

The Mustang Chronicles:

Accidental Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Three fawns wandered past the corral, where Mustang Duryea's horses grazed on tasty spring grass. The Mistress of Boleskine paused in cleaning the adjacent barn's last stall, resting on her pitchfork as the spotted youngsters broke into a game of tag, frolicking around the clearing before vaulting through the underbrush.

A glorious May morning, with temperatures moderate and humidity low - somewhat unusual for the Scottish Highlands. Once her chores were complete, the auburn-haired young woman planned to saddle her Arabian stallion and mingle with nature in a more direct manner.

That is, until a veritable stampede of wildlife - rabbits, squirrels, birds, deer, skunks - burst from the trees in panicked flight from some unseen predator.

"Oh, hell," muttered Mustang, recognizing the signs of intruders on her property. As a rule, she didn't object to visitors during daylight hours, unless they were poachers.

Rifle shots confirmed her suspicions.

An agonized shriek exacerbated her anger.

Sprinting along a path toward the commotion's source, she heard frantic rustling ahead, and realized the trespassers were escaping. A command to halt them died in her throat, however, when she stumbled over a thick root and slammed against an ancient maple trunk.

Car engines revved and tires burned rubber on the macadam leading toward Inverness. Mustang recovered her balance and cursed.

A muffled groan diverted her attention from the intended vengeance. Retracing her steps, the obstacle on which she had tripped turned out to be a man, pouring his life's blood into the soil.

Not a hunter, either. A tourist, or resident of the Loch Ness district, out for a stroll to enjoy the weather, given his plain white t-shirt, jeans and red sneakers. Her cursory inspection of his wounds indicated the bullet had entered the base of his neck and exploded beside his adam's apple, nicking the carotid artery - accounting for the quantity of blood.

For all she knew, he could be paralyzed, or worse.

Calling upon nature to heal him, with the power she'd inherited from her scientist/occultist grandfather, Jack Parsons, would not be feasible, since she could not be specific enough in her directives.

She instinctively ripped off a section of her flannel shirt and jammed it against his flesh, applying pressure. If Denis Sommers, the orthopedic surgeon

related to her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, were on holiday, she could summon him for assistance. Without that resource, the nearest doctor would be miles too far.

For the first time since she unwittingly plunged a ceremonial dagger into Parsons' chest, she felt absolutely helpless.

"Don't let him die!" she shouted to the breeze.

"I can't tell you how often I heard that same plea on the battlefields of Africa," came a soothing baritone from behind her.

Startled, Mustang gazed up into the stern countenance of Erwin Rommel, who she'd met while embodied in a former German soldier, and with whom she periodically enjoyed a game of chess. "General! Can you..."

Gently, this manifested spirit raised the injured man and transported him to Boleskine House as if he weighed no more than a feather. Traversing the foyer, veering from the corridor into the second of two furnished bedrooms, Rommel waited while Mustang fetched towels to lay atop the sheets to catch the blood.

"What now?" she asked.

"A little field medicine. Have you sewing thread and a needle?"

The slender female withdrew, rummaging a spool from the linen cupboard. "I never use it..."

"Sterilize them in boiling water."

"Right."

Mustang's stomach revolted as Rommel sutured the mangled flesh, and she averted her hazel eyes, unaware of the military leader's skill. Almost an hour elapsed before he rose, wiping his hands with a satisfied grin.

"The bullet missed his spinal cord, from what I could see. And, the way he flinched when I tied off the stitches, his nervous system is intact. Nonetheless, he should have a blood transfusion to survive."

"Will you stay with him while I run to use Glenn MacDonough's phone?"

"Do you want to risk involving the authorities?"

"Is there..."

"You, who so assiduously protect your privacy, wish to be subject of the investigation which will result from such a call?"

"I... did nothing wrong."

"But, there will be questions. You will need to verify your identity, Lady Elizabeth..."

Glimpsing her shredded shirt and stained jeans in the mirror, Mustang gulped. She'd allowed the residents of the area to believe her a widowed

noblewoman, Lady Elizabeth Neville. The fact she occupied this residence at the behest of the F.B.I...

“What can be done?”

“Your power...” hinted Rommel.

“I can’t create blood!”

“You can feed him properly, and stimulate his body to generate the necessary cells with the power.”

“Ah!”

“I’ll leave you to it.”

Before she turned to thank him, the general had vanished.

Mustang settled on the edge of the double mattress, contemplating the sleeping figure. A damp washcloth removed encrusted dirt and blood from his brown beard, prominent nose and tanned cheeks. Gauze taped over the wounds prevented her from doing likewise to his neck.

His shag-styled mane a dirty blond, she detected silver wire-rimmed spectacles in the pocket of his ruined t-shirt. The lenses were cracked, the frames bent when she extracted them.

Easily repaired with a quiet word.

Replacing his clothes would be no trouble, either. As for the other...

After bundling saturated towels to the laundry, she kept vigil by his side - utterly forgetting her plans to exercise the horses. Her bi-weekly grocery order delivered the previous day, she had plenty of orange juice, fruit and meat to feed him, when he awoke.

Which didn’t occur until well after dark. A lone lamp on the night stand provided illumination, so she barely observed his lids flutter. He attempted to swivel his neck, and groaned in anguish.

“Lie still,” advised Mustang. “You’ve been hurt.”

He croaked, hardly audible, “Where...”

“Safe, at Boleskine.”

He shifted his eyes toward her, and the light caught blue orbs burning like pale sapphires. His amateur nurse gasped.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she stammered.

His effort to nod brought a grimace to thin lips.

Mustang suggested, “How ‘bout this. To say yes, squeeze my hand. If it’s no, do nothing.”

Weak fingers caught hers and applied limited pressure.

“Orange juice, or just water?”

“No fair,” he gurgled.

