

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Shakespearean Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

Secluded on her property, Mustang Duryea seldom ambled down the meandering gravel drive to the mailbox. The number of people who knew of her presence at Boleskine had increased over the years, yet the metal receptacle remained mostly unused.

She preferred it that way.

Thus, she was duly surprised when the hay and feed delivery driver tossed her a parcel, having parked his pickup near the barn that Saturday morning.

“What’s this?”

“‘Twas stuffed in your letterbox,” he replied, his Scottish burr thick as gravy.

“It’s not addressed to me.”

“There’s been a substitute on the route the past few weeks. Ye will have to run it into town and explain...”

She laid the brown-paper wrapped rectangle on his running board. “You do it, please.”

“I canna, ma’am. Ye must dispute the error in person.”

Mustang grumbled an expletive. She’d sworn to never again set foot beyond the 47 acres surrounding her Georgian-style mansion after recent debacles involving her fellow human beings. Her kindnesses always seemed to backfire, and she predicted no less if she were compelled to ride one of her horses into Dores so Lisa Owens could receive her order of what felt like books.

Resigned, she helped the spry farmhand stack the hay bales before saddling Molly.

She cut through Glenn MacDonough’s property, to avoid traffic and shorten the distance. Had the decision been arbitrary, she might’ve chalked up colliding with the squat, disheveled woman to coincidence.

Long ago, she stopped believing in coincidences.

“Sorry, dearie,” fumed the frazzled, bespectacled senior, jamming a knit cap atop her bluish curls. “I’m fit to be tied, and wasn’t watching where I was going.”

The question came naturally, “What’s wrong?” Afterward, Mustang bit her lip, drawing blood.

“Idiot postman lost my books!”

Blotting crimson moisture off her chin with a bandanna from her hip pocket, Mustang’s free hand presented the package. “It came to my house by mistake. I was just returning it.”

“Saints be praised!” gushed the presumed Lisa Owens, hugging the bundle like a wayward child. “I’ve been waiting for these since summer...”

“They should’ve been insured, if they’re valuable.”

“Valuable only to me, I suppose.” She shredded the paper to reveal *The House of Barrymore* by Margot Peters and Joseph Fitzgerald Molloy’s *The Life and Adventures of Edmund Kean*.

Mustang’s confusion must’ve been visible, for it warranted a bizarre disclosure as the woman scurried toward her bicycle: “I’ve got a thing for dead actors.”

The allure of such individuals escaped the Mistress of Boleskine. Her own experiences with live theatrical types - Thomas Burton, Johnny Rosemont and Jerry Richards - had left a decidedly sour taste in her mouth. She’d also dealt with the dead, manifested through unusual powers bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons, rocket scientist/occultist and her grandfather.

Chalk it up to personal eccentricities, she mused, adjusting her mount’s stirrups. Good the matter was settled without incident; better, still, to get back home.

Except, Lisa’s floral-embroidered wallet lay on the sidewalk, where she must’ve dropped it in her excitement over the books.

“Oh, hell...”

The obvious choice would be to turn the item into the local constable; not so for Mustang. An interrogation about where she found it, and her identity recorded on official documents...

She didn’t need any government interference in her life - ever again.

Ideal to restore the wallet to its owner, the address three kilometers east of the village.

Ideal, but not pleasant. Rain clouds converged from nowhere, dousing her with cold droplets. Her auburn tresses dripped and her fingers partially froze around the reins.

Lisa fared no better, getting caught in the downpour herself. She hailed the drenched rider from the veranda of a sprawling one-story tan-shingled dwelling.

“Come in or you’ll catch pneumonia!”

Mustang had no intention of accepting the invitation, until she trembled violently upon dismounting. She thrust the wallet in Lisa’s hand as she crossed the threshold, to be met with profuse thanks.

“I didn’t realize it was missing!”

“The books distracted you. Good thing I wasn’t a thief.”

“Oh, there’s no money,” Lisa chuckled. “My bank pays my bills from a trust.”

Lights switched on, the hostess announced a fire would soon be drying their clothes and warming their bones.

Mustang didn’t hear this last. What her eyes registered overwhelmed her senses.

A French classical-decorated parlor, stuffed floor-to-ceiling with books and DVDs.

The adjacent sitting room was wall-papered with vintage black-and-white photos of stage and screen personalities, commingled with silent movie posters and opening night programmes.

One word formed in the young woman’s mind: hoarder.

“You... collected all this?” she stammered.

“Over six decades.” Lisa waved her to the lone uncluttered armchair in the room. “Having a rich father, I knew I’d never have to work, so I immersed myself in... other pursuits. I financed comedies and musicals - some profitable, others dreadful - in London’s West End, and met many of the greats. From a psychological standpoint, I began noticing a common temperament among the casts, and started researching how they came to behave in this manner. I’ve been compiling notes in the hope of someday authoring the definitive text...”

“A thousand pages?” quipped Mustang.

“Or more. The resources, as you can see, are numerous.”

Flames roaring on the grate, the pair settled on the carpet to thaw. Lisa fetched a bottle of Dewar’s White Label, pouring them each a glass.

“Isn’t it rather... early in the day?” her guest objected.

“It’s five o’clock somewhere.”

Mustang had heard that excuse before, from various alcoholics. She nursed the drink as Lisa prattled aimlessly about her project, and not a word consigned to paper.

“I’ve heard the first paragraph is the most difficult,” sympathized the visitor.

“Oh, I’ve had that churning around my head for ages. What I don’t want it to be is some dull, dry academic tome. I want these men to be alive on the page for readers, but they have to be alive for me, and that’s... lacking.”

“If the information you’ve gathered came from dull, dry books, I don’t see how...”

Lisa shoved a couple DVD cases across the oriental rug. “Have you ever watched these?”

Old movies, Mustang's favorite genre. "Not recently."

"The actors draw you into the plot, make you feel what they're feeling... I want to convey that in the narrative, without coming off like a star-struck fan."

"You want to balance both sides of the story."

Despite her advanced age, the woman leapt to her feet. "Precisely! I want to get inside their minds and their expertise..."

"You'd need to have been a psychologist, getting them on the couch, to accomplish that. Couldn't you write your book on living actors?"

"Today's actors are spoiled brats, out for cheap publicity. They play to the media, not to the audiences."

"Then, it appears your dream will be unfulfilled, Mrs. Owens." Mustang rose, toasty and eager to depart. "Enjoy your research, anyway."

Lisa tossed her latest acquisitions across the room and sighed "It's not the same. If I could have ten minutes with the likes of those two, I could get a genuine feel for their personalities..."

