



# *Mustang Girl*

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## **If at First**

My heart pounding, I held onto one end of the rope, with the wild-eyed bay on the other end. Back and forth the rope played out smoothly from my left hand.

“Who taught you to hold a lead rope like that?” asked Charley.

Scared and also a bit irritated at having my concentration interrupted, I kept my eyes on the bay. “Rosa did. My hand never gets tangled in the rope and I don’t get dragged.”

Chuckling, Charley scratched his head. “Always said you guys were the best!”

“Need some help?” Rosa offered.

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I desperately wanted help, but I shook my head. I had to do this myself. Biting my lips, I took a deep breath and began soothing the mare in a shaky voice. I knew it didn't matter what I said, as long as I said it calmly. Her ears flicked back and forth like nervous bird wings, still wary but listening. I pulled gently on the lead rope. The bay took one hesitant step forward and I immediately loosened the pressure as her reward for obeying. By gently pulling and releasing, we began inching closer to the open trailer.

This was taking forever. I guess I was overly conscious of the three adults watching me. Sweat beaded on my forehead and my armpits itched. *Come on!*

We were almost to the door when I lost my patience again and yanked on the lead rope. Once again, the startled mustang flew backwards, snorting, head held high. Once again I played out the lead rope, fuming at having to start all over from square one. "It's just a trailer, you stupid horse," I muttered in a calm voice. "It's no big deal. Your buddies are eating up all the hay." I started the pull-and-release process all over again, fighting down my rising temper. *Come on! Come on! Just a little closer!*

This time we made it to the door. The bay's ears strained forward, focused on the trailer. I held my

breath as she lowered her head, sniffing and exploring the odors of metal, rubber, and the other horses already aboard. Leaning her head into the cool darkness, the mustang inhaled the sweet scent of fresh hay.

“Watch her,” cautioned Phil in a low voice.

The bay tensed her muscles, but I was ready to move with her. Letting out a grunt, the mustang leaped up and onto the trailer, with me right beside her. Once she was occupied with the hay, I unsnapped the lead rope and ducked out the side door while Phil closed the back.

Well, we made it but my crumbling confidence had taken a bad shaking. I blew out a long breath, puffing out my cheeks, and handed the lead rope back to Charley. The older man’s mouth crinkled up at the corners. “Mighty fine work, little lady.”

Closing one eye and squinting against the sun, I gave him a sideways look. “Thought you said they were already gentled.”

Charley shrugged one thin shoulder. “Told you that one’d be hard to train. She went through the same gentling process those two pintos did. Can’t say she passed with flying colors, though.” He coiled the lead rope in one hand. “Well, you’ll have your aunt and uncle handy if you have any trouble with her.” As I

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turned to go, I heard Charley add, “And you sure will!”

Scowling, I climbed back into the truck cab, the sun microwaving the rug-covered seats. I would have slammed the door but it was too hot. I could hear the adults talking together, their voices getting louder as they walked toward the cab.

“That little filly’s a handful!” commented Phil.

“Which one? The bay or the spitfire?” laughed Charley. “That mustang’s going to give your niece an experience she’ll never forget. Better keep a close eye on both of them.”

“Oh, she’ll do fine,” said Rosa. “She loaded the mare all by herself, didn’t she? And no one was hurt.”

“Yeah, I reckon so,” said Charley, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck. “Still bothers me, though. A little girl working with a wild horse—I dunno.”

“Charley, quit worrying,” said Phil. “We’ll be right there with her in case she needs any help. We want this horse trained right, too. You know that. The owner has to be impressed.”

“Well,” Charley drawled, “if a little girl can train that bay to be a good saddle horse, I’d say the owner is bound to be impressed.” Then he chuckled. “And

when the spitfire gets her first boyfriend, I want to shake his hand!”

At that, my face burned hotter than the interior of the truck. What did he mean by *that* remark? That I was too much of a spitfire to ever have a boyfriend? What made him think I even *wanted* a boyfriend?