She chuckled at her mistake. "Sorry. Orange juice?"

No response.

"Water?"

Affirmative.

"I won't be long."

She brought a tumbler with ice, liquid and a straw, and he sipped tentatively, pain contorting his face. Yet, he drained half the glass.

He whispered, "Thank you."

"No need for that. Rest now. Do you like jello?"

A squeeze.

"I'll have some ready for your breakfast."

"What..."

"We'll talk more in the morning."

Or, at least, communicate. Mustang brought a pad of paper and pen to the bedside, so he could write more complicated questions and answers, until his throat healed.

"Where are you from?" she began.

He scrawled, "Dunedin, New Zealand."

"What the hell are you doing here?" slipped out before she could restrain her tongue.

"Visiting grandparents."

"Oh."

"What's your name?" he queried.

"My friends call me Mustang. What's yours?"

"Sy Kingsley."

"You ready for a shower and some fresh clothes?"

He pressed firmly.

"I'll help you, but remember to move slowly."

Adding her strength to his depleted energy, they maneuvered into the master bathroom, where Mustang literally peeled soiled fabric off a layer of thick hair on Kingsley's chest, back and arms. After removing his socks, she left him to shed his trousers and underwear, focused on adjusting the water temperature in the tub.

Eyes on the tiles, she pointed to the shampoo and soap, and laid purple towels on the sink as he slid the frosted panel closed. She distracted herself counting gold flecks on the counter while he scrubbed himself; should he collapse, she didn't want him to incur further injuries. Assured of his well-being

as he cranked off the faucet, she vacated the chamber, opting to wash dishes in the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, Kingsley posed on the threshold, his lower half wrapped in knotted terry cloth, hair dripping. His gesture emphasized the lack of attire.

Mustang blushed at his solid physique, more like a gorilla's. "Sorry." She hurried to her room, selecting a set of oversized grey sweats from an oak chest.

"You're married?" her guest scribbled on a sheet, seated at the dinette table.

"No."

"Your father's?"

"I like mine baggy," she corrected. "Your stuff is in the wash."

"Scissors." He wrote.

"For what?"

He stroked his moist beard.

"Not a good idea. Too close to those bandages."

Kingsley snatched the outfit off the chair and lumbered from the room.

Assuming he rested peacefully, Mustang ambled outdoors to tend the horses. Troughs filled and oats replenished, her stomach grumbled, reminding her of lunch. She discovered the patient with his head in the refrigerator when she opened the kitchen door.

"Jello's on the top shelf," she stated, dribbling liquid soap on her hands at the sink. "Three different flavors. There's juice, or I can warm some chicken broth, if you prefer."

Balancing bowls of cherry, lime and orange gelatin onto the table, Kingsley accepted the proffered spoon and summarily began shoveling portions into his mouth.

Typical, mused Mustang. She couldn't recall a man she'd met who didn't devour his food as if starved.

"Slow down, dude!" she admonished. "You don't want to rip out the stitches..."

Those pale blue eyes glowered; she threw up her hands in surrender and went to straighten his bed.

He brought her the pad while she was smoothing the quilt. "Where's the TV?" she read.

"I don't have one."

"Why not?" he added quickly.

"That's my business."

He signaled, "Phone."

“Nearest one is down the road.”

“What’s wrong with you?” was underlined three times on the paper.

“Don’t press your luck. Without me, you wouldn’t be alive.”

His expression softened; head bowed slightly, though a stab of pain reminded him such motion was limited.

“Apology accepted,” Mustang acknowledged. “You need your sleep.”

“I... feel fine,” he murmured.

“Another 24 hours, then you can catch a taxi to hospital for proper treatment.”

“No!” he protested.

She snickered. “You hate doctors, too?”

“Killed my mother,” he scratched with the ballpoint.

“Sorry.”

She urged him onto the bed; Kingsley took the hint and stretched his limbs, soon dozing.

Mustang was folding the last load of laundry when petrified screams brought her running along the corridor.

II

Sy Kingsley had bolted upright on the bed, sweat beaded on his temples and drenching his shirt. His left hand pointed toward the shadowed corner. “Nazi soldier...” he sputtered.

“Oh, hell,” Mustang sighed. Stooping over him, she brushed his forehead with her lips.

Fever.

General Erwin Rommel might trust her to tend his wounds, but treating an infection could be beyond her capabilities.

Nor did she relish the need to explain herself to her patient. “I’ll get you some water,” she bluffed, retreating with a nasty glance toward the visitor concealed by the gloom.

“Forgive me,” Rommel pleaded when he joined Mustang at the kitchen sink. “I wished to check his progress.”

“Fine, until...”

“Convince him he’s been dreaming.”

The Mistress of Boleskine held the glass so tightly, it shattered in her grip. Her own blood dripped on the floor, and a stream of expletives echoed off the walls.

Binding the gash in a tea towel, she carried a plastic cup to Kingsley, and he emptied it without using a straw. She eased him onto the pillows, and dabbed moisture from his skin with her makeshift bandage.

“Better?”

“What was that I saw?” His tenor more a rasp, the words didn’t seem aggravated by his wounds. “You collect war memorabilia?”

“No. You... a nightmare, most likely.”

“So real.” Inspired by fright, he reached for Mustang’s arm. “He had a pistol...”

“Nonsense.” She presented his spectacles off the night stand. “You couldn’t tell, without these. Believe me, you’re safe, Sy. I... I’m here.”

Pulling her closer, she climbed into a sitting position, and he shifted his shaggy brown head onto her lap. “I feel... so weak.”

“You haven’t eaten since noon. I’ll bring you...”

When she tried to move, his grip increased. “Not hungry.”

“You must eat something. Otherwise, it’s to hospital, for your own good.”

Trembling digits released her. “Is this... house haunted?”