"Maybe someday you will." Meant as an off-hand remark on her way out the door, Mustang's lips bled anew.

She suspected the result when the structure's foundation wrenched ominously. She whirled upon two men, scanning their surroundings, dumbfounded.

"The Great Profile" - who Mustang had seen in the 1930s *Romeo and Juliet* and *Grand Hotel* - cut a fine figure in white tie and tails, rather than the dissipated version of his later life. A black and gold brocade Hamlet-style tunic, leggings and boots garbed the Brit, Edmund Kean.

In fact, these legends could probably quote more Shakespeare than any actor currently performing the Bard.

That wouldn't help Lisa, however, who'd collapsed in a faint beside the fire.

"Barrymore, fetch her a drink." Mustang knew he'd understand that much, since he'd played a good number of intoxicated characters on film.

Kean squatted beside the would-be author, supporting her head as 80 proof liquid trickled down her throat. She regained consciousness with a coughing fit.

Their hostess resting in the armchair, Mustang beheld the youngest son of Maurice and Georgiana Drew Barrymore drain the liter of Dewar's in one gulp. Thomas Burton would've been impressed. This feat also, mused Mustang, gave fresh meaning to the term "dead drunk".

"It's been too long," he boomed in rich tones, tossing the bottle in a corner.

Kean, with kinky dark hair and a slight frame, selected a Jeroboam of Dom Perignon from Lisa's liquor cabinet, shooting the cork into the wall. "Longer for me, you pompous ass."

"Hey, that's a thousand pounds of my money you're guzzling!" squawked the writer, shoving herself upright.

Kean bowed, setting the empty on the ivory mantle. "Worth every ha'penny."

She glanced at Mustang, who wore a guilty smirk. "Is this a dream?"

"Unfortunately, no. They are quite... animated, and you have a prime opportunity to sample their idiosyncrasies first-hand."

"But, how..."

"Don't ask. Just enjoy."

"Enjoy them wasting my monthly allowance?"

"It's once in a lifetime, Mrs. Owens. The clock is ticking."

"What do you mean?" pressed Lisa. "I only have ten minutes?"

"Around six, as it stands."

Enough for Barrymore and Kean to engage in fisticuffs over who performed a better melancholy Dane.

Mustang stepped between the combatants, not ready to use her kung fu training, but employing sufficient strength to separate them. Her reprimand brooked no opposition. "Knock it off, boys!"

"You are American," observed Barrymore, rolling his R's, using slender fingers to comb wavy light brown strands off his forehead.

"From Montana, originally."

Kean hiccupped, "A colonist? They have no appreciation for Shakespeare."

Deferring to Lisa, Mustang retreated.

"Now they're here, I don't know where to begin."

The younger woman's shoulders drooped in defeat. Another disaster without any positive merits whatsoever.

Meanwhile, Barrymore perused the variety of spirits on the cabinet shelves. "I don't usually mix my liquors," he proclaimed. "But it shouldn't upset my stomach, in my present state."

"You'll be surprised," countered Mustang. "Mark Twain can feel the cold, and his bones get stiff after he's... solid for a couple hours."

The movie star's blue orbs and Lisa's violet ones glared at her.

"You're... responsible for this?" the senior choked.

“You verbalized a wish, and my acknowledgment of it... made it so.” Mustang wished - regularly - a hole would open in the floor and swallow her. “A lamentable talent, you might say.”

“A true sorceress!” hissed Kean. “What she could do as one of the witches in...”

“Don’t say it!” Barrymore warned. “We need no more bad luck.”

The mantle clock chimed the hour, to the young woman’s relief. “Time to go, you two.”

However, they didn’t.

Mustang glanced at Lisa. “Is that clock correct?”

“A minute slow, maybe.”

In other instances - with Guthrie Manor’s ghosts, for example - Mustang had successfully limited the length of the spectres’ materialization. Why had it not worked with Barrymore and Kean?

Who were downing shots of tequila in rapid succession, like thirsty runners swilling water.

It had to be the alcohol.

The intake of a tangible substance might cause them to resist her power, though Twain, Francis of Assisi, Erwin Rommel, Mahatma Gandhi and Lyndon Bixby had, years earlier, shared a Christmas feast with her, vanishing with no difficulty.

They’d willingly done her bidding, though.

The errant Hamlets were too interested in imbibing copious amounts of liquor to resume their ethereal existence.

Her task would be to make them crave the peace of death.

The polka, *In Heaven There Is No Beer*, popped unbidden into her head.

Therein lay the dilemma. This famous pair, accustomed to constant inebriation, would rather bear their hangovers than the tranquil sobriety of the afterlife.

“Oh, hell...”

## II

“What we need are the ladies of the ensemble,” asserted Edmund Kean, raising his glass in salute.

Lisa retorted, “We’re not good enough for you?”

“Too good, madame. I have determined high-born females require their paramours to behave respectably beyond the confines of the bedroom, as if they were husbands. I am what I am, and will change for no one.”

“Unless you’re recording this on tape,” Mustang whispered to their hostess, “you’d better find paper and pen, and jot it down.”

The writer concurred. “Good idea.”

Mustang proceeded toward Kean, scarred palms exposed. “Do these look like the hands of a high-born female?”

He guffawed. “From the first, I could tell you were the maid.” Assessing her jeans, riding boots and cable knit sweater, he added, “I can’t say I condone your uniform, or your Mistress’ revealing attire.”

Lisa wore a calf-length tweed skirt, lace-collared blouse and loafers. “Your ladies of the ensemble wore far less.”

“In the music halls, yes. On the street, they covered their limbs, as convention required.”

“Conventions have changed, my friend,” observed Barrymore, tequila dribbling on the carpet. “Ever since women won the vote, they’ve been pushing for equal rights with men.”

Kean spat, “God’s holy trousers. Do they not know their place?”

Scribbling briskly on a yellow legal pad, Lisa couldn’t believe her good fortune. Mustang, conversely, couldn’t believe these chauvinistic attitudes.

“My place? In your bed, or your kitchen?”

“Indeed.”

The Mistress of Boleskine had never slapped any of her manifestations, but she was sorely tempted. Hadn’t Mark Twain and St. Francis expounded - months earlier - on how men focused the majority of their thoughts on one subject? Hadn’t the men who’d been impressed by her power craved her favors on a physical level, as well?

She groaned at Lisa. “Men are all alike - every century, every profession, bombed or sober. You didn’t need to meet these fools to confirm that fact.”

“I... never thought it could truly happen. It was only a dream...”

“A nightmare, you mean.” She addressed Barrymore and Kean. “How many women have you seduced with your fame and good looks, taken what you pleased, then left them by the wayside?”

