

The Mustang Chronicles:

Touring Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Rare were the days when the temperature near Loch Ness rose above 75 degrees, even in July. This particular Wednesday happened to be one, and Mustang Duryea wanted to enjoy exercising her prize Arabian without a jacket.

Horse and rider invariably tarried on the hill above Boleskine House, to rest after a spirited canter around the 47-acre estate, and relish the view of the famous lake. Usually, they watched tour boats navigating oft-choppy waters, and tourists milling along the shore, anticipating a glimpse of the renowned monster.

Today, an assortment of white umbrellas dotted the coastline on the opposite side of the main road from her estate. She normally didn't care if visitors wandered the grounds during daylight hours, but umbrellas on such a glorious day?

Investigating such oddities - albeit from a conservative distance - might expend a few hours, hours she didn't want to occupy cleaning the barn when she could be exulting in the sunshine.

She left her mount to graze on tall grass which had grown to encompass remnants of a wooden altar, erected on the site many years earlier by her grandfather, occultist and scientist Jack Parsons. Disturbing whatever activities the umbrella-bearers were engaged in was not on the agenda, nor was calling attention to herself.

Every time she did that, try as she did to avoid it, disasters occurred.

In recent months, even her old friends Mark Twain, Mahatma Gandhi, Erwin Rommel and St. Francis of Assisi had chided her for a continuing impulsiveness she'd failed to master since first inheriting a unique power over natural forces at the tender age of 16. She'd ended the spectres' involuntary appearances at inopportune times, using sheer willpower and various distractions. She still harbored a dull ache in her chest; her heart had risked caring for Jerry Richards, who'd died the day after he proposed and slipped a diamond ring on her finger.

That anguish caused her to react foolishly in tense situations, convincing her more than ever to give other human beings a wide berth.

Despite being pushed to use her affinity with nature in positive ways by Peter O'Donnell - step-father of her cousin, Rachel - and the men she'd manifested from their graves to challenge her at chess.

Descending the gently-sloping hill, Mustang traversed a fresh layer of macadam on Scotland's highway B852. Positioned atop partially immersed stones and at weird angles on the craggy ground, what she'd thought were umbrellas were, in fact, light-deflecting screens used by film makers.

A boom microphone hung on a dolly above the head of a man evidently touting the locale's beauty, while the director and crew manned Steadicams and portable monitors.

Was this how Peter O'Donnell made his documentaries?

The scene in progress halted abruptly, when one of the screens toppled in the wind. The dark-haired star of the moment found himself surrounded by a fawning entourage... some of whom Mustang recognized.

Why in hell had Johnny Rosemont - erstwhile science fiction villain and Las Vegas performer - come to the Highlands?

Whatever the explanation, the Mistress of Boleskine had no intention of hearing it. She retreated between shady trees, bound for home.

Until she tripped over a fat power cable running from the spotlights to a generator chugging ominously beside a panel truck parked on the berm.

Somber, tan-uniformed security guards confronted her, lifting her with a deft motion off the dirt. Her black Led Zeppelin t-shirt and jeans were encrusted with mud; she didn't bother to brush it off, jerking free of the pair's insistent grip.

"Leave off, idiots! I've got every right to be here!"

"So much for the local cops keeping out idle spectators," grumbled the massive-shouldered blond.

"I'm not an 'idle spectator'. I live across the road, and was planning to take a swim..."

The second man gulped. "You mean, you swim in that water?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"The... creature..."

"Myth, boy. Myth. I've never swam in more refreshing waters."

"If you're going swimming, where's your bathing suit?" prodded the first.

She snapped sarcastically, "Under my clothes, maybe?"

"Will you guys shut it?" yelled the director, poking his tawny head around a thick oak trunk. "We're trying to reset the shot..."

The guards muttered repeated apologies.

"Who's this, anyway?"

"Some local, going for a swim," supplied the thinner official.

The fidgety director chuckled, "A local, with an American accent?"

"Said she lives across the road..."

From behind his boss appeared Johnny Rosemont, and Mustang cringed. During an unplanned excursion to Las Vegas the previous winter, their paths had crossed and - for some unfathomable reason - he'd kissed her in the midst of Caesars Palace casino. The likelihood slim he'd remember the incident, she

realized; any entanglement at this stage of her... personal journey might result in dire consequences.

“What’s the hold up?” Rosemont queried in a friendly bass register.

The director responded, “Nothing important.”

“‘Nothing important’?” repeated the actor, staring at Mustang. “How could someone so gorgeous not be important?”

“Oh, hell,” she murmured, gazing at the underbrush.

Her attempt to avoid his eyes didn’t work. He sidestepped exposed roots and pushed the guards away, focusing brown orbs on her tangled auburn tresses and slender features.

“We’re doing a promo for my latest picture. Would you like to watch?” he practically whispered.

“Not really.”

“If you’re a local, we could use your expertise in how the Scots pronounce various words...”

“The only thing I know about the Scottish burr is that it’s incomprehensible, and drives me crazy.”

He laughed at that, and she chuckled nervously. He extended his hand - assorted tattoos running up his arm, past the hem of his short shirt sleeve. She laid her calloused palm atop it, against her better judgment.

The security guards dispersed to their posts, and the director forged ahead, shouting orders to the crew.

“I don’t want you to think I’m being a wolf,” stated Rosemont before they emerged from the trees. “Nor did I want to use that hokey line, ‘I think we’ve met before,’ in front of the guys. It *was* Vegas, wasn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she admitted.

“Unfortunately?”

“Mr. Rosemont...”

“John,” he corrected lightly.

“John, you don’t want to know me, and I don’t want to know you. It isn’t...”

He paused, cradling her fingers like delicate flowers. “If it’s the paparazzi and the tabloid exposure, my boys are tops at protecting my privacy.”

“No, I...” Having her photo taken would definitely be anathema, especially if Ben Espinoza or his FBI cronies saw it. Graver considerations held priority.