“She’ll do fine. You wait and see,” said Rosa as she climbed into the truck next to me. Phil got in on the other side and shook Charley’s hand through the window.

“So long, Charley,” he said. “We’ll be back next year.”

“So long, folks!” Charley touched his cowboy hat with two fingers in a parting salute. “Good luck, spitfire!”

Phil turned the key in the ignition, coaxing the truck to life. We started back down the dirt road that led to the highway, the trailer swaying and bumping behind us. Over the roar of the engine, we heard several sharp kicks punching the inside of the trailer. I was sure it was the bay and my heart sank into my boots. Had I lost my mind? Why had I insisted on taking this crazy mare? Why hadn’t I chosen a nice, calm little foal? Why did I have to be so stubborn? With sudden clarity, I recalled Charley’s parting



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words and realized I was going to need a whole lot more than just luck.

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Back home, I helped unload the horses. Glaring at the bay as if daring her to misbehave, I snapped on the lead rope, willing my hands not to shake. The little mustang seemed relieved the long ride was over. She dropped her nose to get a good look at the ground and then leaped out, with me in tow. The two pintos unloaded with no trouble and since they got along so well, they were put in a large covered corral together.

The trip had left the bay soaked in sweat, making her red coat look much darker. Had to admit, she sure was a beauty. Can I pick ‘em or what? I checked her over to see if she’d hurt her legs from kicking the trailer, but she looked fine. Then I spotted it. A patch of red that was *way* too dark and my sigh of relief turned into a cry of dismay. “Oh, no!”

Rosa inspected the raw, oozing wound on the bay’s nose. “Don’t think she liked the trailer ride much. She’s rubbed herself pretty bad.”

“What should I do?” I asked, trying not to sound too anxious.

“Lavender oil and aloe vera for rubs and burns. We have a plant in the house. I’ll mix up some salve for you.”

“Okay, thanks.” Good. That’s taken care of. *Now* what do I do with her? I shot a questioning look at Phil. “Should I put her in the barn or leave her with the other horses?”

“Better put her in the little corral by herself,” he said. “That way she can still see the other horses and they’ll calm each other down.”

Looping the end of the lead rope back and forth in my left hand, I led the bay toward the pipe corral while my uncle walked alongside. She balked and raised her head, staring wide-eyed at the covering.

“Just let her look it over, kiddo,” said Phil. “She probably thinks her new home comes equipped with a mountain lion ready to pounce on her.”

After a few tense seconds, the bay blew out a long breath, fluttering her nostrils. When she lowered her head, I knew it was safe to lead her into the corral.

“You’ll get used to the roof, girl, and you’ll *really* appreciate the shade,” I said, unbuckling the halter and slipping it off. “Look! You can still see your friends, so you won’t feel alone.” I expected the bay to whirl away as soon as she sensed her freedom, but

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instead she leaned her shaggy head down and bumped me on the chest.

“She likes you,” laughed Rosa.

Smiling a crooked grin, I felt a tiny green sprout of happiness poke its way through the sagebrush in my spirit. Putting my hand out to stroke the mustang’s head, I frowned when she raised it out of my reach. “Come on, girl. How am I going to put salve on you if you won’t let me touch your face?”

“You’ll have to get her head down first,” said Phil.

“Well, duh!” I rolled my eyes at him. “*I know that much.*”

“Want some help?”

“Naw, I can do it myself.” Inwardly I prayed, *Please let her read my thoughts! Help me! I have no idea what to do!*

“Well, if you need a hand, I’ll be right over here working on supper for the mares,” he offered, ducking through the corral rails. Without turning around, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Outside the corral, young lady.” I was only too happy to obey.

Rosa waited until I was safely out of the corral, then she dusted her hands on the seat of her jeans. “And I’ll be inside working on supper for us. I’ll keep an eye on you from the house.” Both of them went

about their chores, leaving me to work out my own problems.