Barrymore counted briefly on his fingers, then conceded the point. Kean ground his toe contritely into the rug’s nap.

“Admit, too: if Lisa were younger and I were amenable, we’d share the same fate.”

“You wouldn’t need to be amenable,” leered Barrymore. “Just able.”

Mustang spun on her heel and left the room.

The actors content in their cups, Lisa trailed her guest. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“You can’t leave me here, with them.”

“Why not? It’s what you wanted.”

“They... aren’t what I expected.”

“What *did* you expect?” raged Mustang. “You’ve lived a good long time. Haven’t you ever... dealt with their ilk?”

Lisa recoiled at this fury, dropping onto a scroll-armed, throne-like chair beneath a refurbished tapestry. “I... was married to a baronet at 18. He died in a freak hunting accident days before our child was due. My grief caused the boy to be stillborn. My mind... couldn’t handle the strain, and I ended up institutionalized for six years. Once discharged, I lived here with my brother and his wife, until they died. I’ve been alone ever since.”

“With your research and your fantasies.”

“Sadly, yes. It’s been my life.”

“I’m sorry you’re disappointed, Mrs. Owens, but it’s your own fault. I live alone, too, but I don’t let my mind delude me about reality.”

“You’re so young. You shouldn’t waste yourself...”

“My thoughts exactly!” sneered Barrymore from the sitting room doorway. “That licentious sot you chose for my companion is an egotistical bore.”

“And, you’re not?” Mustang snorted.

His condescending bow reinforced her opinion.

It gave her an idea, too.

“What’s the largest room in this house?” she asked Lisa.

“The old ballroom, at the back. Why?”

“We’re going to have a competition to see who’s the better Shakespearean actor.”

Barrymore’s eyebrows arched. “Eh?”

“You and Mr. Kean can alternate roles in” - she searched recollections of high school English assignments - “*Othello*. You as Iago in the first act, then as Othello in the second, and so forth.”

“Who will be the judge?”

“Lisa and I.”

“And the prize?”

“The winner gets to stay and debauch to his heart’s delight. The loser must submit...”

Barrymore beamed, bent on gloating to his fellow thespian.

“Hold on!” Mustang recalled him. “The curtain rises at eight o’clock. You’ve got to get sober.”

“But...”

“No buts. You both must be sober, or there’s no contest.”

Lisa squinted at Mustang. “From what I’ve read, neither of them ever performed without... artificial courage.”

“Which is why it’ll be more challenging, and more likely they’ll realize how much better they have it on the other side.”

“You mean, it’s a ruse to convince them...”

Mustang nodded.

“Brilliant! There’s even a platform on the ballroom’s far end, where the orchestra used to sit. It can double as a stage.” Lisa’s stomach rumbled. “Now the end is in sight, are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“There’s plenty of food in the ‘fridge.”

The women were savoring chicken salad croissants when Kean and Barrymore burst into the kitchen, wearing dual masks of consternation.

“What’s wrong?” queried Mustang.

“Who will be playing Desdemona, and the rest of the cast?” prodded the Brit.

“Whoever you wish.”

Barrymore choked. “Really?”

“Put your heads together, and compile a list.”

The men withdrew, deep in discussion.

“You *were* kidding, am I right?” muttered Lisa.

“No.”

“Is there no limit to what you can do?”

“I won’t change the weather.”

“My God!”

Mustang swallowed a bite of her sandwich. “It’s not a gift to be envied, Mrs. Owens. More often than not, I cause disasters, even death. You’ll be lucky to come out of this mess with, at minimum, a depleted cache of liquor.” She glimpsed the clock on the stove. “Is that the time? I must get home to feed and water my horses...”

“Well, it’s stopped raining,” noted Lisa, depositing her dishes in the sink. Then, hesitantly, “What about them?”

“They’ll be fine. They won’t be drinking, because they want to win the chance to indefinitely indulge their vices to excess. The rest of the players will appear only on stage for rehearsals and the performance, confined to the ballroom. I’ll be back by seven.”

“I’ll send a car for you.”

“You don’t have...”

“Ollie, down the road, inherited my brother’s Audi, on condition he would provide me transportation whenever I required. I’ll ring him, and he’ll call for you at...”

“Boleskine House.”

Lisa blinked twice. “Honestly? You’re Lady Neville?”

“Didn’t I introduce myself? I apologize,” Mustang flushed.

“No problem. From the accounts I’ve heard, I assumed...”

“Rumors are often exaggerated.”

The rain had chilled the October air, and Mustang shivered as she untied Molly’s reins from an ivy trellis near the covered porch. “Sorry I was so long, girl.”

The roan whinnied, shaking moisture from her mane and splattering her owner’s sweater.

Mustang laughed. She’d always rather associate with horses than humans.

Swinging into the saddle, the breeze whipped auburn hair into her face. She brushed it aside, detecting a vibrant baritone reciting lines from *Richard III*. She steered Molly around the dwelling to an overgrown garden, where Barrymore emoted at full lung capacity to an invisible crowd.

She spoke not, awed by the man’s volume and command of the language. A grand gesture twirled him toward this spectator; he halted in mid-sentence.

“Those are the wrong lines,” she chastised. “You’re doing *Othello*, remember?”

Quietly, he clarified, “I’m rejuvenating my projection. I’ve lost the knack, what with acting in silent films and, then, talkies, the microphone dangling from the rafters.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Barrymore snatched the reins. She struggled to retrieve them; he trapped her right hand, gently tracing the scar on her palm.

“The oaf who did this to you should be beaten within an inch of his life.”

“They were self-inflicted.”

“What? You attempted to brand yourself with hot irons?”

Mustang demurred. “Those who’ve witnessed...”

“Go on, my dear.”

“Please, Mr. Barrymore. I have... other engagements.”

He pressed surprisingly warm lips against her skin. Though she’d touched - and been touched by - Gandhi, Mark Twain and the others, she’d never perceived how truly alive they were.

An all-too-familiar sensation jolted her frame. Barrymore’s seductive blue orbs fastened on her, and she could have melted too easily... Recalling the definition of necrophilia preempted that urge.

“What was it like, acting with Garbo in *Grand Hotel*?”

The change of subject barely rattled him. “Our scenes were very... stimulating.”

“The first time I watched *Dinner at Eight*, I cried when your character committed suicide.”

“There were some women in the theatres who wished I would have done so in real life,” he chortled. “You *are* serious about this competition?”

“Of course.”

“When I emerge victorious, your company on my revels would rival the most intimate interaction with my leading ladies.”

“Not possible. Besides understanding the male mind, I’m resolved to stay off the local radar.”