“Ye can nae be afraid o’ me, now, lassie?” he quipped, testing his imitation of the Scottish accent.

She almost choked at the sound. “Oh, hell, that’s really bad.”

“Is it?” he countered, stunned. “I’ve been working with a dialect coach...”

“Who’s never lived in country, obviously.”

Deliberating briefly, he smiled. The image robbed Mustang of her breath. He couldn’t have had a more perfect face if Michelangelo himself had carved it.

“If you think it needs more work, I’ll take the afternoon and perfect it.”

“Your director may not appreciate the delay.”

“He gets paid whether we shoot or not. I may have to answer to the production office back in Hollywood when I get home, but for now...” He hadn’t released her hands. “Will you help me?”

“I won’t be much help, but I can hook you up with a few *real* locals...”

“I’d be eternally grateful.”

She broke from his grasp and backed from the shore’s edge, more than eager to escape. “Just be careful if they ask you, ‘Which leg do ye kick wi’.”

Johnny Rosemont chased her down - a difficult feat being in his forties and unfamiliar with the territory - and nearly tackled her before she stopped.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“That question...”

“Which leg do ye kick wi’?” she puzzled, angrily flipping strands of tousled hair from her line of sight.

He nodded.

“How you answer will either merit the natives’ respect or disdain.”

“Why?”

“It’s not about kicking a ball. It can mean anything from which soccer team - football, in these parts - you support, to what religion you practice, what political party you’re aligned with, or whether you’re... straight or gay.”

“You’re kidding!”

“They’re a serious lot hereabout - drinking, golf, and a few other choice topics. And, if you succeed in not offending them verbally, avoid the haggis.”

Rosemont appeared to gag. “I’ve... heard that.”

“If you drive into Dores, a few miles north, you should catch the regulars at Cullen’s Inn before they head home for supper. Keep your ears - and your mind - open.”

“Thanks.” He reached futilely for her as she ducked beneath a low branch.

“Will I see you again?”

She didn’t answer.

She couldn’t answer.

She couldn't risk involvement with another human being, risk losing what tenuous control she had acquired through harsh self-discipline.

Risk unleashing her power to the detriment of all.

The Arabian had eaten his fill - and fertilized the hill - when she swung into the saddle and steered him toward the barn. Summer days lasting until roughly midnight, she resigned herself to raking straw from the stalls, laying fresh, filling oat buckets and water troughs, and grooming each horse in turn.

She trudged to the house, unlocking the deadbolt on the steel-reinforced panel, after 10:00. Her stomach growled audibly; she hadn't eaten since breakfast.

The dreaded knock came as she was pouring herself a bowl of cereal.

"I saw the light," Rosemont greeted, his longish black mane hanging lank.

"Not from the highway, you didn't."

"I... confess, I was trespassing. May I come in?"

"No."

He peered past her at modern, stainless steel appliances. "The owner wouldn't approve?"

"I *am* the owner."

"No way!"

She grit her teeth and remained silent.

"Okay, I believe you." He shifted his weight toward the sunset - whether to awe her with his profile or to contemplate the fading pastel highlights, she didn't speculate. "This is difficult for me, because people - women, to be more specific - always put me on a pedestal."

"I won't."

"Good. You're savvy, some would say wise. My hunger for knowledge doesn't mesh with the flunkies my agent pays to hang around, and I get tired of the dearth of intellectual conversation."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Still the cynic, eh?"

She had no doubt he noticed her smirk from the corner of his eye.

"Look, I leave Saturday on a six-city tour to promote this movie. I'm begging you to come with me, and I swear I'll deposit you back on this very doorstep in one week, unsullied, uncompromised, with horizons broadened."

"My horizons have been broadened plenty, thanks."

"Share your experience with me."

"You want to die?"

He squinted, wrinkles unhidden by make-up hinting at his true age. "You on somebody's hit list?"

“No, and I don’t want to discuss it. Please, John, go. And stay away.”

“Anyone ever notice you’re lit from within like a beacon?”

“I attract moths and flies,” she scoffed.

“I mean it. I don’t even know your name, yet I sense a wealth of knowledge and insight which can benefit the world...”

That phrase stifled her next retort. Had not her ethereal companions been nagging her to embrace the whole of humanity?

“How so?” she asked instead.

His expression softened. “Movie premieres are madness: the red carpet, the rich and famous, and screaming crowds... The right word in the right place, however, viewed by millions on some entertainment website, can inspire positive change.”

“You honestly believe that?”

“I do. I select every script based on that premise...”

“Science fiction trash?”

“Not since my career’s been on solid ground. You get out much?”

“I’m a hermit.”

“So am I, from midnight to six each morning. I can meditate, read, sleep...”

“I envy you that.”

“What, the privacy?” he probed.

“The meditation. I’ve tried, and I can’t stop my brain...”

“It’ll be a fair exchange. I’ll teach you meditation, and you can feed my need for stimulating dialogue.”

“If this is a game, John...”

“As a guarantee I’m not yanking your chain, I’ll entrust you with my deepest, darkest secret.”

“I hope not to your eternal regret.”

“I’ll chance it.” He raised her chin level to his. “Rosemont is my mother’s maiden name. My birth certificate lists me as ‘John Vladislav Kowalski’.”

II

Mustang pitied the man in that instant. “Ouch.”

“Which is why - to date - only you and my parents know the truth,” confided Rosemont.

“If I’d have done that to my child, I’d be mortified.”

“My great-grandfather was Polish nobility. Every first-born son bears his name. By my freshman year of high school, I’d learned to live with it, even joke about it.”

“Joke?”

“I’d tell classmates, ‘My middle name is Vladislav. My brother’s is Cole Slaw.’”

“Ouch,” the young woman chortled.

He stepped off the kitchen porch into the late evening gloom. “See you tomorrow?”

“You said we’re leaving Saturday...”

“We’re shooting the promo at the lake in the morning. I picked up a good bit of the burr at the tavern, but a second set of ears will keep me focused.”

“Which leg do ye kick wi’?”