“Not by ghosts.”

She left him staring after her, puzzled.

Chicken broth, orange juice and more jello were loaded on a wooden tray, which she set on his thighs, once he’d been propped against the carved headboard. She obliged his fears by perching near his feet, watching him consume the liquids without gusto.

“Steak... potatoes,” he grunted between spoonfuls.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

She smiled and, surprisingly, he mirrored the expression. His beard concealed most of his mouth, as it was, now his upper lip totally disappeared, revealing a minor gap between his front teeth.

If any woman considered him handsome, she would be a rare creature, indeed.

He waved away the empty dishes; Mustang resented playing maid to this uninvited guest. “Good night,” she said in parting.

“You’re... coming back?”

“I need my sleep, too.”

“Sleep... here.”

Kingsley ignored her adamant refusal.

“How do you earn your living, Sy?” she pressed.

“Web... graphics designer... for a media syndicate.”

“Live with your parents?”

“For... Christ’s sake. I’m 32. I’ve... got my own...”

“Sorry. You’ve no cause to be afraid. My... security measures...”

“I... didn’t see an... alarm system.”

She clarified, “Unique configuration. Impossible for intruders to find the panel or disarm it.”

“Wow,” he snorted. “Rich bitch.”

Hazel orbs squinted as she backed from the space. “Think what you will.”

Mustang crawled into her king-sized bed that night, open window allowing the spring breeze to cool her rage. She chided herself for caving to General Rommel’s request and harboring the man. His arrogance might merit him being shot on purpose, by potential assassins who pursued him from New Zealand...

“What a crock,” she chortled in the dark. “I should have flattened the poachers’ tires, and let the police arrest them.”

“Brilliant,” the voice - not Rommel’s, or any of her regular, ethereal visitors - cut through the silence.

Her turn to scramble from beneath the covers and order all lights to switch themselves on.

Kingsley’s eyes widened at this feat, impressed. “Damn good security system, and voice activated.”

“What... are you doing?”

“Looking for the bathroom.” He peered through the door opposite. “Is this where you had me shower?”

“Yes, but you can use the one down the hall on the right.”

“Now, who’s jittery?” he taunted, angling his glasses to glare in her face.

Fists clenching and unclenching, Mustang resolved not to expose her powers. “Get out,” she instructed, chin quavering.

Something about her tone prompted Kingsley’s compliance. His entire demeanor changed from asserting his advantage to uncertainty. “Good night... er, Mustang.”

“Sleep... well.”

Exhaustion compounded by her early chores in the barn, the young woman slumped over a bowl of corn flakes that morning. Kingsley halted on the kitchen threshold upon seeing her, scrutinizing the stainless steel appliances as if they were monsters.

“What’s wrong?” grumbled his hostess. His wild mien raised goosebumps on her arms. “The nightmare again?”

“It’s not a dream. He was standing behind you last night in your room and, later... The swastika so red on his uniform, I’d swear...”

Mustang leaned her head against scarred palms. “Dammit, General, can’t you leave well enough alone?”

Kingsley shuffled toward the dinette table. “Who’re... you talking to?”

“A long story, one you’ll never hear.”

“Why not?”

Through grit teeth, she hissed, “If you’re scared now, I’d hate to think...”

“This place *is* haunted, isn’t it?”

“No!” The force of her declaration rattled skillets hung above the stove. “If you want breakfast, you can fix it yourself!”

She stormed out the door, pausing to catch her breath well beyond the corral.

Glenn MacDonough’s pickup truck, bearing his construction company logo, crunched gravel along the drive, swinging around the curve to stop beside her. “Good mornin’, Lady Elizabeth!” the balding Scotsman greeted cheerily from behind the wheel.

She didn’t immediately respond.

“Have ye heard the news?”

“What news?”

“A group o’ poachers was caught south o’ Dores just before dawn, two deer strapped on their bonnets.”

“Strange time to be hunting.”

“They were stranded wi’ multiple punctures.”

Mustang’s jaw dropped, then closed. She’d wished their tires to go flat, and they had - albeit belatedly. What sentence would be imposed would be less than they deserved.

At least, this information released some of her tension. She spun toward Boleskine House, the Georgian mansion once owned by the likes of occultist Aleister Crowley and rock guitarist Jimmy Page, her supposed sanctuary from frequent dilemmas triggered by her unusual power over nature. Sy Kingsley had stripped off his bandages and donned the white t-shirt, jeans and red sneakers in which she’d encountered him two days earlier, marching in her direction - a man with a purpose.

“Ye ha’ a guest?” MacDonough inquired.

“The poachers shot him accidentally.”

“Did ye notify the constables?”

“I... haven’t had a chance.”

“If ye wish, I’ll ring them.”

Mustang bristled. “We’d best leave that decision to Mr. Kingsley.”

“What decision?” groused the object of the conversation.

“Whether you wish to press charges against the men responsible for your injuries.”

Kingsley visibly stiffened. “My grandparents expected me in Glasgow yesterday. They’ll be worried. I...”

Befuddled, MacDonough shrugged and shifted the pickup in gear, pulling slowly away to avoid kicking up a spray of pebbles.

“You’re leaving?” Mustang prodded her companion.

“I appreciate you tolerating this inconvenience,” babbled Kingsley. “My grandmum used to be a nurse, and she’ll...”

“You going to walk to Glasgow?”

“There’s a town not far...”

“It’s not an easy hike.”

He snapped, “I’ll be fine.”

“Did you eat anything?”

“A slice of toast with jam.”

Mustang seized his arm, applying unaccustomed pressure. “If it’s one thing I despise, it’s guys acting macho to mask their fears. You don’t want to be in the house by yourself, because you think a Nazi officer...”

“I never said officer,” Kingsley corrected, suspicious.