His visage darkened, clenching the leather tighter. “Radar? What is that?”

“A tool used by the weather service to track storms and other... anomalies.”

“Why would you...”

Mustang jerked the reins from his grasp. “Look, you should be devoting your attention to Mrs. Owens. She’s got the thing for dead actors.”

“She’s... ancient.”

“So are you. I estimate your age as, roughly, 130, which means you’d be robbing the cradle by concentrating your charms on her.”

“Ah, influencing the judge!” bellowed Edmund Kean, stalking between leafless rose bushes.

Barrymore snarled, “Silence, fool!”

“What other purpose would you have for beguiling this lovely maid?”

“Call me a maid once more, Mr. Kean, and you won’t enjoy my reply,” counseled Mustang.

A tremor beneath his feet mellowed his tone. "I humbly beg your pardon, ma'am. Being ignorant of this culture..."

"Don't make accusations you cannot substantiate. That does more to negatively influence me than my conversation with Mr. Barrymore."

The latter gallantly patted her leg and winked.

Kean cringed. "The cast is assembled, Mr. Barrymore. We await you on stage."

"Behave, both of you," sighed Mustang. "Any efforts to sabotage the other's portrayal will adversely affect the outcome."

The pair simultaneously bowed as she tapped Molly with her boot heel and set off at a canter.

Rounding the curve on a dirt track which would take her cross-country to Boleskine, rather than through Dores, Mustang slowed. She shifted to regard the actors bickering about some irrelevant topic, two spoiled children arguing over a soccer ball, perhaps.

Their youthful features confounded her. For that matter, so did Twain's, Gandhi's, Rommel's and St. Francis'. Instead of raising the historic figures as they appeared upon their respective deathbeds, they were rendered in good health.

A fascinating quirk to her power, she surmised. She'd seen each of the men in a photo or painting, never expecting to inadvertently summon them, and those images played into their physical representation.

In other words, she'd subliminally wanted Barrymore to look as he did romancing Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel*, or in his silent films.

"But, I didn't come to bring him forth," she remonstrated with the wind.

Answering herself a sign of madness, she nonetheless vocalized, "As always, blame your lack of self-control."

Jiggling the reins, Molly slogged through the mud. The trek lasting a half hour, Mustang was elated to reach the barn, grooming her stock, scooping oats into their feedbags, and dumping water buckets in their troughs.

Another dilemma sparked by leaving the security of this serene acreage, which she might not be able to remedy at Lisa's that evening.

She showered and donned an ivory turtleneck and black slacks, a tribute to the renowned actors who would grace the stage. News the performance might not occur, though, distressed her.

Ollie, Lisa's friend, pulled the green Audi near the mansion's entrance at precisely 7:00. He held the passenger door for Mustang, relating the guests' increasing discomfort.

“They’ve been beggin’ Lisa for even a small libation these past three hours,” the gangly Scot concluded.

“What did she do?”

“She locked the liquor cabinet and hid the key on her person.”

“Do the... guests know this?”

“From what she told me when she rang, the one in tails does. He’s been courting her like an avid suitor, short of proposing marriage.”

Given Barrymore’s antics in the garden, Mustang could envision his technique, decades of practice serving him well. She suppressed her laughter, instructing Ollie, “We’d better hurry.”

Exceeding the speed limit didn’t get the pair to Lisa’s before absolute hell broke loose. In the unfurnished, acoustically resonant ballroom, deafening shouts threatened the chandeliers. Mustang could distinguish the male leads yelling obscenities at each other; lesser cast members carped about the absence of costumes, make-up and scenery, and the short amount of preparation.

Lisa hustled from trying to soothe the players to the younger woman’s side. “I think Kean’s got the D.T.’s, and Barrymore is miffed because I rejected his advances.”

“Everybody on stage freeze!” hollered Mustang.

The ethereal beings didn’t need to acknowledge her command; nature immobilized the dozen instantly.

Her next directive: “Barrymore, Kean, come here.”

Emotions articulated by their scowls, the actors traversed the polished floor.

“Are you both five years old?” she stormed.

They chorused, “No, ma’am.”

“Would you ever, in life, allow this pandemonium during a dress rehearsal?”

In unison, they repeated their response.

“Remember, you are professionals, the best at your craft, and create order from this chaos!”

“We cannot, without the proper accouterments,” contended Kean.

“Namely?”

Barrymore itemized the essentials, to which Kean made some slight revisions.

“Fine. Get on with it.”

As the men retraced their steps to the platform, clothes were transformed into 17<sup>th</sup> century gowns and capes. A bed, on which Desdemona would be suffocated in Act V, congealed from thin air.

Lisa gaped at Mustang.

“When you wake up tomorrow morning, you’ll believe it was all a dream,” the latter grunted. Making her exit, she thundered, “Thirty minutes to curtain, people!”

### III

“I shouldn’t have left you alone with them,” Mustang commented, serving the jittery Lisa a mug of hot cocoa in the kitchen.

“The din resurrected memories of my days at the institution. I must say, though, Mr. Barrymore was almost irresistible...”

“He is that.” The Mistress of Boleskine slumped on the granite counter. “Have you... continued treatment since your release from...”

Lisa crinkled her sloped nose. “The funny farm? You can say it. Doesn’t bother me a bit. And, no. The doctors determined it was a mistake to house me on the locked ward. My reaction to those tragic deaths was normal, by all standards. The misdiagnosis of severe schizophrenia is the reason I live comfortably on proceeds from a trust.”

“You took them to court?”

“My brother was a solicitor. It had upset him greatly, at age 12, seeing me hauled away in a straight jacket. He never forgot, and wouldn’t forgive them for the lasting damage to us both.”

“That damage being a sensation of never trusting another human being...”

“And hiding behind stacks of books and mountains of fantasy.”

“Which are far less tumultuous than reality.”

Grinning, Lisa sipped the steaming brew. “Kean’s biographers certainly underplayed his... temperament. Next time, I’ll be careful what I wish!”

“It’ll be over soon,” Mustang assured her hostess, adding under her breath, “I hope.”

The ladies took their places - armchairs moved from the sitting room for the occasion - five minutes prior to “curtain”. Both puzzled at the players milling aimlessly beside the platform, and the absence of Barrymore and Kean.

The double ballroom doors slammed wide with a resounding crash. Lisa and Mustang leapt off the cushions, to be confronted by the Great Profile, furious, Kean at his elbow.

“There shall be no performance tonight!” howled the former.

Mustang didn’t have to inquire why.