A jaunty wave preceded his disappearance into the night. “Whichever leg is closest to the ball.”

She withdrew into the house, her cereal forgotten. The nocturnal booby-traps she’d initiated during those first days in exile at Boleskine wouldn’t harm him - an amazingly balanced soul for an actor.

Thomas Burton - Irish and delightful, with decades of performing Shakespeare’s classics under his belt - couldn’t hold a candle to Johnny Rosemont.

Rosemont didn’t drink alcohol to excess, like Burton had frequently done in her presence.

She hoped.

And, rather than keep her gifts to himself, as Burton preferred when in his cups, Rosemont wanted her to share her supposed wisdom with the masses.

A petrifying prospect.

Not if he stood beside her, however.

He possessed a self-control she lacked, a determination based on genuine confidence, not the false bravura of many Hollywood personalities.

If he could preempt just one tragedy by stopping her from speaking the wrong word at the wrong moment...

Her own inner doubts surfaced.

What if she brought him harm by her carelessness?

What if she ruined his career, or his life *in toto*?

Desolate and confused, she sank on the wooden kitchen chair and wept.

As a consequence of her agitation, she didn’t get to bed until the wee hours, and slept past noon Thursday.

Auburn mop damp from a quick shower, attired in a purple Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and boots, she hiked to Loch Ness' eastern shore, none of the glare shield/umbrellas in sight. In fact, the film crew was packing their equipment in the panel truck, ready to leave.

John Rosemont stood on a jutting rock, magnificent in blue polo shirt and khakis, straight black mop rustled by a scented breeze. He tossed stones into the rippling current. When he glimpsed her approach, he hopped down and crossed to her with long strides.

"I thought you had a change of heart," he greeted.

"No, just overslept."

He winked playfully. "I'll forgive you, then."

"The shoot finished already?" she queried.

"The weather, and my accent, cooperated."

"Why were you so intent on using a Scottish accent? If you're playing an American in the movie..."

"An American, at the beginning. He's an infantryman in World War II, who gets captured by the Germans and shot while escaping from a prison camp. Members of the underground sail him across the Channel to Scotland, where he's nursed back to health - physically."

"Physically?"

"The script did a good job of exploring how post-traumatic stress disorder was an undiagnosed problem in every war in recorded history. My character has severe difficulties adjusting to ordinary life among the Scots, and he can't resume active military duties because his injury has left him disabled. He fears returning to the States and being scorned by friends and family, so he stays here. Gradually, among these fantastic vistas and unique people, he recovers a sense of self which gives him a brighter future."

"The love of a good woman, probably," Mustang scoffed.

"Nothing cheesy like that. There were a couple romantic scenes in the original draft, but I convinced the director to cut them. Love can be overrated sometimes, and it does everyone a disservice to promote it like a miraculous cure-all."

"Amen, brother!"

"I only hope we captured the real reason an American would decide to remain here."

The young woman toed rich loam underfoot. "From what I've heard, a lot depends on how the film is edited and scored, but your description leads me to believe you have."

“This promo won’t hurt the effort.” He lifted that perfect face skyward. “With a backdrop like this, the airlines are going to be swamped with reservations for tours!”

“It’s bad enough now, with countless oddballs wandering the countryside, waiting for Nessie to rear her head and pose for a snapshot.”

“Her?” he echoed.

“Her. Him. There has to be more than one down there, keeping each other company. Spawning little ones to keep the myth alive.”

“I never considered that.”

“Few do. I can imagine her living a hundred years or more, but thousands? Her flippers - or fins - would be too stiff to swim.”

The truck’s engine disrupted her thoughts; she glanced toward the road. A lone African-American videographer seemed strangely preoccupied with arranging his camera in its case. Rosemont linked his tattooed arm with hers and ushered her toward a white Rolls limousine concealed by a stand of knotty pines.

“Would you like to stop for a drink at Cullen’s?” he suggested.

“No, I have work to do with the horses.” She realized her predicament. “Before I head out with you on Saturday, I have an awful *lot* to do, including asking my neighbor to keep an eye on things.”

“Would it go easier if I intervene?”

“He’s a good man, Glenn MacDonough. Raises horses, himself. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

“We’re flying to London at six on Saturday. Best if I pick you up tomorrow night, and we stay in Edinburgh...”

“London?” Mustang cringed. One of the few cities she disliked...

“A painless dinner and premiere. After that, Paris, Milan, Berlin, Vienna and Brussels.”

“Oh, hell...”

“What?”

“Except for a couple nice outfits, my drawers are full of...” She spread her arms, indicating her present clothing.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning, in that case, and you can get your shopping done in the city.”

“John, I haven’t worn a dress since...” she had to drag the memory from its grave, “my senior prom.”

“It’s not required, unless you really want some conceited fashionista to critique the designer and the fabric.”

She hugged him and pecked his cheek, in a rush of gratitude. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He burst out laughing, swinging her in a huge circle. “Never in a million years would I have imagined a woman showing such appreciation for me *not* spending thousands on her wardrobe.”

On solid ground again, her lips bore no smile. “You will spend *nothing* on me this trip, do you hear?”

“Why not? I invited you, and as my guest...”

“No. You invited me as your intellectual equal and, in that light, I will not leech off you. I have plenty stashed away, and will pay my own expenses.”

Rosemont brushed her mouth with his. “Thank *you*. That’s a welcome change from the norm.”

She checked traffic and jogged across the highway. “See you tomorrow, around seven.”

“Seven A.M.” he joked. “Right!”

“P.M., you nit!”

When she paused at the edge of the gravel drive to look back, the limousine was accelerating toward Inverness.

Instead of continuing the trek home, she diverted to Glenn MacDonough’s. The marvelous thing about having the construction project manager living two miles up the road: he felt a fatherly concern for her and agreed to every request. Her guilt at leaving Boleskine - though she’d vowed not to, over and over - was assuaged by his sincere promise to tend her horses and prevent any vandalism in her absence.

