolled skyward. "Who says I have any secrets? My life is an open book."

"If that's the case, why are there no public records of Lady Elizabeth Neville, here or in the States? Why is the ownership of this estate so top secret, even my team couldn't locate the documents? And, how in the name of all that's diabolical, did you best my two finest bodyguards?"

He pointed to the pair suspended by invisible bonds.

Ruminating on her options, Mustang knew divulging the truth would leave her vulnerable to blackmail - or worse - at Swan's hands. While many men who'd crossed her path since the unfortunate incident that bestowed on her Jack Parsons' occult powers when she was 16 had a basic sense of integrity, Swan lacked a moral compass.

Accompanying him on whatever excursion he'd planned might also expose her to unknown dangers, requiring her to use her command of nature for protection.

"Well?" he prodded.

She could always wipe the trio's memory and oust them from the premises...

Swan rose. "We're wasting time."

Their deaths were only a thought away, the young woman realized.

Still, an unnatural demise would prompt investigations, especially if this man merited the high profile he projected. Better to take the lesser risk.

“Give me a minute to get dressed,” she stated.

Yanking jeans, a blue flannel shirt and sneakers from the closet, she slipped into the master bath. A brush brought some semblance of order to her tresses, which she whipped into a pony tail.

She emerged to find Swan contemplating his dead employees.

“You... murdered them?” she gasped.

“Their contract stipulated any failure would result in immediate termination.”

“Eliminating any witnesses to your schemes.”

“Very... astute.” His fingers entwined with hers. “What *should* I call you, by the way, since you don’t use your old name and you’re not Lady Elizabeth?”

“I’d rather you not address me at all.”

He’d tossed the magazine on the worn carpet yet, as he led her toward the window, they trod upon the open page and seemed to be sucked into the photo.

The transition did not faze Mustang, thanks to her experience traveling on lightning bolts. Swan recovered his composure equally fast.

They stood in the midst of thousands, drums generating a solid beat, complemented by guitars and vocals. A quick glance around verified the photo’s caption had been correct: New York’s Central Park. Crowds stood, dancing, near a stage, while others bounced up and down on temporary bleachers.

“A time traveler?” she remarked.

“Of a sort,” he responded slyly.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“To... prove you and I are destined to be together through the ages.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang groaned, extricating herself from her companion. “That’s nonsense.”

Swan flipped her palms upward. “By all accounts, you should be dead.” Releasing her, he unbuttoned his wide-collared silk shirt. Multiple scars marred the left side of his chest. “So should I.” His long blond hair rustled in the breeze. “Our youth has been preserved because our power makes us immortal.”

Delusions such as his raised a chuckle in Mustang’s throat. “You have no idea how foolish you sound. There’s no such thing as immortality. The reason I’m not dead is because I’m able to... deflect objects that would do me damage.”

The switchblade Swan pulled from his pocket sliced at her torso. It melted in his fist.

He guffawed. "Like that?"

"Like that," she echoed reluctantly.

"Impressive." He scrutinized her. "Your look needs a makeover, if you're going to consort with my crowd."

"I'm not consorting with anyone."

A tooled leather portfolio mysteriously appeared, containing photos of Swan and someone resembling Mustang in a variety of venues, on a broad spectrum of dates throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

"If this was the past, why did you come to my present..." she hiccupped.

"Because one mistake in this past recreated your present."

"What mistake?"

"Like a typical Judas, you... betrayed me, abandoned me, left me at the mercy of those who would ruin me."

This scenario baffled the young woman. "How can that be, when I don't remember any of it. I wasn't even born..."

"The deal you cut when you betrayed me erased your memories of our... union."

While she fully doubted Swan's tale, she couldn't completely discount it. After all, she had performed feats most humans would refuse to acknowledge: manifesting the dead, traveling through space on lightning, splitting herself into two parts, mentally translating languages and making herself understood to those who spoke no English.

"If this mistake is... rectified, I'll be free of you?" Mustang proposed.

"That's not..."

She shoved the portfolio toward him. "Explain. In detail. I'm tired of riddles."

Swan settled on a vacant bleacher beyond the throng, his low tenor audible above the cacophony.

"Before the second World War, I worked as a Hollywood casting agent. I was drafted, but was classified 4F because of my height and severe astigmatism. With all the A-listers headed overseas, I thought I'd get ahead, but the studio execs just laughed at me."