“To distract myself from the liquid refreshment ban, I browsed through the unkempt library of books and other materials Mrs. Owens has accumulated. You, Madame Witch, dared us to portray Othello, when authors have written our biographies in the style of gossip columnists! I, personally, tried to stave off such abuse by having my tale written while I was alive, but that didn’t stop them, did it?”

“The stageplays based on our lives,” he persisted, “and the two-bit hacks who’ve portrayed us on film. I can understand Errol Flynn, a faint copy of his younger self, but who is this Jack Cassidy? On Kean’s part, who is Anthony Hopkins? Ben Kingsley? The inaccuracies, the license, has history no respect for the greats?”

“Calm yourself, Jack,” interspersed Lisa.

“Jack?” Mustang echoed silently.

“Calm myself? We have been brought here and played for fools!” He whirled on Mustang. “You will restore my formal habiliments, and conjure a car to conduct us to the nearest tavern. No more games!”

With the first request, Mustang complied. Not the second. Barrymore marched away, Kean trying to match his pace.

“One more step, Mr. Barrymore,” her words amplified by the acoustics, “and you’ll see this witch turn bitch. The results will devastate the countryside.”

He kept walking.

Lisa raced after him. She snagged his coat sleeve and aborted his progress. “She means it, Jack. The miracles I’ve seen this day relegate Houdini to amateur status.”

He favored her with a patronizing expression. “My dear Lisa, your devotion to improving comprehension of the creative psyche’s foibles among the general public is undeniably laudable. Those foibles, in my case, include an insatiable appetite for liquor. If you will not unlock the cabinet, I must seek it elsewhere.”

Her grip hardened on his arm. Rather than scuffle, he drew the woman close and kissed her passionately.

Mustang observed the scene, envious - not of the kiss itself, but the fact no external forces augmented the emotional exchange. If she'd occupied Lisa's shoes, the roof would've been in chunks at their feet.

Kean approached her, another voyeur. "In the course of rehearsals, I've managed a grope or two, but he makes love like it's a West End production."

"Nothing is done by half measures anymore, Mr. Kean. If it's not on a grand scale, it's not worth doing."

"No more discretion, no more pining for that clandestine rendezvous?"

"Not since the invention of the camera, satellites, and the internet."

Kean's head tilted. "I am unfamiliar with these terms."

"Publicity, over the top. Instant gratification. Nothing is secret, thanks to the paparazzi."

"Sad."

Barrymore had finally released Lisa, who staggered backward, stunned. Mustang grabbed her before her knees buckled, and assisted her to a bench near the cobwebbed wall.

"Any further objections?" he hissed.

"I suppose appealing to reason would be futile," speculated Mustang.

"I'm not known as an unreasonable man, but I would be more inclined to listen if you were opening a bottle while talking."

"Or, perhaps, if I promise you a bottle afterward?"

Barrymore bowed his acceptance.

"First: you were brought here by accident. No one but Mrs. Owens and myself know the truth. As I was telling Mr. Kean just now, because of mass communication technology, secrets are impossible to keep. If I supplied you a vehicle for the drive to the village pub, someone would undoubtedly recognize your famous profile, and with no more than a quick phone call, we would be mobbed by the media or, worse, arrested."

He clicked his tongue, shaming her. "You forget, Madame Witch, no noble heart beats in this chest, except on the silver screen. I can't count the number of skirmishes with the law, and they didn't blemish my popularity in the slightest. In other words, your logic doesn't wash."

"Stop calling me that!"

"She is Lady Elizabeth Neville," declared Lisa. "A highly esteemed gentlewoman in the region."

Kean bent at the waist in homage.

Mustang raised him vertical. "Don't do that, either."

“How does an American come to be lauded as an aristocrat?” Barrymore mocked.

“None of your business.”

“It is, when you violate my inherent freedoms and plentiful access to spirits.”

The last thing Mustang needed was another person - Lisa, specifically - being privy to the details of her affinity with the natural elements. If the saga would soften Barrymore’s antagonism...

She met Kean’s eyes. “I’m sure Mrs. Owens would love to hear you recite some of Shakespeare’s soliloquies, since the full *Othello* will not be forthcoming. If you’ll excuse us...”

The 18<sup>th</sup> century actor escorted a timid Lisa to the armchair. Then, he mounted the now vacant platform, striking a dramatic pose.

Mustang dragged Barrymore down the corridor to the sitting room, spinning the old fashioned key below the knob.

Barrymore made a beeline to the liquor cabinet, deftly picking the lock.

“Wait a minute...” exhorted Mustang.

It took seconds for him to drain the brandy snifter he’ll filled to the brim. “You who purport private follies are now fodder for public consumption, you wish to bare your soul to me?”

The fire had died on the grate. No logs for fuel, flames burst forth - and his companion hadn’t twitched a muscle.

A row of crystal champagne flutes on the cabinet’s top shelf shattered.

Piles of books toppled like dominoes.

“Need more?” Mustang taunted.

“Need I mention I’m especially attracted to women shrouded in mystery?”

“So is every man I’ve met since I killed my grandfather.”

Blue orbs bulged.

“He lived in Pasadena in the late 30s and 40s. Jack Parsons.”

“I recall seeing that name in the papers. Something to do with Cal Tech and explosives.”

“Rocket fuel,” she corrected.

“Why did you kill him?”

“It could be described as a ritual suicide. I was blindfolded, he got between the knife I held and the altar...”

“Ah! How dramatic! I could visualize such a scene captured on film...”

“How ‘bout sending an FBI agent flying into Loch Ness?”

They laughed together, his a melodic roar.

He poured himself another drink, and wrapped his free arm around her narrow shoulders, leading her to the French-style divan. Only inches taller than her, she stared at his straight nose and dimpled chin.

“Local folk bestowed a title upon you in honor of this power?”

“No. I stupidly believed if I hid my identity, I could hide from the world. What friends I have call me Mustang.”

“I’m Jack to my closest comrades.”

“I wondered why Mrs. Owens...”

“A trifle.” He maneuvered her onto the cushions, angling her palms toward the lamp light. “I’m curious about these wounds. Your body emits its energy at this point?”

She didn’t flinch. “The energy isn’t mine, Jack. It’s nature’s. The scars were formed when lightning...”

“Lightning?” He recoiled, fear clouding his countenance. “As in, ‘May lightning strike me if I’ve sinned?’”

“No, it’s how I travel long distances.”

“Amazing!”

“Painful.”

Barrymore smirked, joining her on the divan. “I suspect so.”

“That, and the fact so many have died though my lack of self-control... I avoid using the power...”

“Such a gift could benefit humanity!” He leaned closer, obliging her spine to arch backward, until they resembled the cover art of his *Don Juan* DVD, lying on the end table.