He couldn’t prevent Johnny Rosemont from showing up two hours early Friday, driving a nondescript Volkswagen Golf.

Mustang emerged from the barn, straw stuck in her hair from cleaning the stalls. She stopped beside the corral, displeased.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you’ve changed your mind,” stated Rosemont.

“About what?”

“Taking this trip with me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You mean, you don’t know?”

Verbal sparring aggravated her. “Know what?”

Reaching through the open passenger window, the actor retrieved a laptop computer. He set it on the car’s hood and opened the screen.

Curious, she joined him and viewed a startling clip from a tabloid website. Her eyes bulged at the image of herself and Rosemont chatting on the lakeshore.

The narration, by some nasal American gossip reporter, speculated the “Hollywood heartthrob” had found himself a new girlfriend “amongst the heather.”

“The cameraman’s been fired,” Rosemont explained, folding the console flat.

She actually chuckled. “And you told me your boys were top notch at protecting you from paparazzi.”

Her levity stemmed from the lens’ failure to capture her features. The view of her back, with flowing red tresses and skinny waist, could have been any of a million Scottish girls. The audiences who reveled in such trash - and certain FBI agents who might chance upon the video - would glean nothing to threaten her exile.

“They didn’t expect the paps to infiltrate the crew.”

His forlorn countenance amused Mustang further. “It’s okay. Really.”

“You’re still coming?” he pressed.

“Of course. You’ll have to wait for me, though, because I was planning to be ready at seven.”

“I wanted the extra time to... beg, if necessary.”

“Believe me, if I’d decided against going, no amount of begging would’ve worked.”

He walked her to the front door. “They’re calling you the ‘mystery woman’, and I think you’d be a mystery to them no matter what, because you’re so beyond their sphere of understanding.” He grinned. “You’re a mystery to me, to be honest.”

“Don’t put *me* on a pedestal, now,” she chided, inserting her key in the deadbolt.

“It’s not that. The first time I watched the footage, I realized I don’t know your name.”

“My friends call me Mustang. Mingling at the parties, you’ll probably want to introduce me as Elizabeth.”

His lips twitched into a sideways grin. “Not the Elizabeth Neville who exposed the latest Lord Guthrie as a murderer, and exorcized ghosts from the manor?”

Her jaw dropped.

“I overheard the men drinking at Cullen’s Wednesday. They were debating whether the estate’s new owners will preserve it or convert it into another tourist attraction. The consensus was: you should have bought it, since you’re wealthy as King Midas.”

“Nice to know my neighbors think so highly of me,” she grunted. “And, yes, in some quarters it *is* Elizabeth Neville. Since you entrusted me with your secret, I’ll entrust you with mine - though it’s not so avidly guarded. My birth certificate reads, ‘Elizabeth Candida Duryea’.”

“Reflecting your trust in me, I respect you enough not to ask the obvious question,” Rosemont commented.

“I appreciate that, because my intention is to not unduly complicate your life. The less you know about me, the better off you’ll be once we part ways.”

“That statement only intrigues me more, but I’ll curb my curiosity.” He followed her across the threshold. “How quickly can you pack?”

She pointed toward the living room. “It won’t take long. There are cold drinks in the fridge, if you’re thirsty after the drive from town.”

“I had a soda on the way, thanks.”

“Why come by yourself?” trailed down the hall. “The chauffeur...”

He shouted after her, “If you were angry with me, I wanted it kept private. At this moment, I can’t tell who’s secretly on the take.”

She didn’t respond, having caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. She groaned, picking what straw she could from her tangled hair, while twisting the shower faucet to high heat.

Wrapped in a bath towel and far more relaxed, Mustang poked her head into the hall. She realized stuffing her dress clothes in the tattered backpack wouldn’t work on this trip. “What kind of luggage restrictions will there be on the flight?”

“None,” came from the kitchen.

“None? I remember commercial airlines allow one carry-on bag, but no limits on the number of checked bags?”

“It isn’t a commercial flight, so you can pack as much as you want.”

She shuffled toward his voice, and found him smearing peanut butter on three slices of bread. “Not commercial?”

“We do these hops in a refurbished DC-10.” He snickered at her astonished visage, before recounting how, as a young man in Hollywood, he roomed with two friends who would later write and direct, respectively, those “science fiction trash” movies she held in such high regard. “It was cheaper to buy the plane and have mechanics go over it with a fine-toothed comb, than keep renting private craft capable of handling the equipment and crew.” He took a huge bite from his sandwich and mumbled, “Even though our careers took us along different paths as the years passed, we still share ownership of the Monster, using it when we need it.”

“Well, it’ll be a change from how I usually travel,” she said, rubbing her scarred palms self-consciously on the towel.

“Definitely much more roomy and comfortable than economy class.”

He barely heard her as she withdrew. “That’s not what I meant.”

III

London held unpleasant memories for Mustang Duryea. The drive from City Airport did not take them past the British Museum, however - where she’d once been accused of trying to set off a bomb. The traffic on this Saturday morning wasn’t as congested as a working weekday; it still took an hour to reach the Savoy Hotel on the Strand.

“Who pays for this?” the young woman puzzled, depositing her grandfather’s old two-suiter - found in the Gate Lodge closet years earlier - and small case on the bed of the five room suite.

“On these junkets, the production company.”

“Do they dictate everything you do?”

Framed by the doorjamb, Johnny Rosemont cocked his head, his long hair falling across his face. “Obviously not.” He consulted his wrist watch. “We’ve got six hours for sightseeing before I have to attend a charity tea.”

“Charity?”

“That’s part of my deal for making these trips. Every special event I attend benefits one or more organizations, from earthquake and hunger relief to AIDS education foundations.”

“What other special events are there tonight?” asked Mustang, impressed.

“The movie premiere and, afterward, a high-brow party.”

“High brow?”

“University types, politicians, that sort. People who won’t fawn over me, and will listen to *you*.”

She shuddered. “How can I...”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

“You don’t understand, John. I’m... not good around people. Particularly crowds.”