Swan had vowed revenge. "One night at a bar near Grauman's Chinese, I met a guy who offered to help me make good. I was pretty drunk, but still savvy enough to add clauses to the contract specifying I retain my youth, and live for a minimum of 200 years."

"So, not really immortal, just..." Mustang balked at a horrific memory.

“Close enough. I’ve outlived most of my acquaintances from that era, and will outlive this generation, and the next.”

The preposterous narrative prompted the demand: “How do I fit into this deal with the devil?”

“You and I met in 1945, at a Cal Tech war bond drive. I’d been consulting with Jack Parsons about... well... He introduced us.”

The truth dawned. “That wasn’t me, Swan. That was my grandmother!”

What little Mustang knew of the deceased Sylvia Matthys: she had participated in rituals with Parsons to create the Moonchild, and had become pregnant. Parsons supposedly died in an explosion of fulminated mercury, with the FBI whisking him off to Scotland. Sylvia married another member of the occult fraternity, but her daughter, Maggie, turned out not to be the special child they anticipated..

“The day we met, these scars...” He prodded the marred flesh of her palms.

“I never knew her well enough to find out if she... shared Parsons’ power. If she did, that would explain...”

“You *do* share that power?” Swan almost drooled.

“I didn’t say that.” She yawned. “Now that we’ve established I wasn’t the woman in the picture, can you please return me to present day?”

“We’ve established nothing. Even if it was your grandmother, the bloodline allows you to remedy her mistake.”

“And change the course of history?”

Swan glared at her. “My history, no one else’s.”

“You act as if you’re not naive, but that’s the most idiotic statement I’ve heard to date. Think about it: all the bands you’ve discovered - will they still become famous after the alteration? Their families, their children... dozens, hundreds of lives will be impacted.”

He clutched her shirt collar, tenor grating. “I don’t care! I want what’s rightfully mine!”

Swan would not take no for an answer, Mustang acknowledged. “Fine. Tell me what happened.”

He inhaled solemnly. “At the end of this set, a squad of New York police officers will raid the dressing rooms. A total of 80 grams of cocaine, assorted baggies of marijuana and miscellaneous pills will be confiscated. None of those arrested will give up the name of the supplier of these... substances.”

“You?”

“Of course. Keeping the performers happy and...” His voice trailed off.

“In the groove’?”

“Precisely.”

“So, the redhead in the picture...”

“Ratted me out to the pigs,” Swan snarled.

“Meaning?”

“I was arrested, convicted and spent fifteen years in the can, losing my entire catalog and millions.”

Mustang swallowed hard. She could envision her grandmother, righteous woman that she was, turning Swan over to the authorities. Some uncertainty remained, however, that she had been his consort.

She would have been busy as wife and mother during that period of history, raising her daughter.

Could it indeed have been Mustang herself?

Applause drowned out conscious thought, then a gruff voice through a bullhorn announced the police presence.

Swan smirked at her, blue eyes focused on her delicate features as his glasses rested on the tip of his slender nose

“Oh, hell,” she muttered.

III

Police cordoned off the venue, setting up specific checkpoints where every person attending the outdoor concert submitted to a pat search. Alcohol and drug-related arrests exceeded 500, with misdemeanor charges adjudicated by magistrate judges on the spot, bond set and paid, eliminating the need to transport so many to jail.

Swan and Mustang watched from the bleachers as half-dressed backup singers were escorted to paddy wagons and lead guitarists, make-up smeared, were loaded into patrol cars.

The music producer stood and stretched, a satisfied grin lighting his pale mien. “Well?”

Hesitant, the Mistress of Boleskine hugged her knees. “What’s in this for me, Swan?” she asked. “If not telling the cops about you changes the future, how do I know I’ll even...”

“That’s not what you should worry about,” he grumbled. “Two of my men will be stationed outside the precinct where we’re questioned. If you repeat your mistake, they will shoot you dead in the street.”

“Then, that hogwash about me being immortal...”

“Hogwash, naturally.” He cracked his knuckles. “You let yourself be coned because you wanted to believe it.”

Uniformed officers strode toward them.

Mustang straightened, decision made; she placed her hands on scrawny shoulders and whispered into his ear from behind. “And you believed I’d let you get away with dealing drugs, Swan?”