“Whatever.”

“You know more than you’ll admit...”

Her fingers became a vice around his bones. “You’re going to bed and will stay there until I give you permission to move!”

Wriggle as he might, Kingsley could not break from her grasp. His face blanched, framed by the brown beard and dirty blond mane, creating its own ghostly effect. He crumpled against her in a faint; she summoned the natural elements to prevent him from hitting the ground..

Practically dragging him into the house, she settled him as best she could on the living room’s green divan. Though about her same height, his frame packed quite a bit more weight than she anticipated. She laid a crocheted afghan over him for warmth, and settled in the cane-backed rocking chair to calm her jangled nerves.

“You need some distraction,” offered Erwin Rommel, materializing beside the chess board to her left.

“Perfect! We start one of our marathon games, and Sy wakes to see you... us...”

“Would it matter?”

“He’s a right pain, and if he leaves here, blabbing to his grandparents - or whoever will listen - about... about...”

“Who’d take him at his word?”

Mustang sucked air slowly. “To this day, they’re still catching Nazis and putting them on trial. Your name might never be raised in the reports, but I’d be targeted in the very interrogation you hoped to avoid when you brought him here... the main question why I’m harboring fascists!”

“You can erase his memory. You’ve done as much to others.”

“I... don’t... want... to use... my... power!” she shrieked.

Kingsley fidgeted on the cushions, and the young woman bit her lip.

“He’s dangerous,” commented Rommel. “I shan’t abandon you...”

“What could he do to me? I can stop bullets, melt knives...”

“Last night, he had every intention of killing you in your sleep.”

Pitching forward on the rocker, Mustang glared, “How do you know this?”

“Check your butcher’s block.” Without further ado, Rommel dissipated.

Reluctantly, the auburn-haired female trudged to the kitchen. Five blades fit in their specific slots, the sixth out of place. She pounded her hand on the counter, irate that another stray dog she’d showed a kindness had tried to bite her.

She could rouse him and evict him into the night - subjecting him to her nocturnal guardians, which deterred other intruders - or let him rest until morning, then confront him with the truth. Like as not, her fury loosed, she’d kill him on the spot.

Another eight hours she sat, toying with the black king from the chess set, scowling at the supine Kingsley. She could easily arrange for him to be hog-tied and gagged or, better, play upon his horror of Nazis by creating an illusion of an entire platoon, their Lugers aimed at his head.

The best retribution: exploit his trepidation regarding hospitals and doctors, placing him on an operating table so those disconcerting blue eyes would fasten on a scrub-clad surgical team, a scalpel inches from his throat.

“Cruelty becomes you not,” rang Mahatma Gandhi’s nasal tenor inside her skull.

“You, too?” she challenged. “Let’s just drive him to the edge of insanity, wholesale.”

“Are you saying you’re insane?”

“No. I know how you came to be here. He doesn’t. And I don’t want him to, either.”

“You’ve trusted others...”

“And regretted it.” The king bounced on the chess board. “He works for a media company. One blunder, and I could end up the next hot news item.”

“You could’ve had Mr. MacDonough summon assistance...”

“Please, Gandhiji, I’m in no mood...”

When the sun cut through a gap in the heavy draperies, Sy Kingsley rolled off the divan, feeling stronger for an untroubled slumber. Mustang dozed in the rocker, and he smiled at her unaffected beauty.

A mug of coffee awaited her on the table when he jiggled her seat and jarred her into consciousness. She glanced around, then up, stunned by the dignified presence.

“You okay?” she ventured groggily.

His natural accent transcended a lingering rasp. “Grand, thanks to you.”

This gentle reply jolted Mustang to her feet. “No... bad dreams, no Nazis...”

“It must’ve been the fever, and I can’t tell you how sincerely sorry I am for the disruption to your life.”

“And, your plan to kill me?”

“Kill... Oh, the knife.”

“Yeah, the knife.”

“I would’ve killed the Nazi, if he’d been a threat...”

Mustang swallowed a laugh. “Can’t kill someone who’s already dead.”

“Eh?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. How ‘bout some breakfast?”

“Already cooked, and warming in the oven.”

“You... cook?”

“Since I moved to Dunedin six years ago, I’ve had to fend for myself.”

“I’m astonished you don’t have a girlfriend, or a wife.”

“With this mug?” Kingsley chuckled. “My father would never admit it, but I’d take bets - somewhere in our ancestry - we’re Jewish.”

Considering his exaggerated nose, maybe, Mustang silently concurred. The scraggly beard hid a chin which a caricature artist could feature in a cartoon.

Elegantly, he extended his scrubbed fingers - all traces of blood and dirt eradicated from beneath the nails, meaning he’d found the brush in her medicine chest. Mildly annoyed, she accepted the gesture and let him lead her into the

kitchen, where the table had been set with a lace-adorned cloth from the linen closet, flatware, plates and goblets.

He'd been awake for some time, to search the entire dwelling.

Pouring grapefruit juice from a crystal pitcher, he cocked his head slightly to the left - a twinge of discomfort quickly reversing the posture - when she refused more coffee.

"I... don't."

"Then, why have beans and a grinder?"

"Guests."

"How... considerate."

Skin protected by oven gloves, a warm platter was set between them, heaped with bacon, scrambled eggs and fried potatoes. A rack of lightly browned toast completed the menu.

Mustang fumbled with her fork. "You know as well as I: I'm not considerate in the least. I did what needed doing, so you wouldn't die. I... don't like people, to be honest. They get close to me and... they get hurt."

"Hurt? Emotionally?"

"Physically."

Kingsley shoved a strip of bacon in his mouth. "I wouldn't take you for the violent type."

"When I get upset, I do horrible things." Crossing to the refrigerator, she fetched the catsup, squirting an ample stream on her potatoes. "Let's drop it and enjoy this excellent cuisine."