“What sights do you want to visit?”

He might’ve thought changing the subject would ease the tension, but the butterflies had already claimed Mustang’s stomach.

“I... don’t care.”

“I’ve never had a chance to tour the Tower of London.”

She unpacked blouses and slacks, hanging them in the wardrobe.
“Whatever.”

Like ordinary tourists, the pair walked to Charing Cross station and boarded the rapidly moving underground trains. They climbed to street level just opposite the famous castle, where the line to purchase tickets moved at a brisk pace past multiple booths.

Rosemont wore no disguise, only a fedora and sunglasses. The sun beating down - much warmer and more humid than in Scotland - Mustang wished she'd done the same.

They were not bothered by flocks of the star's fans, which relieved some of her anxiety. They wandered the fortress, viewing implements of torture, a chapel, throne room, the Crown Jewels - even the Traitor's Gate, opening onto the Thames River, where medieval prisoners were delivered via boat - coming eventually to the yard where contented ravens lurked.

From milling about for the spectators, the huge black birds suddenly assembled in a straight line, as if under military order to stand at attention. As one, they bowed their beaks to the ground...

Toward Mustang.

“Is it a trick?” muttered one woman to a patrolling Beefeater in red and gold uniform.

“I've been 'ere twenty years, ma'am, and never seen 'em behave so.”

Rosemont glanced at his companion, who blushed as red as her hair.

“It *is* a trick, isn't it?” he whispered.

Her reply: “Let's get out of here.”

Rather than cut short their excursion, Rosemont convinced Mustang to accompany him to the Tower Bridge, climbing high over the Thames for a view of the city. They followed with a stroll along the teeming South Bank, with its vast ferris wheel and artisans. A tour of Parliament proved their final stop, listening to Big Ben chime the hour.

“It's later than I planned,” lamented Rosemont. “We'll have to rush...”

“You go ahead. I'll meet you at the hotel after your tea.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to get lost...”

“I'll find my way.”

Into Westminster Cathedral - a Catholic church not too distant from Buckingham Palace, and not to be confused with Westminster Abbey. Though her spiritual beliefs didn't mesh with any established religion, the interior's silence gave her a chance to ruminate over the ravens' bizarre acknowledgment.

She'd talked to animals her entire life - horses, mostly. Heartbeat, her pinto in Montana, had once been able to talk back, thanks to an offhanded comment she'd made, which nature had honored. These birds didn't know her, yet... they knew?

Mustang indulged in quasi-American fare at a fast food restaurant near Victoria Station, though the employees weren't British, but foreigners. Many unexpected things had happened this week, and she dreaded what more might transpire.

At the elliptical, domed Royal Albert Hall, for instance. Escorted through the stage entrance while Johnny Rosemont basked in the adulation of his fans and the media on the red carpet, the Mistress of Boleskine traversed a series of catwalks above the auditorium to an elegant box in the Diamond Horseshoe. There, she waited in a cozy sitting room beyond public view, until the actor arrived and the house lights were extinguished.

"You sure you don't want to watch?" he queried, joining her behind closed doors.

"Some other time, perhaps. What about you?"

"I've seen it three times."

They chatted about the film's reviews, and how harsh some journalists could be. That led to a discussion of Mark Twain, who'd written for many newspapers, in addition to penning his renowned novels.

That man's view of war blossomed into a debate on Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you some centenarian who'd met both men during their lifetimes," noted Rosemont, loading a china plate with finger sandwiches from the buffet laid on a sideboard. "Or, that you studied them intently as part of a university Ph.D. program." He sipped his soda. "But, you're too young for either."

She grasped at straws to formulate a reasonable explanation. "I'm definitely not the first, but I could be a child genius who graduated high school at 12 and Harvard at 15."

"You'd have more books in your house."

"Who's to say I didn't convert one of the five bedrooms into a library?"

"If you held a Ph.D., you'd be teaching or researching somewhere."

"Another spare bedroom might be a laboratory, where I'm delving into the deepest secrets of DNA."

"It'd take too much time from your horses."

"You caught me." Mustang smiled her surrender.

Music signaling the final credits penetrated the sitting room door. “You live alone for your own reasons, as do I.” Rosemont dabbed the crumbs from his chin and straightened his bow tie. “Privacy is extremely valuable, and we both have the right to guard ours from idle scrutiny.” He resumed his seat in the box just as a spotlight illuminated him accepting the audience’s wild applause.

A reception at the Savoy made Mustang’s escape to their suite simple when she tired of the assembly of noted scientists, historians and government officials. Despite a crippling trepidation, she fared rather well, earning the occasional nod and wink from Johnny Rosemont. Whether those in attendance listened to any of her responses - more interested in her relationship with the actor than intelligent conversation - she couldn’t determine.

She steered clear of paparazzi at the hotel entrances, and ambitious amateurs trying to snap photos with their cell phones.

“What did you think?” asked Rosemont, trudging through the door at 2:00 AM as she dozed to the drone of a cable news commentator.

“Even so-called high class people nurture a base need to gossip.”

“That’s because the lives of so-called high class people are, overall, exceedingly dull.”

Mustang studied his exhausted mien. “Is your life dull, John?”

“At this minute, no, thanks to you.” He sank beside her on the gold velvet divan. “Had I been alone on this trip, yes. For me, the fun is creating the characters I play, and bringing them to life on film. Once the final product is in the can, it’s all...”

“Routine?”

“Very.” He yawned. “To bed, now. Tomorrow, Paris.”

The City of Lights welcomed them with rain and oppressive heat. Ensclosed in the five-star Hotel Napoleon near the Champs Elysees, they watched wind-whipped droplets beat against the balcony windows.

“I’ve been here six times in thirteen years, and the uncooperative weather has always prevented me from getting to see Notre Dame,” grumbled Rosemont.

“I’d think the mayor would arrange a private tour, with umbrella bearers so you wouldn’t muddy your shoes...”