A deluge of rain fell from cloudless skies, severely decreasing visibility. For his part, Swan bemoaned his ruined silk shirt and matted blond mane, while Mustang scurried into the trees.

Her soaked auburn mop transformed to styled ebony locks, she blended with pedestrian traffic on Central Park West.

At the northwest corner, she observed the parade of black and white vehicles hauling captives to the county jail.

Her knowledge of New York based on classic movies, Mustang wandered the sidewalks, ignoring the faces of those rushing past. Neon lights flashed, music blared from basement dives, the smell of taxi exhaust permeated the air. Skyscrapers loomed above, blocking out the stars.

She could never live in the city, she determined.

Near a bus stop, a phone booth bore graffiti on the glass. Reflecting, the young woman recalled telephone books being delivered each year, which her mother tucked into a kitchen drawer. She peered through smudged panes where, protected by a blue hard cover on a chain, the New York Yellow Pages offered hope of finding Swan’s office.

The list of music recording companies ran six pages, none bearing his name. As the masses shoved each other to board the latest bus, she analyzed the listings for some clue.

A computer would have come in handy, even if she didn’t own one in present day, and none existed in 1974.

Ads filling a quarter of the sheets assisted her unwittingly. The lettering for Cygnus Productions fit within the silhouette of a swan - worth a visit on 58th Street, five miles south.

Lacking funds for public transportation, Mustang hiked the distance, collapsing from exhaustion on a playground bench two blocks from her destination.

The sun rose too soon, rousing her, bleary-eyed, to continue her quest. Flannel shirt ruffled, feet sore from the sneakers, she let her hair return to its natural color, with not a soul noticing the transformation.

A four-story red brick structure, that might have previously housed a corner bakery or neighborhood grocer's and apartments, had been renovated with tinted glass panels facing both streets from foundation to roof. Etched logos confirmed the address, embossed in gold on the lintel.

When Mustang entered the art deco lobby, she was greeted cheerfully by the brunette at a steel and tinted glass desk.

"Good morning, Candida," came the pleasant soprano. "Haven't seen you in awhile."

"I've been... away."

"That's what Swan said. He isn't in yet."

Mustang bluffed, "He told me to wait."

At the press of a button, elevator doors parted to her left. Evidently Swan's private lift, she rode to the penthouse and alighted in a wildly decadent chamber.

A mirror ball and strobe lights hung from thick oak rafters. Wallpaper blended black velvet swatches with neon pinks and blues. A red upholstered throne-type chair near the window might have served as Swan's vantage point to observe party-goers engaging in orgiastic rituals.

"He's a pervert, on top of everything else," she breathed, crossing the black shag carpet.

No drawers to rifle in search of incriminating evidence, there had to be a safe, or a second room concealed behind the walls, she surmised. Calming her heart rate, she called upon nature to locate any anomalies...

As she ran her right hand along the textured surface at shoulder height, a book-sized compartment clicked and popped open. A double-combination safe within signaled important documents in storage.

The need for an expert safecracker nonexistent, dials spun untouched. The iron rectangle slid forward, exposing two green ledgers which contained the truth of Swan's legal and illegal transactions.

Gripping them firmly, she restored the room. A phone would have been useful at that moment; inspection of the throne revealed one arm had been wired with receiver and touchpad.

The 9-1-1 system not yet in operation, Mustang dialed "O" and told the operator to connect her to the nearest police station.

"Is this an emergency?" droned the disembodied voice.

"Lives are at stake, yes."

"You can find the number in your phone book."

Frustrated, Mustang spat, "I don't have a phone book. Please, hurry!"

Moments later, a gruff baritone announced her connection with the 20th Precinct. “How may I help you?”

“If you want the goods on Swan, I have the evidence,” was all she could say before the receiver was snatched from her grip.

She heard the officer frantically repeating, “Who is this? Who is this?” before the line went dead.

Not a religious sort, she nonetheless prayed the man had the wherewithal to contact the operator and trace the call, sending help.

She was going to need it.

“How’d you escape the cops?” she barked.

“The same as you, in the rain and confusion, but in a different direction,” Swan’s nasal tenor declared. “I had a sneaking suspicion you’d find my *sancto sanctorum*.”

She spun toward the dry and neatly pressed figure, sporting black bell-bottoms, polished leather boots and a wide-collared floral print shirt. His pudgy digits clutched a Colt revolver.