“What am I supposed to do with you?” I scowled at the bay through the rails. “Guess I’d be surprised if you actually told me.” She stood quietly, her ears forward, listening. “Rosa says you like me. Well, if you like me, why won’t you let me touch your face?”

On impulse, I lifted my hand, but the bay again raised her head just out of reach. I tried humming, like I’d heard Rosa do to get horses to relax. The bay seemed to enjoy the attention, but as soon as she lowered her head and I reached for her, she flipped her head up again. I could feel hot frustration rising with each failure. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my uncle approaching with a grain scoop and a flake of soft green hay.

“Why don’t you quit for a while and water the horses?” he suggested, tossing the hay onto a rubber mat and depositing a small amount of oats into a feedtub attached to a rail of the pipe corral. “I’m going inside to wash up. Fill the buckets from *outside* the corrals, remember.”

“I know,” I grumbled. As if I’d ever forget! Safety around horses had been drummed into my skull from the first day I’d arrived! Horses are big and fast. And heavy. Their eyes are on the sides of their heads

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so they can't see where their feet are and might step on you. Don't walk behind a horse without talking or sliding your hand across his rump to let him know where you are. Never run up behind a horse or make sudden movements. Don't act stupid around a horse. I know! I know what I'm doing. Sort of.

Collecting three buckets from the barn, I placed them in the corrals. From the outside. The bay kept her nose buried in the feedtub, ignoring me, but I got her attention when I lugged over a gallon container of apple cider vinegar. I poured a generous glug in each bucket before filling it with cool water from the hose.

The bay watched with interest, sniffing the bucket with flared nostrils. "Never smelled vinegar before, huh?" I grinned. "It's good for you. In a few days you won't taste so good to the mosquitoes and they'll leave you alone." The bay explored the bucket, sniffing and lipping the water but not drinking. I giggled as the little horse raised her head, lifting her upper lip to expose her teeth.

When the bay put her head down to play in the water, I took a deep breath, ready to try again. "All right, you little stinker. Hold still." Slowly I reached out to touch the mare's face, but once again the wary mustang pulled away. Scowling, I let out an

exasperated breath through clenched teeth. “I’ve *had* it with you!”

Think! What would Uncle Phil do? What would Rosa do? Aha! I knew exactly what they’d do. Or at least I thought I did.

“I’ll put your halter back on and then you’ll *have* to let me touch your face!” Grabbing up the halter, I climbed through the corral rails, blind to every rule of safety I’d ever been taught, bent only on teaching that stupid mare a lesson.

My guardian angel must have been on duty. Either that or the bay regarded me as a mere curiosity rather than a threat. Whatever the reason, it was no use. No matter how many times I tried, she stood stock still with her nose high in the air, just out of my reach. After several failed attempts, I was no closer to getting the halter on. I threw the halter down in disgust, startling the mare, who backed away from me in alarm. “What’s *wrong* with you?” I shouted. “You’re supposed to be halter trained already! You dumb, stupid, *idiot* horse!”

*I give up!* I’ll never be a horse trainer! I’ll have to spend the rest of my life shackled to a computer, making colorful graphs with Jean and working on my people skills. These thoughts, and a few admittedly bad words, assaulted my mind as I stormed into the

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house. My aunt and uncle were already seated at the table. I wasn't hungry so I flopped down in my chair, still fuming, my eyes boring a hole through my dinner plate. If anyone even *suggested* that I wash my hands first, my mind was going to explode, erupting into a million sharp little bits of glass.

"Did you give the horses fresh water?" asked Rosa.

"Yes, I did," I muttered through my teeth.

"With vinegar?"

"*Yes!* I *know* how to take care of horses!"

Rosa threw her hands up. "Hey, sorry! Don't bite my head off!"

Phil gave me a stern look. "You shouldn't yell at your aunt. Apologize to her."