“He might, but I’ve never asked. I... don’t want to be treated like a celebrity.”

“Good for you.” She pulled her hair into a pony tail and headed out the door.

Curious, he pursued her, befuddled when she waved off the doorman in his slicker, letting the downpour drench her.

She stood in the middle of the sidewalk and called, "Are you coming?"

Two soggy tourists arrived at the stupendous cathedral after strolling along the Seine where no artists plied their trade, nor lovers cuddled on benches. Their footsteps echoed around the high-ceilinged nave, one group and scattered individuals admiring the architecture and decor.

"Why the enthusiasm about this place?" Mustang inquired, drying her face on her shirt sleeve.

"I performed Quasimodo in a high school production of *Hunchback*. Given our rudimentary sets, seeing the original has been a long unfulfilled goal."

"Well, you can tick it off your list."

"Not until I make it up to the bell tower."

The stairs to which were cordoned off and marked in three languages, "Closed to the Public." A uniformed security guard kept a close eye on those who loitered near the spiral steps, urging them away if they lingered suspiciously.

"Won't happen," remarked Mustang.

"I'm not leaving until it does."

"You want to get thrown in jail?"

"They wouldn't do that to me," Rosemont chuckled. "I'm a celebrity."

The young woman muttered an expletive under her breath. It wouldn't be difficult to distract the guard with a little help from nature...

She countered the impulsive thought with reason. A disturbance of any kind would garner undue attention for Rosemont - and her. Interpol had spoiled her trip to Paris once; they wouldn't be allowed to do so again.

An aspect of her power she took for granted: her brain's automatic translation of languages. A voice crackled through the guard's hand-held radio, summoning anyone with CPR knowledge to the church's sacristy, where their supervisor had collapsed while changing into his uniform.

Every staff member abandoned his post.

"Go," Mustang urged Rosemont.

"Only if you come with me. The view is said to be glorious..."

The climb was hellish, however, and prolonged. Mounting the final step, they were panting, legs pulsating in agony. The rain hadn't ceased, either, and doused their jeans, t-shirts and sneakers anew.

Yet, Paris washed clean with heavenly waters fascinated them both. Not a scene printed on postcards or in coffee table albums, they grasped the vista as few had enjoyed under these conditions.

"Well?" probed Rosemont.

"Nothing like it anywhere else in the world."

“You’ve circumnavigated the globe?”

“While Glenn MacDonough’s crew was renovating the house for me to move in, I needed something to do.”

“You’re that wealthy?”

“If I want to be.”

His lank black hair a dripping mass, he peered at her through tangled strands. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Aren’t you wealthy by choice?” she countered. “You could donate every penny you earn to charity, or burn it, for that matter. You keep enough to live well. I do likewise. When you’re poor, you don’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Damn, woman. Nobody your age should be so...”

“Tortured?”

Another flash of consternation marred his perfect features. “Tortured? No. Brilliant would be a better word. Are you tortured?”

“Not by choice.”

“Most creative geniuses have no choice when the muse strikes.”

“I’m not a creative genius. I’m not any kind of genius. I’m...”

An incessant clicking ended her statement abruptly. Coupled with a high-pitched beep, she wondered if the bells were linked to a timer which designated the hour they rang...

Rosemont knew better. He hastily crossed the belfry to the stairs, dragging the cameraman-turned-paparazzi from the shadows.

“Don’t!” the scruffy youth objected, stuffing a huge telephoto lens beneath his shirt. “You’ll ruin the equipment.”

Rosemont growled, fist clenched, “I’ll ruin *you*, bastard! You’ve got a lot of guts...”

Mustang blocked the punch. “As Barry Fitzgerald said to John Wayne in *The Quiet Man*, ‘Don’t soil your knuckles on the man.’”

“He deserves it!”

“You got me fired,” whined the African-American photographer. “You owe me a living. I can make a small mint selling shots of you and your latest lady to the tabloids.”

“Why degrade yourself?” asked Mustang.

“It’s not degrading. It’s... like espionage. Getting the shots and not getting caught, all for the pleasure of American women who drool over this guy’s mug, and would leave home and family to spend one hour with him.”

“That’s insane,” the actor scoffed.

“No, it’s not. Back in high school, I can’t tell you how many girls sat around the cafeteria every morning, searching for the latest gossip about you on the internet. Your breakout role in that silly romantic comedy made them all crazy...”

Mustang inspected the digital camera. “Let me see what you’ve got.”

He drew it from her reach.

Rosemont concurred. “Give it up, dude.”

“No.”

Personally, Mustang didn’t care if he had a thousand images featuring the back of her soggy head. A single picture of her face, though - what the tabloids would want to identify the “mystery woman” - could spell disaster.

“You’ve got five seconds to erase those files, or you’re going airborne,” she stated flatly.

“Airborne?” he chuckled derisively.

Rosemont intervened, pulling her aside. “What are you talking about? He outweighs you by 100 pounds, at least.”

“It’s not weight, it’s...”

The youth called her bluff. His smug expression exasperated her further, to where a word would’ve sent him off the parapet to his death. Instead, she executed a precise roundhouse kick, practiced many times against imagined enemies - and real spies - since her visit to a Beijing park, and sent him slamming into the stone wall.

The camera dangled from a leather strap around his neck and, while he remained dazed, she punched the “Delete” button, adorned with the symbol of a trash bin. Answering the confirming message, “Yes,” the images vanished.

“Bitch!” he moaned.

“You try this again, I won’t go so easy on you,” she promised.

Leaving him to consider his sins, she and Rosemont descended the spiral staircase. No guard at the base of the flight, they casually exited the gorgeous edifice. The rain had finally stopped, and they strolled to the Hotel Napoleon at a leisurely pace.

“Where did you learn...” Rosemont queried.

“On my world travels.”

He smirked while holding the suite door for her to pass. “Remind me never to piss you off!”

IV

Mustang Duryea actually relaxed in Milan, no burden of being photographed or hounded by law enforcement hanging over her. She and Johnny Rosemont took a bus tour of the city - neither had previously traveled there - enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of cooking pasta and delicately-spiced sauces.