Somehow, that alleviated the knots in her stomach. “Oh, hell, Swan. Didn’t I tell you I can’t be killed?”

“So you say. Unless you give me those ledgers, you *will* die.”

She tapped the rough covers. “Dude, there’s enough here to put you away for the rest of your life.”

“I know.” He supplanted her on the throne, custom made for his limited height. But for a crown, he might have been mistaken for a king. “At least, last time, you only gave the pigs verbal evidence. That was bad enough. Now, you want to bury me for good?”

“I don’t abide drug dealers. Not only are the addicts’ lives destroyed, but their families...”

“If not me, then others,” Swan rationalized. “Why shouldn’t I reap the profits?”

Mustang longed to end the conversation, but needed to give the police time...

“Doesn’t your legitimate business provide enough for you to live... comfortably?” she countered. “Or are you so degenerate you must immerse yourself in wholesale debauchery?”

Surprisingly fast for someone his size, Swan lunged, pinned her arm behind her back and drew her to where their faces were inches apart. “You should talk,” he scolded playfully. “From this very chair, I’ve watched you make the rounds of the men, giving lap-dances and letting them... put their hands on you.”

“Liar!” Her kung fu training kicked in; she shot a knee into his chest then, unrestrained, aimed a roundhouse kick to his temple, knocking him cold.

This, as two police officers burst from the elevator.

Swan was handcuffed before he regained consciousness. When his eyelids fluttered open, he groped for his glasses - in pieces across the floor - then erupted in a tirade of expletives.

Mustang presented the ledgers to the sergeant, who instructed her to follow them to the police station. His attention diverted by Swan’s resistance, he couldn’t take any notes, like her name.

She wouldn’t have known what pseudonym to give, if he’d asked.

“I’ll be there shortly,” she bluffed as the elevator doors closed.

From the tall window, she watched Swan being shoved in the back of a Chevy cruiser. Four other municipal vehicles had converged on the corner, with plain clothes and uniformed police escorting the brunette receptionist and other staff from the building.

Once they departed, Mustang descended to ground level and exited without disturbing the large-font notice taped to the door warning against trespassers, or the chain and huge brass padlock.

Skirting Columbus Circle, she meandered into Central Park, teeming with joggers and mothers pushing strollers in the balmy summer air. Hazy memories of conversations with her grandmother and Jack Parsons buzzed in her brain - something to explain what was transpiring.

Sylvia Matthys may have suggested Candida as Mustang’s middle name, but she had - to the young woman’s knowledge - never been known by that name.

That eliminated the deceased matriarch from this particular equation.

She had, however, been associated with what could be the Candida in question. Mustang strained her brain cells to recall that woman’s legal identity. Madge, Marion... finally, a bench advertisement for a popular margarine brand created the link.

Marjorie.

Marjorie Cameron, as Jack Parsons had related in his journals. He compared Sylvia and Marjorie to twins, as well, resembling each other so closely.

If she’d had those journals at hand then and there, she could easily have pieced the puzzle together.

Mustang recalled no mention of Swan on the pages or, if there was, had Parsons used some other name?

That didn’t matter so much.

She had to rectify the alteration of the future. Her mental image of the photo from *Rolling Stone* had not shown the redhead with Swan. It was a simple shot of the crowd enjoying the concert.

Swan, in fact, had been shown on stage, or off stage, in other snapshots.

Meaning, the Swan who had accompanied her remained part of a separate time line.

And must be returned to the future.

Finding a phone booth with an intact directory ate up the better part of the afternoon. The distance logged on her sneakers to New York Police's 20th Precinct on 82nd Street taxed her leg muscles.

She couldn't simply waltz through the doors and demand Swan's release. She could - and did - alter her appearance to that of a uniformed officer, gaining access to the squad room without anyone giving her a second glance.

Listening while she pretended to read a file plucked from a corporal's desk, she heard that Swan was awaiting questioning by detectives in a holding cell on the third floor. Feigning nonchalance, she navigated the maze of faded grey metal desks to the staircase.

When the iron door swung wide, Swan leapt from the cold, unpainted steel bench in anticipation.

Squinting at Mustang through cracked lenses, his expression soured.

"What the hell..." he grunted.

"You think you're the only one who knows how to pick locks?" His visitor directed, "Sit down and shut up. We don't have much time."