Eyes blazing, I glared at Phil, then at Rosa. "Sorry," I mumbled into my plate, not feeling at all sorry but a little bit calmer. I toyed with my fork, sulking. My mind wasn't ready to explode anymore and I was ready to wash my hands—of one stubborn mustang.

Rosa slid the salad bowl over to me. "I don't think you're mad at me. You came in mad." Rosa settled her chin in her hand, locking eyes with me. "You're mad at the bay."

I squirmed. I *hate* it when people know what's in my head before I'm ready to tell them! And I hate it when people *don't* know what's in my head when I *am* ready to tell them! How did this get so complicated? I tossed my fork onto the table and growled, "I can't get her halter on! Stupid horse won't put her head down for me!"

Phil helped himself to the salad. "That horse probably never put her head down willingly for anyone." He pointed the salad tongs at me, adding, "And I don't want you working with her unless one of us is right there to help you. At least for now. Understand?"

"Okay, but it shouldn't be this hard," I whined. "Charley said she was halter broke by the prison inmates."

"Yes, honey, but they're all grown men and much taller than you," said Phil.

I hate it when my uncle calls me honey, like I need to be placated. I'm not a little kid anymore! Feeling very much like a little kid, I chewed my bottom lip, mulling over what to do. I didn't want to ask for help already, but I didn't seem to be making much headway on my own.

"Tell you what," Rosa offered. "We'll doctor the bay's nose for you tonight and check her ears for



mites and lice. That may be the reason she's hard to halter."

"Thanks," I mumbled, feeling as useless as a dull knife.

"But if you really want to train this mare," she continued, "you'll have to figure out a way to get her halter on by yourself."

I could only nod miserably. So much for my dream of training a mustang by myself. This was starting off all wrong. Why doesn't life have a rewind button so you can redo the parts you don't like? I tried to eat my macaroni and cheese, but every bite seemed to stick in my throat. "I'm done," I said, pushing my plate away. "Will you show me how to mix up the salve?"

Rosa glanced at Phil. "We can do the dishes later. Just put everything in the sink."

"But you haven't finished eating," he protested.

She patted her ample stomach. "I think I can afford to miss a meal once in a while," she laughed, showing deep dimples.

I followed her to the herb cabinet and watched in sullen silence while Rosa cut a spiky leaf from the aloe vera plant. Slitting it carefully, she scraped out the clear yellow gel into a small jar. Tossing the spent leaf in the compost pail, Rosa then looked through one

of the many drawers in the cabinet, selecting a tiny bottle of lavender essential oil. Twisting open the lid, she deposited four drops on the aloe gel. Handing me the jar and a clean wooden craft stick, she said, “Here, *carita*. Stir this and take it out to the bay. I’ll get some carrots.”

Inhaling the lavender scent soothed and calmed me as I followed my aunt and uncle out to the corral. Rosa picked the halter up from the dirt where I had thrown it and shook off the dust without a word. Ashamed, I kept my eyes on the salve, pretending to be very busy stirring. Once again my famous temper had left telltale footprints.

While Phil fed the mustang carrots, Rosa was able to slip the halter on her head. The bay sniffed the aromatic salve with interest but refused to hold still to have it applied to her sore nose. Ha! So she won’t hold still for them either! Now I didn’t feel so bad.

Giving up, Phil announced, “We’ll have to use the lip chain, Corky.”

The lip chain technique was always the last resort. I ran to the barn and fetched a lead rope with a chain on one end. Rosa threaded the chain down the left ring of the halter and underneath the bay’s chin, snapping the end onto the other ring. Murmuring in Spanish, she placed the chain over the mare’s upper lip and

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took up the slack. The bay mouthed the chain on her tender gum, head twisted high in protest. Humming a Mexican lullaby, Rosa began pulling down and releasing the chain using a slight wrist motion, like a soft pulse, stimulating acupuncture points that naturally released tension.