She ducked free of the awkward embrace, retreating to the wall of photos. “So, you *are* an aloof goddess, too good for ordinary men.”

“You’ve got it reversed. I’m bad news, as others can testify.”

“I prefer bad girls,” Barrymore oozed. “Fewer complications.”

“Would you consider destroying this house a complication?”

“An inconvenient one. Do you intend to blow it up if I...”

“Don’t you get it?” squealed Mustang. “It’s not intentional! I’m so attuned to nature, the slightest increase in my pulse, or quickening of my breath, causes a catastrophic reaction.”

A pounding on hefty wood panels spurred the Mistress of Boleskine to inch left, rotating the key. Kean and Lisa bustled across the threshold.

“We heard shouting,” panted the hostess. “Are you all right?”

Mustang mutely dismissed the query.

“Mr. Kean has decided to... go back where he came from,” Lisa announced.

“This dear lady showed me some of your technology. Not even an ample stock of scotch could get me through a day living under such scrutiny.”

“Mrs. Owens, do you have sufficient input for your research?” probed Mustang.

“More than sufficient. I’ve got the entire outline.”

“Pleased to hear it.” Briefly clasping Kean’s hand, she wished him well.

When he vanished, Lisa nearly fainted - again.

Barrymore caught her and propelled her to a love seat. His coloring also pale, he chided, “Are you so cold-hearted...”

“Having frequently seen people... er, come and go in this manner, I’m used to it.”

“No one in their right mind...”

Lisa stirred, the offending remark penetrating her stupor.

“Hush, Jack!” murmured Mustang.

“Or, was he a figment of some warped imagination?”

“If he was, so are you.” She pinched him. “You’re flesh and blood.”

He rubbed the spot on his arm. “Damn you, woman!”

“I thought you said I’d wake up and realize I’d been dreaming,” the dazed Lisa stated.

“Tomorrow morning. It’s still today.” Mustang indicated the mantle clock.

“Are you two going to hang around all night?”

Mustang deferred to Barrymore. “If he stays, I stay.”

“You’ve designated yourself my shadow?” he snorted.

She’d tired of his imperious attitude. “You saw how Mr. Kean... left? Like exiting a stage - when you’re willing. If you’re not, and I have to force the issue, it’ll feel like wolves ripping you limb from limb.”

Lisa interspersed, “Lady Elizabeth, please! You are both my guests...”

“And you’ve been an exceedingly tolerant hostess,” praised Barrymore, patting her hand. “It *is* late, and we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

“I didn’t...”

“You will excuse a pair of fractious souls as we venture into the frosty moonlight.” A deep bow preceded his departure.

Mustang hesitated a moment, then rushed after him.

“Who’s not in his right mind, Jack?” she demanded, preventing him from fleeing the veranda.

“I will see this world to which you brought me. With or without your sanction.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere, Scotland. There’s not much to see. If you were in New York, or Los Angeles, I’d say, ‘Go for it.’ Here, the best you’ll do is get lost.”

“You mentioned a pub in the town?”

“Cullen’s. And the Dores Inn has a bar.”

“Have you money to stand me a drink?”

“Do I look destitute?”

“Frankly, you did earlier. Had you not reacted so vehemently, I would’ve taken Kean’s appraisal of you being the maid as charitable. You looked - and smelled - like a stable hand.”

“Because that’s where I spent most of my time.”

“You own race horses?”

“Six, but I don’t race them.”

“Takes a pretty penny to keep so many.”

“Like I said, I’m not destitute.”

Barrymore’s lips quivered. “Is your domicile as... spacious as this?”

“Much larger.”

“You live there alone?”

“By choice.”

“How well stocked is your liquor cabinet?”

“I don’t have one.” Mustang hid her smile when Barrymore’s face caved.

“But I have a full two-liter bottle of Jameson Special Reserve.”

Flashing his trademark profile, he boomed, “That’ll do. Let’s go.”

## IV

Ollie had left the keys in the Audi’s ignition. Mustang assumed he’d grown bored waiting to drive her home.

He’d assumed she could drive.

She’d never obtained her learner’s permit, much less her license.

Horses were her primary mode of transportation.

John Barrymore, adjusting his white tie, held the driver’s side door open for her. “Well?” he prompted.

“I... don’t...”

“So much for women having equal rights!” He slid onto the leather upholstery and studied the computerized dashboard. “My God! Detroit’s created its own breed of monster!”

“The controls are supposed to keep us safe,” explained Mustang, plopping onto the seat opposite.

The journey to Boleskine House practically triggered a heart attack in the 26-year-old. Barrymore hunted for a clutch with his left foot, the concept of an automatic transmission foreign to him.

As was power steering. Each time he jerked the wheel on a curve, he barely missed the berm and, worse, trees lining the roadway.

“Slow down, can’t you?” she shrieked. “You’ll drive us into the loch!”

He quipped, “Nice night for a swim.”

“Shut up.”

Two successive shots of whiskey failed to unkink her taut muscles once the car braked on the gravel drive.

“Not as big as my castle,” droned Barrymore, on his third glass in the cozy living room. “But serviceable.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

He placed the empty tumbler on the coffee table, moving behind Mustang’s cane-backed rocking chair to massage her neck. “Why so tense?”

“If I’d known the only driving you did was on a movie back lot, I would’ve hoofed it!”

“It’s been seventy years.”

Her shoulders sagged as strong fingers kneaded away the knots. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I thought your nervousness was linked to my enticing proximity.”

She swatted at his arms. “Sit down, Jack.”

Easing onto the green sofa, he might’ve been reprising his role as Svengali, so intense his gaze.

“I’m not in the habit of... discussing my private affairs - and I use that word deliberately. Nor am I being falsely conceited when I confess the men I’ve met since... I acquired this power have wanted me - in a physical sense - for the same reason you do. Back in Montana, I loved one, and he was killed by moronic FBI agents. Since being exiled in Scotland, I’ve... deflected most advances. After lowering my guard with a prominent politician, I nearly married a performer. Both are dead.”

“Ah, a black widow!”

Her chin quavered. "I've pondered that dynamic myself."

"I didn't mean it!" Barrymore, mien contrite, sank to his knees. "You're so beautiful, so tantalizing, so... lit from within like a lantern..."

"There are days I wish I was one of the old hags from Mac..."

He clamped his hand over her mouth. "Don't say it!"

The old superstition about mentioning the name of Shakespeare's "Scottish Play" lightened the mood. Mustang attested, "Nothing can hurt you, Jack. You're already dead."

"I don't feel dead. I feel... very much alive in your presence."