"You're telling me," he concurred, complying with her request. "If the cops take me to the main lock-up, they'll discover two Swans, not one."

"Right."

Slumping on the seat, he stared at the cement floor. "Two of you, as well."

"Nope."

"Huh?" He perked up.

"The story you told about how we supposedly met had one flaw."

"What's that?" he asked, tenor derisive. "It wasn't you?"

"The woman Jack Parsons introduced to you in 1945 was Marjorie Cameron, his favorite during the Ordo Templi Orientis rituals back in Pasadena."

"Impossible."

"Patience, Swan. Marjorie went by Candida. She was great friends with my grandmother, Sylvia. They even looked like each other."

"And, you inherited your grandmother's features and hair?"

“Pretty much.” She leaned against the wall. “I can guess, after the FBI faked Jack’s death, Marjorie gravitated toward you, having money and a modicum of power after your deal with... Her disappointment at not conceiving the Moonchild, but Sylvia getting pregnant by Jack during a subsequent ritual, left her... disillusioned. She would’ve latched on to anyone with a few bucks.”

Swan stiffened. “That wasn’t the case. I loved Candida... Marjorie... whatever her name was. Guys like me, shorter than most women, don’t find love at every turn. She inspired me, consoled me...”

“Encouraged you to deal drugs?” Mustang sniffed.

“Since you didn’t live through the 60s, you can’t judge. Getting high was... like breathing.”

“Even if a lot of your... customers stopped breathing when they overdosed?”

“I didn’t... cut the shit like some of the other dealers prided themselves on doing. My highs were honest.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

Swan exhaled dejectedly. “After Candida ratted me out, we lost touch. I spent more than two decades trying to find her once I served my sentence, winding up with you, instead.”

“I remember Sylvia showing me a scrap book, with Marjorie’s obituary pasted on one page. I didn’t read the whole thing, but it was 1976 or so.”

Determined footsteps approached, keys jingling.

Swan retreated to the corner, cowering.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang croaked. She laid one hand on his shoulder, and a finger on his lips. “Be absolutely silent and trust me.”

“Why...”

His shoulder felt unbearable pressure as she slapped his cheek, the pinkish glass in the aviator frames abruptly repaired.

“Okay,” he whispered.

A fleshy desk sergeant wrestled with the ancient lock, mumbling to himself about doing a flunky’s job. Hinges squeaking open, he called Swan’s name.

Receiving no response, he looked up. His jaw sagged. “Oh, crap.”

He reversed course, stumbling as he lurched toward the alarm box.

Sirens reverberated through the building, and a half-dozen officers surrounded the sergeant, whose mouth failed to form the necessary explanation.

Mustang urged Swan forward.

“Are you kidding?” he protested.

“All we have to do is walk out.”

“And get arrested again?”

She snickered. “Don’t you get it? When that idiot looked in here, he didn’t see us, did he?”

A full minute elapsed before Swan acknowledged the truth. “We’re... invisible?”

She nodded.

He led the way from the cell along the corridor, avoiding scrambling officers, many with sidearms drawn.

In the stairwell, Swan paused between floors. “What about the ledgers?”

The Mistress of Boleskine didn’t miss a beat. “Nothing but blank pages.”

Descending the flights, he blurted, “Thanks.”

On the main floor, a shot-gun armed detail blocked egress to the street. Mustang tugged the music producer into the men’s room - vacant in the emergency - raising the window pane and crawling over the sill.

“You’re an absolutely certifiable lunatic,” Swan remarked.

Landing in the alley with deft grace, she grinned, “You have no idea.”

IV

Mustang Duryea and Hamilton Swan stopped running two blocks north. Her hair again darkened, she didn’t stand out among late-day pedestrians and Swan, well, went unnoticed amidst much taller crowds.

Taking a breather, Mustang’s stomach grumbled.

“You hungry?” Swan queried.

“I haven’t eaten since” - she considered - “before you kidnaped me from Boleskine.”

He strode toward 58th Street. “I owe you dinner, if nothing else.”

“Your recording studio is on lock-down.”

“Which is fine, for all intents and purposes. There’s a kosher deli...”

She followed, legs aching and head pounding. “You’ve got cash?”

He stopped for a red light, whirling toward her. “I may not be the me from this time period, but I remember where I kept my stash.”