She said no more, but felt Kingsley's eyes upon her until the last bite had been cleared from her plate.

III

His features skewed by a pensive smirk, Kingsley followed Mustang out to the barn, intent on assisting with her chores. The horses sensed his timidness in their midst, and reacted skittishly when he approached.

"Just... sit down, Sy, on the bench over there," the Mistress of Boleskine barked. "Unless you have something else you'd rather do."

"Nothing at the moment."

"You... mustn't feel obligated to... repay me for the last few days. You're free to go at any time."

"I know. I... want to learn a bit more about my nurse."

Mustang exhaled loudly. "Not happening."

“Why not?”

Her knuckles whitened around the oat bucket handle. “Because, once you’re gone, our paths will never again cross. And, trust me, that’s better for both of us.”

“What are you saying?” Kingsley stepped closer. “Are you attracted to me?”

“Not in the slightest.”

His ego wouldn’t permit the discussion to end. “You’ve got a boyfriend?”

“No.” Mustang stroked Pietra’s nose, the roan’s breath frosty in the chill air.

“A girlfriend?”

Her head whipped around so quickly, he feared it might snap off.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“Shut up, will you? Shut up and sit down, or get out.”

Meekly, he obeyed, but when she stole a glance at him on her rounds of the stalls, she guessed he was pondering how to satisfy his curiosity.

“Dammit, General,” she murmured. “Better he’d died from the bullet, than from what I’ll do to him.”

“Did you say something?” Kingsley called.

“Not to you.”

“Then, who?”

“The horses, of course. I always talk to them. They’re better than human friends. They don’t interrupt, or ask stupid questions.”

The insult didn’t faze him. An idea must’ve formed in his mind, for his posture switched from that of a mournful penitent to the player with superior cards: fingers laced behind his shaggy head, legs outstretched, and a conniving smile between that unkempt facial hair.

“By the way, there’s scissors in the bathroom, if you want to trim that,” Mustang stated arbitrarily.

“Trim what?”

“Your beard. Now the wounds are healing, it should be okay.”

“What about a blade for the stubble?”

Absently, she answered, “There may be a barber’s razor left from my granddad’s day...”

Kingsley straightened. “Your granddad?”

“Oh, hell.” Mustang twirled on the heel of her leather work boots, hazel orbs flashing fire. “Drop it, Sy. You won’t like what you hear.”

“What, one of those typical American stories with the proviso, ‘If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you?’”

No words necessary to convey her retort.

Which only escalated his interest.

In an effort to win her cooperation, Kingsley commenced a frivolous routine: getting in Mustang’s way, trying to clasp her hand, maneuvering to kiss her cheek. She reached the boiling point in less than five minutes, biting her tongue so as not to utter the fatal command.

A wickedly cold wind engulfed the barn, blowing Kingsley into the tack room and slamming the door.

“Thank you!” Mustang drawled.

She ignored his shouting and pounding until her tasks were finished, and the horses’ nerves calmed. Then, ever so politely, she unfastened the latch and released the involuntary captive.

“Sorry about that. Sometimes, when it’s humid, the frame swells...”

“Bullshit!” He brushed bits of straw off his t-shirt and jeans. “You did that deliberately!”

She feigned innocence. “Did what?”

His jowls slack, he said nothing. Slipping his arm through hers, he led her into the sunlight. “What if we settle this with a game of Truth and Consequences Chess?”

“What?”

“You’re into chess.”

“Sure.”

“Then, we make it Truth and Consequences.”

“I thought the old game was Truth *or* Consequences.”

“Not the way we do it at the syndicate.”

“Oh, hell.” She stopped on the gravel drive. “Explain.”

“Each piece I take, you answer a question truthfully, and vice versa. The winner gets to determine the consequences for the loser...”

“That’s nuts.”

“It’s... not a game for the timid.”

“Look who’s talking, Sy! You were so scared, you wanted me to sleep with you, to keep away the mean ol’ Nazis!”

He squirmed. “That... was the fever.”

With a snarl, she plodded to the house, Kingsley at the chase. The steel-reinforced front door sprang closed, nearly clipping his distinctive nose. He had

no inkling she'd added a bit of unseen weight to the metal, to prevent his entrance. Shove though he did, he could not penetrate the portal.

Mustang had shed her yellow flannel shirt and red sweat pants, heading to the shower. When Kingsley burst into her bedroom, the curse which escaped her lips sent him flying along the hall, crashing onto the foyer tile.

Locking the knob, the young woman luxuriated in hot water pulsating over her knotted muscles. She lost track of time, not emerging from the stall until her skin was well pruned. She didn't care. For another five minutes, as she towed the moisture from torso and legs, she relished a temporary contentment.

A game of chess? She'd challenged Mark Twain, Gandhi, Erwin Rommel, St. Francis of Assisi, winning as often as losing - and learning along the way. What questions her guest might ask would be meaningless, when she checkmated his king and ordered him to forget the entire exchange.

She almost collided with him when she opened the bedroom door; how long he'd been waiting there, she had no notion.

"What's up with you?" he growled.

"House is haunted, like you said."

A violent knocking caused Kingsley to cower against the plaster, pale blue orbs tearing. Mustang nonchalantly moved to answer the summons.

Rather than her periodic feed delivery, three camouflage-clad men and a uniformed constable stood on the stoop.

She repressed a caustic tirade about unwelcome visitors. "May I help you?"

The wiry police officer's Scottish burr bordered on incomprehensible. She gathered these were the poachers who had trespassed on her property, and they'd been ordered to make their apologies in person.

The trio looked about as contrite as any men caught in an illegal act, who had full intentions of repeating the offense at the next available opportunity. They blubbered inanities about breaking the law, and a willingness to pay for any damages.