"Like you did in Lisa's, hoping she'd crack open another quart of vodka under the influence of your tender caresses and amorous flattery?"

He settled on his heels. "Oh, merciless harridan! Think you I have ulterior motives now?"

"Then, state your motive."

"Redemption."

The rocker almost flipped when she pushed back in despair. "Oh, hell!" The actor yanked the curved woodwork forward, launching Mustang into his unwitting embrace. He took full advantage of the accidental contact, however.

She broke his hold, rolling onto the floor, then to her feet and sprinting outdoors. The tell-tale tremor petrified her, and she needed the house intact.

Barrymore gave chase, cornering her near the barn. "What's wrong? Why have you sealed your heart in cement?"

Even the demonstration at Lisa Owens' hadn't impressed upon him the danger - not to himself, but to inanimate objects - of being with her. Glumly, she extended her right hand. "Take it."

He did and, as she anticipated, raised it to his lips. An immediate increase in wind velocity ruffled his light brown hair, flopping long strands over his forehead. Rocks vibrating in the corral caused no alarm, only astonishment.

"Is this how they track you on that... radar?"

She nodded.

"Then, why not give them something to really track?" he enthused.

"Been there, done that. Loathsome publicity and streams of inappropriate questions from reporters and government officials."

"You cannot hide your light forever, Mustang. You cannot bury yourself in a premature grave, existing rather than living."

"Do you call your... escapades back in the 20s and 30s living?"

"I have no regrets."

"Why, then, seek redemption?"

“Because my marriages... perhaps, one regret,” Barrymore conceded.  
“I thought there were four.”  
“The same mistake, quadrupled.”  
“You believed the love of a good woman would save you from yourself?”  
“On the contrary. I wanted a wife fond of evenings beside the hearth or, sporadically, who would carouse with me, abandoning convention. In the end, they sought social approbation and propriety... elsewhere.”  
“I seek domesticity without the carousing; to indulge myself would wreak havoc on the planet.”  
“Is this polluted, overpopulated planet worth saving?”  
She rested her head on a corral fencepost. “I’ll not bury six billion in premature graves, so I can release my inhibitions.”  
“What will you become, if you don’t? A gnarled, sour spinster, angry at humanity for imprisoning your true self behind invisible bars.”  
His steamy breath assailed her ear.  
She pleaded, “Jack, don’t tempt me... I’m half drunk, and weak...”  
“There’s a line from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* about ridding oneself of temptation by yielding to it.” He gently spun her toward him. “Mustang, as someone who’s experienced both life and death, I can authoritatively affirm you must squeeze every ounce of joy, sorrow, pleasure and anguish from your days, otherwise you’re one of the living dead.”  
“I’m... happy here. I’m happiest... when I’m alone.”  
“If that’s so, why are you crying?”  
“You’re a devil, John Barrymore,” she sniffed.  
Sarcasm tinged his reply. “I never played Mephistopheles on stage, but it wouldn’t be beyond my range. Sell me your soul, Mustang, for a year and a day.”  
“A week, and not here.”  
“Where?”  
“You choose.”  
“When?”  
“Noon tomorrow.”  
“Procrastination?” chuckled Barrymore, arms encircling her waist.  
“I have to ask my neighbor to tend the horses.”  
“Write him a note, and we’ll tack it to his door on our way south.”  
“South to...” She dreaded he’d say London. She hated London.  
“Marrakesh.”  
Unusual.

He read her quizzical frown. “There used to be a hotel there... totally private, and the sunrises are brilliant to behold. We can make our way from there north through Spain and Portugal.”

“No museums.”

He profusely concurred.

They strolled, arms linked, to the house.

Mustang suggested one amendment: “When it’s over, you go willingly.”

“Seven days with me, you may want me to stay forever.”

“Are you that good?”

“None of my women ever complained about... that aspect of our relationship. Once we got out of bed, though, things went to hell.”

She chortled, and he grimaced playfully.

“It’s not that,” the Mistress of Boleskine elaborated. “After Jim was shot, I could’ve summoned him, as I did you. It never occurred to me we could’ve lived a comparatively normal life, except for being married...”

“Can’t marry a dead man, eh?”

“If his... non-existence had been discovered, my permanent residence would’ve been a padded cell.”

“I discern in your voice a wistful desire for such an end. ‘Twould be gruesome. My father’s demise confined to an Amityville sanitarium...”

“I... It would be safer for all concerned.”

“Damn safety. Forget safety. Forget everything but gratifying impulses great and small. Whether you fancy a bar of chocolate or a sapphire necklace, to flamenco dance on a table in a Madrid café or shout obscenities from the Alps...”

Glenn MacDonough may have wondered how Mustang gained entry to his kitchen - past double deadbolts - hanging the folded sheet on his refrigerator. She would’ve taped it to the construction company pickup in the garage, but it being Saturday, she knew he wouldn’t be driving to the office.

Barrymore waited in the Audi, which would be returned to Lisa’s before commencing their exodus. “You could have a fantastic career as a professional burglar,” he hinted when Mustang rejoined him.

“Shut up.”

From the outset, Mustang enjoyed this trip more than any other. By relaxing, focusing on the scenery, the ordinary - not on her suspicions of those they encountered, or the potential for mistakes - she was able to savor the tastes, the smells, the sounds. No microbursts of wind, spontaneous rain showers, random earthquakes plagued the couple’s travels.

Not even through the night, sharing a bed in various hotels.

Contemplating the arched stucco ceiling in the wee hours Thursday, Mustang pieced together the puzzle of her life. She and Barrymore had ridden exquisite stallions across Andalusia the previous day, the freedom tangible. Horses had always symbolized freedom to the young woman, especially watching them gallop in Montana's open spaces. They had no worries, so long as they had food and water and a bit of shelter.

She'd always wanted to emulate them.

Horses understood affection - from humans, and for each other. Mustang sensed she never had, honestly. Jim Neville, Montana State Police detective, had been assigned to protect her; he'd done his duty, protecting her from herself in many ways. Scottish First Minister Sloan MacTavish had been bemused by her supposed beauty, simultaneously coveting her alleged political influence. Jerry Richards had campaigned to end her isolation, to create an extrovert.

They'd wanted to change her.

That wasn't love.

Other than picking the journey's starting point - Marrakesh, a teeming metropolis which delighted the senses with its open-air market and Djemaa el Fna square swarming with dancers, acrobats, musicians and food vendors at night - Barrymore let her dictate their activities.

Sampling native fare, admiring hand-woven rugs and extravagant jewelry too tame, they wandered the Atlas Mountains' foothills, scaling an imposing, sheer cliff as a test of courage. Barrymore, in this guise, climbed adeptly, even hoisting Mustang onto a perilous ledge when she lost her footing and plunged toward a cavernous abyss.