“More important, do you remember how to get us home?” she pressed.

“That’s... complicated.”

“How so?”

They resumed walking, Mustang unable to hear Swan’s statement. She pulled him into a coffee shop, mostly deserted at that hour.

At a round pine table near the windows, he ordered a large coffee and she chose hot chocolate.

“Figures,” he grunted.

“Never mind that. What were you saying about getting home?”

“You won’t like it.”

“Surprise, surprise.”

Their drinks delivered, Swan sipped from the ceramic mug, pensive. “In order to pull off this scheme...”

“Keeping yourself out of stir?” Mustang clarified.

“Right. I had to cut a side deal with the boss.”

“What boss? You’re the owner...”

“Of Cygnus Productions, sure.” He drained the steaming liquid, as if it would strengthen his resolve. “Not of my soul.”

“Oh, hell...” Attempting not to explode in a rage, Mustang swirled her spoon, toying with a miniature marshmallow. “Is this the guy you mentioned meeting in a bar during the second World War?”

“You’ve got a good memory,” Swan praised.

“Thanks. Do *you* remember the guy’s name?”

“Of course. That’s not something you forget when you’ve... well...”

“So?”

“Jude Griffin.”

Mustang’s cup, fortunately empty, shattered, the wood table split in half.

Swan’s chair slid backward, face petrified by fear. “What...”

“Tell me, fast, what this side deal entailed,” the young woman hissed.

“If I convinced you not to repeat the betrayal, allowing me to proceed with business as usual, you would be... added to the rolls of the damned.”

For one millisecond, Mustang visualized Swan with a garotte around his neck. Then, as he began choking, she forced herself to empty her mind.

Instead, clenched lips muffled the curse, “You presumptuous son of a...”

The coffee shop floor lurched, and fixtures crashed on the tile.

Someone yelled, “Earthquake!”

Employees fled into the street.

Panicked, Swan’s tenor rose an octave, he pitched backward, tumbling the chair. “How was I to know? I made the deal in ‘89!”

“Mephistopheles has tried before to rope me in,” Mustang lamented.

“Now, you’ve given me to him on a silver platter!”

“Restoring my life, my wealth and reputation...”

“An egotistical, narcissistic, selfish... ambition!”

“I admit that, whole-heartedly,” he groaned, scrambling upright. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“Maybe you can’t, but I can...” Rising, she gazed at the fading daylight and the crush of humanity. “Tell me, precisely, how Jude is supposed to collect me.”

Swan’s blue eyes squinted as he taxed his memory. “When I walk out of jail, free, I’m supposed to give you... or Candida, anyway, a check for one million dollars. The moment it’s cashed, Jude... well...”

“Wait a minute!” Mustang interrupted. “It’s not me who should be receiving that check. It’s Marjorie Cameron. Since none of this is going to happen, there’ll be no soul to collect!”

Tension eased, Swan smiled - casting his face in a genuinely pleasant light, Mustang noted. “You’re right!” he beamed. “There’s nothing to worry about, at all!”

“Unless...” the young woman’s tone grew ominous “Did you read the fine print of the deal?”

“Of course, he didn’t.”

Stepping gingerly around splinters of wood and clay, Jude Griffin approached the pair. His tousled brown hair swirled around small ears, across a high, smooth forehead. His sharp jaw hard set, the straight nose and piercing brown eyes beneath full, naturally-arched brows caused Swan to shudder.

“It’s been awhile,” Mustang greeted sardonically. “Though, maybe for you, on the ethereal plane, not so long.”

“Weird how that works, isn’t it?” Griffin agreed. “Technically, this being 1974, we won’t meet for 30 years, yet...”

“I understand how your game is played, and will do everything I can to thwart you.”

He raised a warning finger, not quite human but not exactly deformed in any tangible way. “Hold on, there, Mustang.”

“Mustang?” Swan echoed. “How the hell...”

She brushed off his confusion. “Later.”

Griffin drew a folded parchment from the inside pocket of the tweed sportcoat he wore with green turtleneck and black slacks. “This document promises me one soul, in return for allowing Swan to find his betrayer and return to the past in an attempt to prevent his prosecution on drug and money laundering charges. It’s supposed to be the woman who...”

“Which wasn’t me,” Mustang remarked, “and that woman died long ago. What if he isn’t successful?”

“The soul due would be his own.”