She'd tentatively planned a side trip to see authors Rolf and Greta Steckling in their hometown of Salzburg, but didn't anticipate seeing them in Vienna. The pair crossed her path at the airport Customs Desk, having themselves just flown in from a New York book signing.

Embraces and introductions followed a stop at one of the terminal's taverns. Rosemont bought a round of drinks, while the women chatted gaily.

"My production company has been looking at buying the rights to your last novel," he told Rolf in German as they sipped their beer.

"We've had a number of offers," the rotund, sandy-haired writer acknowledged. "Mostly independent film makers with little backing to do the plot justice. We're waiting for the right one."

"We'd do it justice."

"Would you star?"

"If my schedule allows."

"Who would be the female lead?"

"We'd discussed that before I left on this junket. Your description of Elizabeth is very exacting. Difficult to find someone to match perfectly..."

Rolf gestured toward Mustang.

"She's no actress."

"She *is* Elizabeth."

Rosemont's face betrayed his confusion. "Her *name* is Elizabeth, but..." He studied the young woman's countenance, smiling happily while conversing with her old friend. "Yes, I see it now."

"She did us a great service when we were starting our career as novelists. My wife and I both agreed she should be our heroine. Later, when she found us the ideal secretary, our gratitude increased a hundredfold."

"Stop putting me on a pedestal," Mustang chided, her beer untouched. "It's not like I can't hear every word."

Rolf flushed. "Sorry, Lady Elizabeth."

She might've heard their exchange; Rosemont pondered how she could understand it, speaking English the entire time. His brown eyes widened as he fell silent, listening to the trio break the language barrier in perplexing ways.

The Stecklings' phone number tucked into his wallet, the actor escorted Mustang to a Mercedes limousine, which had been waiting nearly an hour. He desperately wanted to ask about the linguistic trick, but didn't want the angelic glow in her eyes to fade.

"I'm glad you had a chance to meet them," she gushed, ignoring the cityscape outside tinted windows. "They're marvelous individuals."

"They consider you a special friend."

"They did me as much of a service in Monte Carlo as I did them."

"What kind of service?" he prodded.

"I... was being chased by a relentless Interpol agent. They gave me a ride on the yacht they had borrowed, so I could escape him - albeit temporarily."

"And the service you rendered them?"

"I helped them through a bit of writer's block."

"Ah!" He settled on the buttoned-leather upholstery. "Without speaking a word of German."

Fade that glow did, instantly. "It's such a habit for me, I didn't realize you..." She shifted toward the glass, to hide her sobs. "Oh, hell."

He patted her arm gently. "I didn't mean to upset you, Mustang. It was... like something from an old movie, where one guy is speaking English, and another Japanese, without subtitles making it possible for the audience to understand."

"I've seen those, up late on school nights back home. Always made me laugh."

"From the moment you crashed into me at Caesars Palace, I knew there was something unique about you. Finding you at Loch Ness... I thought myself incredibly fortunate. Now, I'm uncertain whether you're real, or just a dream..."

"More like a nightmare, John. I've lost count of how many have died as a result of knowing me."

Rosemont swallowed hard. "Died?"

"To put it simply: the same... ability which allows me to comprehend multiple languages - and be understood by those to whom I speak - also manifests in other ways, not so pleasant."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"I've been trying so hard to control my impulsiveness and emotions, and you've been so good for me... Like teaching me that instant gratification isn't all it's cracked up to be."

“When did I teach you *that*?”

“Paris. You’d tried for years to see Notre Dame, and had the patience to wait a bit longer, if necessary...”

“Did you cause the rain?”

“No. I don’t... meddle with the weather. Nature reacts badly to that kind of interference.”

“You talk like it’s a living being,” Rosemont commented harshly.

“It is. Nature is... alive in the most real sense. The elements blend together to create a very real consciousness...”

He snorted. “There are Hollywood types who believe in such nonsense. I wouldn’t have expected such trash from you.”

“I’m reminding you not to piss me off,” she said, her temper flaring. “I mustn’t get angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“What... kind of horrible things?”

“Dropping an entire engine from a moving car,” as she’d done to Jim Neville’s state police cruiser. “Setting fire to trees. Putting... obnoxious men in their place,” when she dropped the Waffen-SS officers to their knees in a small French restaurant. “And... materializing the dead.”

A nervous laugh conveyed his disbelief more than any statement. The limousine had braked beneath the portico of their hotel, and she didn’t wait for the chauffeur to open the door. She bolted and jogged along the crowded street, vision blurred by streaming tears.

Rosemont didn’t give chase. He suddenly regretted inviting the Mistress of Boleskine on this trip. A kernel of fear had claimed his chest; he didn’t wish it to grow.

“What about the young lady’s luggage?” inquired the doorman.

“Put it in storage. If she returns, she can claim it.”

Mustang had no idea what to do. She slowed her pace once beyond sight of the hotel entrance, eventually collapsing on the steps of a music school. She could summon lightning to take her home, but that would mean violating her resolution - again. She could go back and tell Rosemont she’d been playing a joke...

She couldn’t lie.

He wouldn’t accept the truth, obviously.

Or, it terrified him.

If a way existed to *prove* she could control herself, and not bring harm to those closest...

She’d like to see that, herself.

She'd never been able to accomplish it in the decade since Jack Parsons had cursed her with his power.

There had to be a first time. She had to be able to transform her life, apply the lessons Rosemont had taught her...

She'd so long tried on her own, without proper guidance... The last person who'd shared a degree of her power had been clinically insane. No role model, there. Even the wealthiest man on the planet could not advise her, with the capacity to buy anything his heart desired.

Such a one couldn't raise the dead, or heal injuries without need of a doctor's scalpel.

Or, make himself invisible.

Mustang rose from the stoop as a class of children bustled from the structure, instruments bouncing in their cases. They didn't see her grinning at their playful enthusiasm, nor did the doorman at the hotel.