Which is when Sy Kingsley asserted himself.

To be instantly silenced by Mustang's unspoken mandate.

"Was this man injured in the incident?" queried the constable, reaching for a notepad and pen.

"No, sir. He... saw the men, but an unfortunate mishap with a garden rake prevented him from making the report to your office."

"Nasty wound, that. Should nae he be in hospital?"

“Looks worse than it is, really. Thanks for your concern, though, and thank you for bringing these... felons to justice.”

With a cursory salute, the man escorted his prisoners to a black sedan idling on the drive.

Kingsley hissed, “Why didn’t you let me...”

Mustang raised her index finger in warning.

“Why... so secretive?”

“You’ll find out when we engage in your little game this evening.” She sauntered to the kitchen, famished.

A meal of grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, potato crisps and chocolate milk shakes relaxed Mustang to the point where she retired to her room for a prolonged nap. Leaving Kingsley on his own might not have been wise, but she needed to catch up on her sleep, for her own health and well being.

Anticipation must have mellowed the New Zealander, for he had showered and trimmed his beard, washed laundry, prepared dinner and set up the chess board in front of a roaring fire before she reappeared.

“If only having a man around the house was always so... domestic,” she lamented, unfolding the paper napkin at the dinette table.

Kingsley affirmed, “It could be...”

She leveled her gaze upon him, over the platter of sirloin steak with baked potatoes and bowl of mixed salad. “Here’s the deal, Sy. Whatever truths come out during this game, and whatever the consequences, you’re out of here at first light tomorrow.”

They clasped hands in agreement.

“Your mother taught you to cook?” inquired Mustang, wiping a milk mustache on her shirt sleeve between bites of chocolate cake.

“The baking, yes. My dad was a chef in Christchurch. They met in the kitchen, and spent most of their time there.”

“Romantic.”

“Most people thought so. The fights at home... not so much.”

“My folks, too.”

Relieving her of the empty plate, Kingsley took up his position beside the carved black marble figurines, pad and pen handy. His strategy proved no strategy: to take as many of her pieces as he could.

From the initial move of her king’s pawn, he eliminated five in short order. His interview smacked of high school journalism.

“Where are you from, originally?”

“Montana.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Elizabeth Candida Duryea.”

“Why is your nickname Mustang?”

“I love horses.”

“How much money do you have in the bank?”

“I don’t do banks.”

He objected, “That’s not a legitimate answer.”

“Then you better be more careful how you phrase your questions.”

“Fine. How much money do you have?”

“Hell if I know.”

Her responses were jotted on the paper, which sufficed to distract him from any technique he might’ve employed to win the match. Mustang couldn’t suppress her grin at his sloppiness, and when she removed his knight from the board - followed in quick succession by two pawns, a rook, and both bishops - he groaned in dismay.

“Your full name?” she began.

“Sirius Andrew Kingsley.”

That accounted for the nickname. “Why is your hair one color, and your beard another?”

“The top bleaches in summer. I only grow the beard in winter.”

“Spend a lot of time on the beach, do you?”

“Surfing.”

“What’s your favorite movie?”

“Dr. Strangelove.”

Oh, hell, she mused. “You prefer cats or dogs?”

“I have a blue macaw, actually, named Stanley.”

“Your favorite sport?”

“Cricket.”

Mustang dismissed his replies, monitoring his desperate tactics on the board. His queen in danger, she debated extending his turmoil, but decided to make it an early night.

He dropped her knights before she gloated, “Checkmate.”

“Who was your grandfather?”

“Jack Parsons.”

“You inherited this place from him?”

“No.”

Didn’t amount to much, the list of facts. Not bothering to inquire about the consequences of his loss, he asserted, “Rematch? Double or nothing?”

“Double...”

“Two questions for every piece.”

The twinkle in those blue eyes elicited her chuckle. She offered him her chair. “Take your best shot.”

He declined. “I’ll stick with black.”

“Whatever.”

She ran out of questions for him before he got a chance to ask any. “What happened to that building down by the road?”

“The Gate House? It deteriorated.”

“Who used to live there?”

“Jack Parsons.”

“Why didn’t he live here?”

“Too big.”

“Why do you live here?”

“I like it.”

“How’d he die?”

“Old age.”

“Heart attack?”

“No.”

The tide was stemmed by a subtle gambit which trapped his king in the corner.

“Again?” he prompted.

She stretched, cracking her vertebrae. “You’re a glutton for punishment.”

“I’ve a feeling this is one corker of a tale...”

“Which you’ll have your people publish when you get back to Dunedin?”

“Screw that. Our affiliates here will pay thousands for it.”

The chess board rattled ominously, scattering pieces on the floor. Kingsley fell off his seat trying to retrieve his queen from glowing embers below the wrought iron grate.

“We’re done,” declared Mustang.

IV

Sy Kingsley leapt upright. “What are you hiding?”

“No bonus questions,” Mustang taunted. “Besides, you need to pay up.”

“Pay what?”

“The consequences. You proposed this contest...”

His tenor dropped to a whisper. “I... ah...”

“Oh, cometh again the dread. You think, after I aided your recuperation, I’d do you harm, when I’m so close to being rid of you?”

“Then, what?”

“Burn those papers.”

“Oh... no... Mustang, you can’t...”

“I can, and I do, per our agreement.” She snatched the pad from his grip and tossed it on the flames.

He howled in agony.

“Don’t take it so hard, Sy. When you get to your grandparents’, or back to New Zealand, you can type my name in any internet search engine and find out what you want to know...”

“You mean, the scandal sheets already have the story?”

“They have stories - none of them true. Since I came here eight years ago, unscrupulous sorts have made it their business to uncover why I choose to live alone, where I get my money, how I lost two fiancés, and so forth.”

“Lost...”