Swan recoiled. “No!”

Mustang had expected as much. Those of the demon realm lacked the commonly-held trait of integrity.

She reasoned, “Somewhere across New York City, the Swan of this time is being held, pending Candida’s sworn statement. Your one hope is to convince her not to tell the police...”

“It’s too late for that,” Griffin gloated, pointing to a small black and white television with rabbit ear antennae on the counter beside the coffee grinder.

Through static, grainy breaking news images of the investigation into a supposed earthquake blended with reports of charges facing music producer Hamilton Swan, shown shackled while being escorted by police into the county jail.

“Time to go, Swan,” Griffin announced.

Blue orbs flashed flight as the diminutive figure searched for an escape route.

“Jude, slow down.” Mustang laid a hand on the demon’s arm, urging him to a seat at one of the undamaged tables.

“I’d rather not,” he refused. “The stunt you pulled - will pull - cost me dearly. I won’t be permanently banished to the lowest circle of Hell because you thwarted me twice.”

Curious, Swan mustered, “What did she do?”

Griffin swung on him. “This supposedly innocent child beguiled me with her beauty and kindness, while actually being cold-hearted and vicious. She robbed me of my prize, which would have elevated me to the elite.”

“What prize?”

“Has she not displayed her power in your presence?” the demon asked, incredulous.

“A bit.”

Griffin bellowed, “One word from that delicate mouth, a single unspoken thought, and the world could be wiped clean of all life. She is a god, albeit accidentally, and he who controls the nether regions craves her power to augment his own.”

“I suspected...” Swan oozed.

Mustang interspersed, “Enough!” Facing Swan, she declared, “You’re already on a power trip; you don’t need me around to clean up your messes, or distract the authorities from your illegal activities.” To Griffin: “If your boss wants a second crack at taking me, bring it, and I’ll shred both of you into bite-sized pieces for the stray dogs in the alley!”

Griffin grinned at Swan. “She’s not one to make angry. She does horrible things when she’s angry.”

“Like shatter dishes?” the latter ventured.

The Mistress of Boleskine supplied, “Try killing people.”

Swan’s pale eyebrows arched; Griffin nodded his affirmation of the fact.

“Take her, and be gone,” shuddered Swan.

The demon retorted, “Technically, I have no claim to her. It is you I’ve come to fetch.”

“One soul is no different from another...”

“There, you’re wrong,” Mustang acknowledged. “Jude’s life would be far less painful if he *could* make me a present to his hideous superior. The sole rule his ilk must observe, however, is not snatching souls arbitrarily. They require legitimate cause.”

Griffin bowed in admiration. “You’ve done your research.”

“Jack Parsons’ journals contained extensive notes on *his* research.”

“You wish me to take him, then?”

She deliberated briefly. “Sad as it is to say, I see in him no redeeming characteristics. He was ready to throw me to the wolves without blinking an eye, and ruined countless lives with drugs...”

“But, how many did I make happy with the music?” Swan protested.

“Thousands uplifted does not compensate for one destroyed.”

“Amen, sister,” Griffin applauded, before self-consciously clearing his throat. “See? See how she twists...”

“Never mind that. Are you taking him, or do you want to go head-to-head with me? I’d like to get home.” Suddenly, Mustang’s jaw dropped. “Oh, I get it! When you brought me through time, Swan, you knew what was in store. You had no intention of restoring me to Boleskine! In other words, you betrayed *me*, Judas, not the other way ‘round.”

Sheepishly, Swan retreated behind a counter cluttered with half-drunk lattes and empty espresso cups.

“Calm down, Mustang,” Griffin warned. “Any damage you do must be explained...”

A single deep breath repaired the table, mug and cracks in the walls caused by her rage. “There. No explanations necessary,” she rumbled. “Just a well-fried corpse dumped in Central Park. They don’t have DNA technology in 1974, so he’ll remain unidentified...”

“You can’t!” Swan shrieked, crashing to his knees.

"I'm a tolerant person, most days," she sighed. "I don't abide those who blatantly use others for their own personal gain. I've encountered too many in recent years, and it disgusts me. You all should be dealt with harshly, and there's no better place to start than here and now."

"Let me have him," Griffin muttered. "It'll serve the same purpose. He'll be gone..."

"You can have his soul after I've made an example of him."