Wedged against the rock face for a quarter hour until her cheeks regained a semblance of color, her companion regaled her with his escapades on silent movie sets, where distressed damsels awaited rescue in formidable towers, or his ardent attention on ivy-trimmed balconies.

"Doing my own stunts kept me in shape."

An understatement, to be sure, Mustang panted. Not the physique of a Mr. Universe beneath the red t-shirt, but well-proportioned and captivating.

"I've never seen such a combination of stark terror and frenzied yearning in any woman's eyes," he murmured. "And never quite that shade of hazel."

How right were Mark Twain and St. Francis about men having one-track minds, regardless of the circumstances! A caustic retort stuck in her throat, however, when her clammy hands relinquished their anchorage on protruding boulders.

“Come, my dear. Our ascent to the heavens shall... be more figurative than actual.”

Heaven a figurative term, the duo glimpsed it in many venues and each other. Not a minute passed without them cherishing some unique novelty.

Crossing to Spain on a ferry wasn't pleasant, given Mustang's tendency toward seasickness. Barrymore stood by, distracting her from the ship's motion and the churning of her stomach.

She'd not laughed so much in ages.

Recalling his vivid descriptions of Hollywood personalities, she realized she'd been taking herself far too seriously. Yes, her off-the-cuff utterances, sparking chaos, were more troublesome than other people's average blunders. Yes, their frequency - despite sequestering herself at Boleskine - kept certain parties, like Ben Espinoza, monitoring her.

Nonetheless, the debacle involving scores of international spies proved she could not be harmed nor taken into custody against her will.

Why aggravate her blood pressure over the possibility?

In repressing her connection to nature, had she caused the equivalent of a volcano, pressure built up until it exploded, as happened whenever she'd dared let a man close to her?

Nothing untoward had transpired over a 96 hour period. Her relief could not be measured by mere words, but she'd noticed her constant smile reflected in shop windows as they strolled between vendor booths and admired public gardens.

Barrymore's broad grin, and his reduction in alcohol consumption, indicated his own contentment in Mustang's company.

Barrymore.

Why did it take the dead to teach the living how to relish the opportunities which presented each second? Johnny Rosemont had coached her in meditative self-control techniques during their tour of the Continent, but that may not have been a viable solution.

Maybe a spark of wisdom smoldered in Lisa Owen's "thing for dead actors".

"You awake?" whispered the Great Profile, shifting his weight on the mattress.

"Can't sleep."

"Upset?"

"No. At peace. Finally."

"Good, because the concept of a 'peaceful afterlife' is bunk."

“Sam Clemens mentioned time stands still, like a sort of suspended animation.”

“An apt description. Death is boring, plain and simple.”

“I hope I live forever,” Mustang sighed.

“You could. Your grandfather survived until he could transfer his power to a worthy successor; you may be required to do likewise.”

“Wouldn’t be so bad, if I stop aging like he did. I don’t know about passing on the power. Putting another human being through this hell... would be too cruel.”

“You can’t deny the perks.”

“Perks?” she scoffed. “Sure. Hours after I’d plunged a knife in my grandfather’s chest, I destroyed the Inverness jail, and escaped from a psych ward. Fire responded to my command, and a baggy pair of pants shrunk to fit me. Trying to moderate every thought, every wisecrack since that day has been torture.”

“That demon has been exorcised. We shall collaborate to remold the world and its inhabitants...”

Mustang propped herself on an elbow, auburn locks tumbling across Barrymore’s face. “Collaborate?”

“We’re good for each other, Mustang. Don’t spoil the adventure by setting limits on it. The positive impact you crave...”

“Jack, I...”

Smothering additional protests, he embraced her. They lay entwined until dawn.

On to Lisbon, Mustang’s enthusiasm was dampened by the knowledge Barrymore planned to renege on their agreement.

Sure, she could finance their jaunts from country to country, buying his silk shirts and tailored slacks, lodging in expensive hotels, indefinitely. Detours to the odd casino would net ample currency.

By Saturday, she would be ready to go home.

People, by and large, were globally cut from similar cloth. They might speak different languages, boast distinctive pigmentation and spiritual beliefs; she didn’t need to meet the lot. She’d met plenty.

She informed Barrymore Friday over dinner in a posh, seaside restaurant. A string quartet accompanied the delicious meal. He’d periodically stroked her fingers, fondled them; he now clutched them frantically. “You can’t send me back to that void. You can’t reseal this portal which has been opened...”

“Jack, so far we’ve been lucky. No one has recognized you. I guarantee, if you stay, someone will. What would you do about the crush of publicity?”

“Authenticate the theory of reincarnation?” he snickered.

She scowled, and he adopted a clownish expression.

“Come, dance with me.”

“I... don’t.”

“It’s a waltz. Everyone knows how to waltz.” He lifted her off the gold-upholstered chair.

Twirling around the polished floor, neither spoke until the melody’s last strains faded. From Barrymore’s demeanor, Mustang thought he might drop to one knee and whip out a diamond engagement ring.

That scene was preempted by his entreaty, “Will you always remember me?”

“Yes.”

“Then the void shall be filled with an abiding warmth.”

“For both of us.”

En route to their hotel, John Barrymore vanished, the sensation of his last kiss lingering on the young woman’s scarred palms.

A lightning bolt deposited her near Loch Ness Saturday morning. So much had been packed into the week, Mustang would spend months sorting through the colorful images.

The image which greeted her drove them from her mind. The barn - where her six horses were stabled - stood in charred ruins.

Forcing her legs to comply, she ran to Glenn MacDonough’s. Her Arabian, Molly and Sarge mingled with his stock...

“I dinnae get there in time t’ free them,” he lamented the other three.

“How’d the fire start?”

“We had a beastly storm late Thursday. Lightnin’ must ha’ struck your woodpile, and spread. I’m that sorry, Your Ladyship.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Glenn.”

By early Sunday, the barn was rebuilt - courtesy of nature - her horses comfortable in their stalls.

For her part, Mustang vowed never to leave Boleskine again.

The price of adhering to Barrymore’s philosophy was too high, and too agonizing - freshly burnt flesh on her palms irrefutable evidence.

She did have the memories, and a wire-bound sketchbook he’d tucked in her coat pocket prior to dematerializing. He’d obviously been drawing the entire trip, including her in a selection of poses.

The pages unsigned, no one could ever determine the source.

He'd inscribed a quote paraphrased from Shakespeare's *Henry V* on the last, "Once more into the void, dear friends, once more."