“They died, to be precise. Other bastards wanted to recruit me... in support of their cause...”

“Cause?”

“Never mind. I’ll say this: were you to give me the option of either sleeping with you or letting those notes out of this house, I’d readily jump in the sack to ensure none of those rags would print another bogus exposé.”

“Wow, that’s... severe.”

She signaled him onto the divan, settling beside him. “You’re 32; I’m 26, but I’ve lived through more hell than you could ever imagine. I’ve shown you a kindness, please do likewise and, when you leave tomorrow, forget Boleskine... and me.”

“It’s so important, it makes you cry?”

Blinking her lids, she felt a droplet escape down her cheek. “I guess so.” He leaned forward and tenderly kissed away the dampness. Their eyes met, and Kingsley misread her sadness.

Mustang didn’t resist his advances, however. She sensed his lack of energy; no man who had sustained such wounds and blood loss could adequately recover in five days to engage in mattress gymnastics. He soon rested his head on her shoulder, snoring quietly.

She didn’t move for nearly an hour, recalling her adventures with Montana State Police officer Jim Neville - tragically killed by overzealous F.B.I. agents - and, within the past year, Jerry Richards, modern vaudevillian who’d proposed

marriage before perishing in an airplane crash. Could she have shared her life with a man, her powers so uncontrolled? Or was she doomed to watch everyone she loved die as a result of her mistakes?

Slipping from beneath Kingsley, she propped him on a stack of throw pillows and meandered into the kitchen, boiling a saucepan of milk for hot cocoa. The sweet brew was seasoned with her salty tears, countless regrets wrenching sobs from her slender frame.

Her scarred palms, including the unhealed gash from the broken glass earlier in the week, would never cease reminding her of her naivete. Even vowing to live in seclusion proved fruitless, with errant souls wandering the property.

Maybe Jack Parsons had it right: electrifying the perimeter fence. She could stay put, and no one would disturb her.

The world didn't function that way; she'd come to understand that, at least. Human nature prevented people from respecting others' privacy. No differently than Kingsley's prying, they wanted to pick apart an individual's past, to compensate for their own inadequate existence.

How long she'd remained at the table, she didn't know. Blackness beyond the kitchen windows indicated storm clouds gathering, obscuring moon and stars. The lone bulb above the sink cast enough light for her to dribble dish soap on the washcloth and scrub the mug, rinsing it to place in the rack, when a darkly-furred arm slid around her waist from behind.

Sy Kingsley planted his lips on her neck. "I always finish what I begin," he murmured.

Small comfort: he didn't want her for her power. She'd kept it in check, and he could depart Boleskine posing no threat to her future.

Supposedly.

She inched from him; he drew her close.

"Oh, hell," she sighed. Some had paid her the high compliment of claiming she shone like a beacon. Whether aware of her power or not, they were drawn to her like moths to... tiny wings beating on the window pane above her confirmed it.

Kingsley's beard tickled her flesh. Hadn't she been advised to enjoy life? Yet, the last time her emotions took the fore, an earthquake ravaged the countryside.

She slapped his face, harder than intended. "Stop, Sy. You're in no condition..."

"Bullshit."

"If you don't conserve your strength, you'll never get out of here."

“That’d be fine with me.”

“But, not with me.” She stalked down the corridor, locking her bedroom door to prevent any more intrusions.

The downpour commenced in the wee hours; Mustang listened to the syncopated rhythm punctuated by flashes of lightning and thunder claps. A relief, the origins couldn’t be traced to her. She fell asleep around 4:00 AM; Kingsley’s knocking roused her at dawn.

“Dammit, man, be gone with you!” she grumbled, rolling on her side.

“I just want to say good-bye, and thanks.”

“Good-bye, and you’re welcome.”

She didn’t hear his retreating footsteps until two minutes later, and decided to close her eyes once the front door rattled shut.

They popped open when gunshots resounded through the window.

“Oh, hell!” Without deliberating, she cried, “Freeze all trespassers on this property in their tracks!”

Tugging on a tie-dyed hoodie and orange sweatpants, she raced from Boleskine House to the corral, where the horses gazed eastward. She sprinted that direction, hurdling bushes and dodging low branches, bursting with green.

Kingsley’s white t-shirt stood out like a sore thumb - that he remained vertical soothed her fears. He paced nervously, glancing up when she approached, chest heaving, on the path.

“They’re... not moving,” he sputtered.

“Sy, please, go. Go far, far away, and never come back.”

He ignored her. “They wanted to kill me, afraid I’d tell the police...”

“I’ll take care of them. You must go, *now*.”

“Mustang...”

“Your grandparents are, no doubt, worried to death about you. Get to town and phone them, then get yourself to Glasgow.”

“What...”

“Sy...”

He reached for her, she recoiled. “All right, all right. I’ll... miss you, Mustang.”

Walking in reverse a few steps, he bumped a tree and, shrugging, turned toward the main road. In that instant, his mind was cleared of every memory from the past six days, the remnants of his wounds healed without even discoloration of his skin.

As for these interlopers...

Before she freed them from their inert condition, she melted their rifles into useless puddles of metal and wood. Tempted to allow the resident wildlife to retaliate on her behalf - especially two bucks witnessing the proceedings from the underbrush - she merely shredded their expensive jackets, trousers and boots, various patterned boxer shorts their lone unspoiled garments.

The auburn haired young woman could not contain her glee when, their limbs unencumbered, the middle-aged trio's faces ran the gamut between confusion, consternation, fright and embarrassment.

"Hello, boys," she greeted cheerily. "Here I find you, in *my* woods, with *your* guns, ready to shoot up the place again. It won't do. It simply won't do."

"I... we..." blathered the closest.

To his right, twitching digits clasped onto a buck knife in its sheath. The sensation of hot steel against his leg raised a yowl that sent flocks of birds from their nests.