"No!" Swan begged, hands clasped in petition. "I can change! I'll do anything..."

Griffin and Mustang uttered the comment simultaneously. "Typical."

"Yes, I freely admit, I'm a coward," the music producer wept. "In prison, the other inmates..."

"You don't need to elaborate on what they did to you," the young woman advised. "Those who commit the crime must do the time."

"It wasn't... I didn't... It was just the way things were..."

"Excuses, excuses," Griffin chided, glancing at his Rolex wristwatch. "I'm on a tight schedule, Mustang. Do your thing, so I can get him down to intake."

Inside her skull, the voices of St. Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi and Mark Twain chorused their objections to any violent action. She agreed, in principle, with their rationale, but Hamilton Swan deserved his end.

"Come here," she ordered the trembling blond, sweat drenching his floral print shirt despite the sudden chill.

"No..." he pleaded, voice weakening.

"Now!"

His feet propelled him to the center of the coffee shop's dining area. "Please, Mustang... have mercy..."

Her fists clenched. "This is about as merciful as I get."

Trained swiftness augmented the punch to Swan's nose, breaking his spectacles anew and spraying blood in a wide arc. He landed in a heap on the far side of the room.

"Nice one," praised Griffin.

"He's all yours," she concluded, examining her scraped knuckles. "That is, after you send me home."

"So be it."

The demon placed a gnarled digit on her forehead and, instantaneously, she found herself once more in present day Scotland.

A strange sensation, much more intense than traveling via lightning bolt, she mused.

Sun rising over the horizon, Mustang shivered on the hill beside Jack Parsons' decaying altar. She had no way to verify if the New York fiasco had occurred in one night.

Unless she rode into Dores to pick up a newspaper.

She delayed the outing until after a hearty breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast, shower and change of clothes. While her hair dried, she sat on the love seat in the reinforced study, perusing Jack Parsons battered journals.

Her grandfather did mention, on one page in the second volume, a "little pipsqueak obsessed with money, power and women" who approached him for assistance in the mid-1940s. If, indeed, the reference was to Swan, he attended one ritual in Pasadena, meeting Marjorie Cameron and others of Parsons' circle.

If Swan had visited Boleskine in later years, Parsons did not record the encounter. Or, she considered, with his musical connections, he may have joined guitarist Jimmy Page in his revels during the years that celebrity took over ownership of the property after Parsons' other staged death in 1972.

Daylight failing to warm the air, Mustang drew a parka atop her sweatshirt and jeans before heading to the barn.

Stepping through the front door, a white panel van remained parked on the gravel drive - Swan's transport with his two thugs, now dust wafted out her bedroom window on the breeze. She disintegrated the vehicle as tires approached.

Glenn MacDonough's pickup rounded the curve, perhaps saving her a trip to town.

"Lady Elizabeth!" he hailed with his thick Scottish burr. "Have ye seen Mr. Swan?"

"Not today," she replied evasively.

"The committee members can't reach him. His mobile is out o' service; he has nae been t' his hotel in Inverness..."

"Why the urgency?"

MacDonough frowned. "He owes for the concert permit and other festival expenses. If the vendors dinnae get their money, they won't..."

Another conundrum for Mustang to handle. She could pay for Swan's extravagance and let the festival take place, or...

"Glenn, I hate to break this to you, but Swan is gone. He was... all in all, a shady sort. No good. I'm afraid the villagers put their faith in the wrong man, and your construction company will suffer a terrible loss on the renovations to that factory."

"Are ye positive?" the wispy-haired elder prodded.

“He came here to enlist my services in a scheme so devious, I couldn’t abide it. When he discovered his plans would fall through, he... succumbed to the inevitable.”

No better way to describe what had taken place, she decided, without shocking her neighbor.

“I’m that disappointed,” MacDonough mumbled. “So will be the committee.”

“It’s for the best. Any profits made from the festival would never have been delivered to the charity earmarked for the funds. Swan would have... found other uses for it.”

“We’ll see he’s prosecuted t’ the full extent o’ law!” Stomping to his vehicle, MacDonough spun. “Thank ye, Lady Elizabeth, for the news.”

“Sorry it couldn’t be more... encouraging.”

Locking the deadbolt before heading to the barn, where her beloved horses waited, Mustang encouraged herself to mind her own business from then on, learning that questions asked often generate unwelcome answers.