I stroked the mustang's neck as we waited for the lip chain to take effect. I've seen other people use a lip chain, but they used it all wrong. They would jerk and yank on the chain until the poor horse was afraid to move for fear of more punishment. Rosa's way made the flightiest horses calm down, but it sure took a lot longer.

My own inner conflict ebbed to the rhythm of Rosa's gentle pulsing and her mesmerizing melody. Didn't she ever get tired of waiting for horses to be still? I had never seen Rosa lose her temper. Maybe she'd just been born with a truckload of patience. I wished I could wave a magic wand and have the same ability with horses. How could I ever hope to be as good a trainer as Rosa? Maybe I was just kidding myself.

After a few minutes, the mustang's eyes softened, blinked, and then her entire body relaxed. As her head lowered, it was easy for Phil to smear salve onto her

nose. The little mustang seemed to appreciate the soothing gel and stood quietly.

“She doesn’t have ear mites or lice,” he said, inspecting the bay’s ears. “Just wants to be left alone.”

“But she *has* to get used to wearing a halter,” I insisted. “Her owner won’t want her if he can’t even catch her.”

“This is just the first day, *carita*,” said Rosa. “Give her some time. She’s doesn’t know us, she doesn’t know where she is, and she’s hurt.” Rosa removed the lip chain and the halter in one smooth motion before the mustang had time to react.

I could hear my mind-train chugging in the background. *Just-a-kid, you’re-just-a-kid, you’re-just-a-kid*. How am I ever going to get this mustang haltered by myself? Even Phil and Rosa couldn’t do it without each other’s help. More than anything, I wanted to prove to them, to my dad, to everyone at school, that I could be a success as a horse trainer. Most of all, I think I wanted to prove it to myself.

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Later that night, after the dishes were done, I wandered back out to the bay’s corral. Recalling my uncle’s words of warning, I didn’t enter the corral this

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time. The little mustang pricked her ears toward me and then turned back to playing in the water bucket.

“Hey, be careful! You’ll wash off all your salve, silly girl.” I knelt at the mustang’s head and reached in to touch her face. Once again the bay pulled away. Blowing out an impatient breath, I scolded her. “You think this is a game, don’t you? Well, it’s not! You *have* to let me touch your face and you *have* to let me halter you, whether you like it or not!”

Just then an owl swooshed by on deathly silent wings. Alert, the mare raised her head, inhaling the night air, ears pricked and sharp. Muscles tensed, she stood on guard, searching the wind for any scent of danger. The mustang craned her neck, sorting out faraway sounds I couldn’t hear, her eyes lustrous in the moonlight.

The transformation was unnerving. In an instant, I saw the mustang for what she truly was—a creature with keen instincts accustomed to running wild and free over deserts that had never known fences.

“You miss your freedom, don’t you, girl?” I whispered. “I wish I could give it back to you, but I can’t.” Against my will, my throat tightened and my eyes burned. “You belong to someone now and you won’t ever have to be hungry or thirsty again.” It

didn't seem like enough to me. Somehow the offer of a life of safety wasn't quite an equal trade.

Still kneeling, looking up at the mustang's tangled mane as it floated on the night breeze, I was overcome with a sense of sadness. Soon the burrs and knots would be removed from her black mane and the mustang would little by little be changed into the image of just another tame horse. Soon—too soon—the restrictive world of saddles and bridles and human rules would take over the independence the mustang once knew. The little horse's liberty would slip away, her heritage disappearing along with her unkempt appearance.

As I pulled myself up to stand beside the bay, I was suddenly aware that my cheeks were wet. I leaned in toward the mustang, breathing in the scent of warmth and sweat mingled with the lavender salve. Blinking hard, I drew a deep breath and made a solemn vow. "I'll give you as much freedom as I can in your training," I whispered, "and you won't have to wear a halter all the time. I promise."

It still didn't seem quite enough.

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