"Naughty, naughty," she chided. "If I were you, I'd get myself to Dores and report to the constable that you've been very, very bad. Tell him Lady Elizabeth wants you prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

They took two strides and halted.

"Maybe you should run the whole way," she hinted, creating a combination of barking and sirens on the wind to pursue them.

"Cor blimey!" shouted one, brushing invisible dogs from his backside as he jogged through a thicket.

His confederates caught him up and disappeared into the forest. Mustang waved to the deer who'd gathered, and trekked to the barn, her daily chores waiting, along with the prospect of riding after nearly a week out of the saddle.

That blasted white t-shirt made her heart skip a beat. Sy Kingsley should have been long gone, yet here he stood, studying the house through squinted, pale blue eyes.

Coyly, Mustang queried, "May I help you?"

"I... think I'm lost." The full effect of his New Zealand accent rang in her ears.

"What are you looking for?"

"Urquhart Castle."

She erupted with mirth. "You're on the wrong side of the loch, dude. Did you come over on the ferry?"

"No, I took a bus from Inverness..."

"The wrong bus, evidently."

"Evidently."

“You can catch the ferry up the road a piece, and there’s an afternoon bus from the castle to Inverness.”

“You’re very knowledgeable, for an American.”

Pausing at the barn door, she whirled. “How’d...”

“I haven’t been able to understand a word the locals spoke since I flew in yesterday. It’s a blessing to meet someone...”

“On whose land you’re trespassing, if I may.”

“Apologies, Miss...”

“No need. If you don’t hurry, you’ll miss the boat.”

He commenced walking, then doubled over, coughing violently.

“General!” Mustang bellowed, realizing his sutures and nature’s healing had left some aspect of the bullet wound unrepaired.

“It’s not that,” corrected Erwin Rommel, hovering in the shadows. “He’s smoked cigarettes since the onset of puberty, and was recently diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer.”

“Oh, hell!” She glared at the German. “I can’t do this...”

“Let him be. You gave him time he wouldn’t otherwise have had...”

“You mean, the poachers were supposed to kill him?”

“In shielding yourself from the official inquiry, you prolonged his life.”

“Damn you!” she swore.

“Mustang, consider the ramifications...”

Not one to heed advice, she scurried to where Kingsley lay on the gravel, convulsing from lack of air. She knelt beside him, repeating her regrets for interfering with his future. Summoning the elements, she directed his lungs be cleared, his breathing restored to normal.

Propped on her heels, she waited until his muscles relaxed, his agonized blue eyes closed to sleep. “General!” she hailed.

His military boots crunched on the pebbles. “Yes?”

“Carry him to the road. Sit him against a tree trunk, so he’ll think he stopped to take a nap.”

“He’ll be back, looking for the castle...”

“Not if the driver of the next passing car accidentally loses his map of the district out the window.”

Rommel smirked, impressed. “Very good. Very thorough. You would’ve done well as a tactician during the war.”

“It’s depressing to know this is a type of war I’m waging, to keep people the hell out of my hair.”

“Without killing them?”

She scowled at the bad pun, motionless until the manifested spirit vanished around the curve with his burden. Shuffling to the barn, she wished circumstances could be different between her and... ordinary individuals. Kingsley's chess skills might have matched her own, without the "Truth and Consequences" component. To spend an evening at the board, using her brain cells for something other than solving sticky problems...

To let him cook for her, to relish his company...

She'd had similar dreams, harkening back to the days immediately after Jack Parsons' death. She'd ached for normalcy, the creeping comprehension such amounted to mere fantasy.

"I waited until Mr. Kingsley found the map," Rommel informed her while she scraped soiled straw from Sarge's stall.

"Thanks."

"He held it upside down, until the wind blew it from his hands, and he chased it across the pavement, almost being struck by oncoming traffic."

"What?"

"The vehicle swerved successfully, but the passengers scolded him roundly. He explained his predicament, and they offered him a ride to the ferry pier."

"Fantastic." She shook her pony tail. "He's not stupid, really..."

"No. He's merely supposed to be dead. When a person's clock ceases ticking, it's not for you - or anyone - to circumvent..."

"I should've let him stay. He would've been safe."

"You would've been living under a cloud, and if anything had transpired..."

"Like what, for instance?"

"If you'd made love, and you became pregnant..."

Her expression hardened.

"The ramifications could have been... catastrophic."

"Because the child would inherit my power?"

Rommel inhaled solemnly. "No, yet the existence of the fruits of a living being and one past his time... there's no predicting."

"Gee, thanks." Mustang pitched the shovel in the corner; the grazing horses whinnied in frustration. "Something else to gnaw at my conscience. I can't let a man touch me, because any offspring could destroy the world!"

"Or, alter history."

"Go away! Please!"

"As you wish."

Flopping onto a bale of straw, Mustang burst into tears. If she'd had her druthers, the poachers' errant bullets should have hit her, and put her out of her misery.

Rivulets dripping on the floor, she determined to steer clear of any relationships - male or female. Selecting a saddle, she adjusted the stirrups on Molly, a roan mare, mounted and trotted through the trees.

She had her hands full with six horses, and needed nothing else to be happy.

The following Monday, when the flat bed truck's brakes squealed, announcing the delivery of oats, hay and straw, the driver dismounted from the cab, a newspaper stuck to his trousers. Mustang extricated the bubble-gum secured sheets, glimpsing the headline as she tossed it on the seat: "New Zealand tourist killed in brawl."

Climbing the running board, she scoured the smudged print for details.

Sirius Kingsley, at an Inverness pub sipping a vodka gimlet while waiting for his bus, had met his delayed death at the end of a drunkard's switchblade, to her heartfelt dismay.

"Never... never... never again!" she pledged.