He blinked, though, when the revolving door rotated without - visible - propulsion.

The suite's locked door couldn't prevent her entry. She walked into the master bedroom's bath, where Johnny Rosemont showered the day's dust from his skin.

"John," she hailed, loud enough to be heard over the running water.

"Who's there?"

"Come out here and see."

Through tinted glass, she saw him scrub the soap from his arms and legs, and rinse shampoo from his straight black hair. The door's latch clicked; a plush terry robe seemed to dangle in midair above the floor mat.

"What the hell..."

"Put it on," she instructed.

"Who *is* that?"

"Who does it sound like?"

"Mustang?" He glanced around, through steam-saturated fog, at no one.

"When you're dry, come into the bedroom."

"Why?"

"To settle this."

His baritone trembled. "What... are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

He'd never toweled himself off so quickly. He couldn't imagine how she'd gotten into the suite, unless the maid had used a master key. He'd have the employee fired for that breach...

Everything seemed normal in the bedroom - the king-size four poster bed fully made; his clothes hung in the wardrobe by the valet. "Where... are you?"

"I'm here."

The voice came from the direction of an ornate French Provincial-style desk. Had someone rigged up a speaker...

As she spoke, she moved, dispelling that notion. "John, I want to apologize. I... I'm not... good with people. You're the first I've... not harmed, which always happens entirely by accident. I... don't want to lose our friendship, because I've enjoyed every minute of this week..."

She might've been two inches from him. "Where *are* you?"

"Sit."

Did two hands push him onto the mattress?

"If you pass out, I won't have to catch you."

"I've never fainted in my life!" he protested.

And, he didn't when a shimmering cloud seemed to disintegrate around her, restoring her to visible form.

"Damn, woman!"

"I wasn't lying, John."

"I... believe you." He rubbed his eyes, just to be sure. "The boys back home won't, though, when I tell them I want to make a movie of this..."

"You can't," she countered.

"It'd... be incredible!"

"It would be the end of me."

"Interpol?"

"The FBI, mainly. I'm... supposed to stay off the radar."

"They'd never know the source..."

"Yes, they would."

"Okay, okay. I'll shelve the idea, for now."

"Thanks."

"We have to be at the theatre in less than an hour..."

"I'll stay here tonight, if that's okay. I'm... tired."

"Does it take a lot out of you?" he queried.

"Sometimes."

No moreso than in Berlin when, seated in the box prior to the lights dimming, Mustang heard a familiar voice whisper, "You must watch the movie tonight."

"Why?"

"Trust me."

She turned to see Erwin Rommel standing, partially concealed by the decorative red velvet curtain framing the arch. She laid her left hand on Rosemont's thigh.

"We have a guest," she announced.

The actor assumed a publicity stunt, rising to greet the hired impersonator. She didn't correct the mistake; that would occur in due course.

None of her ethereal friends had appeared on their own for months, and Mustang mulled this event, ignoring the film's main titles. Rosemont opted for the sitting room, expecting her to join him. Her refusal intrigued him, so he remained beside her on the throne-like armchairs.

Perhaps the proximity to Rommel's home had brought him. They'd been in Berlin together during the war; that connection might draw him more readily...

Then, the general's point hit home. He was depicted on the screen during a strategy session prior to the Normandy invasion, with his aide Georg Schiller.

Somebody had done thorough research.

"Thank your friend for me," Rommel directed.

"He... won't believe me."

Unless, as transpired, Rosemont glanced over his shoulder at the exact moment the German vanished.

Recovering his wits, he leaned toward Mustang. "Was that..."

"Yes."

No more was said that night, nor on the flight to Brussels. Johnny Rosemont had stopped smiling, and Mustang knew the reason.

Her.

"I'm sorry I've ruined your trip," she noted en route to the final charity spectacular.

"It's not that. The past four days have been..."

"Not as fun as the first three?"

"Different. Definitely different."

"At least, you didn't say *disastrous*."

"Nobody died."

"Or has had their future irreparably destroyed." She reached for him; he avoided her grasp. "It's not the same."

"I'm... a very grounded person, Mustang. I've never given much credence to spirituality, or superstition. You've... changed that, and the doubts about my entire life..."

With startling swiftness, she clutched his chin and swiveled his eyes to meet hers. "I am an *anomaly*, John Vladislav Kowalski. There's no need for you to doubt your beliefs, because what you've told me is sensible."

"Sensible, perhaps, but not true. You've shown me the impossible is... possible."

"Nature played a terrible joke on me, and has a good laugh at my mistakes. What I do cannot be imitated by anyone else on the planet. In 99 percent of cases, I wish I couldn't do it, either. I belong in a circus freak show."

"I... wouldn't say that."

"Your brain is overwhelmed by what you've witnessed. I have that effect on people, and it's why I've tried so hard to hide myself away, to keep my personal torture private. This week has been the best in recent memory, though. You're a fantastic individual, untainted by Hollywood's crap, and I'll always cherish your kindness."

He tentatively managed a grin. "I thought I might be losing my mind..."

"Not at all. Once you drop me in Edinburgh, you'll never again have invisible people wandering your hotel rooms, or dead soldiers manifesting at movie premieres."

She felt his muscles untense, and released her grip.

"If I do make a film of this experience, it'll have to be science fiction. No one would believe it, otherwise."

"You've got that right."

He stroked her moist cheek delicately. She hadn't realized she'd been crying. "I'm sorry, too, for treating you like a pariah. I... handled myself badly."

"Better than some. I've had guns pointed at me on many occasions by those who feared me."

"You weren't scared of being killed?"

"If I can torch trees, imagine what I can do to metal."

They both were laughing as they entered the concert hall.

Bidding each other farewell at Edinburgh Airport the following afternoon, they hugged and exchanged well wishes. Waiting on the tarmac until the DC-10 soared westward, she felt at ease.

After so many catastrophes, self-control - and a relatively normal life - might yet be within her reach.