



## SECOND CHANCE AND MUSTANGS

A Romance Short Story

by Kathie Baset

They were young in college when they met during a backpacking adventure with the club they both belonged to. Annette was still in a relationship with William her high school sweetheart who went off to a different college. Bob was a lot of fun as they walked the trails and knew everything about adventure camping and survival. He was not quite six feet with dark brown hair and a leftover summer tan from being a lifeguard at a swim club.

One night sitting on a large tree trunk in front of the fire after everyone had gone to their tents, Bob shared with Annette, a petite woman with natural blond hair, his career plans to be an advertising executive at a large company in a metropolitan city. He planned to send his resume for a summer internship at the company he hoped to later work for. Annette was from a small town and thought all his plans sounded exciting. She shared that her plans were to be an interior designer and return to her hometown.

Bob poked at the fire with a stick and glanced over at her while she described her love of wild flowers that came up every year in her backyard. "I especially love the tall lavender and their aroma. When there was a pause he leaned in to kiss her. Annette returned the kiss and a relationship blossomed.

When she went home for the Thanksgiving holiday and spent an evening with William, who was shorter than Bob, and had ginger hair color and fair skin to match his ethnic culture of Irish. He, too, had come home for the holiday. Annette shared with tears as they sat in his car, that she had met someone at college and was in love with him. His head lowered with eyes filled as he took in the news. She thought he had accepted it with kindness and humility. In fact, he sweetly told her he would always love her and if at any time she wants to be with him again he would ask no questions and welcome her back into his life.

Annette decided not to tell Bob about that Thanksgiving weekend. Her relationship with him was still quite new. Instead, she even held off with having the relationship become intimate even though he tried several times.

Bob did get that internship for the summer, leaving Annette to go home relax and work as a restaurant server to earn money for college books and supplies. Her parents were paying the tuition.

William didn't come home that summer He wrote her a letter sharing that he had taken some time to reflect and decided to leave college. The letter sounded sad and yet the scenery he described was beautiful. With his parents' approval he had taken his college fund and purchased a dude ranch with Mustang horses out West from a couple who decided to retire. They had raised, trained and sold Mustang horses for fifty years and were ready to enjoy time with their grandchildren who lived in another part of the country.

Part of his letter was about becoming a writer for an international publishing company. He had sent them one of his stories about the Mustangs and the ranch. They loved the story and asked him to write more just like it. He was given an advance for his next story about the Mustangs. The picture that William sent with his letter showed a panoramic view of his property with wide open grazing and Mustangs in the pastures surrounded by white horse fencing. The house was large with a wraparound porch and two white wooded rocking chairs with hanging plants from the pillar posts. Around the fencing was wild lavender flowers and tall grass. His letter asked her to marry him and come and live on the ranch. "You've always loved horses and I know you will

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love the Mustangs. I plan to turn it into a dude ranch where people can come and ride some of the horses that are trained. I've never stopped loving you, Annette." She thought, *There was no doubt that the place was amazing.*

She wrote back, "My parents want me to finish college and to wait and make any lifelong plans after graduation. Your ranch is beautiful but right now it is not a decision I am able to make for me. I too, still love you. Best of luck, Love Annette."

From that point on they would exchange letters occasionally though they became fewer and far between as the years went on. It was a cold February evening during her second year of college after a snowy walk back to her dorm room that emotions with Bob heated up. Her roommate was away on an athletic weekend with her team. They no longer needed to fear someone walking in suddenly.

Bob knew it was to be the first time for Annette. He wanted it to be special so he took his time. Seeing her respond by arching her back to raise her breasts sent sizzling emotions throughout his body. Her breasts were beautiful. His hand entered down her jeans giving her added stimulation. Annette moaned with pleasure.

With them both naked he encouraged her to roll up on top of him. He massaged her breasts as she became more and more excited. She loudly called his name, "Bob, Bob." Moans from both of them were constant as he flipped her on her back to thrust more firmly in her and bring them both to a climax. They both expelled sighs of release and ecstasy pleasure. They held each other for a long time without saying a word.

When she finally made a move he said, "Sweetheart you were amazing. I love you." Annette replied, "Everything I ever dreamed of what my first time would be like came true tonight. You made love to me. It wasn't just sex like it was for some of my friends. I love you too." They fell asleep in each other's arms until they were awakened by the regular sounds of students in the halls going to their activities. Bob turned to Annette and said, "I suppose we need to welcome the new day. I will remember our evening with the utmost loving and exotic pleasure." Annette responded simply, "Me too."

Graduation came with Bob securing a full-time position at a medium size book publishing company in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was assigned to head a new department for the expansion of the company into nonfiction authors. This was an area where Bob could excel and he did, capturing many established authors as well as first time authors writing their autobiographies. Some were celebrities that helped him become well-known within the industry. Annette had relocated with him, sharing an apartment and opened her own entrepreneur interior design studio in the second bedroom. She focused on designing special events; weddings, engagements, significant decade celebrations, and baby showers. On their apartment terrace she established a beautiful wild flower garden. Ultimately, one of the weddings she designed was her own to Bob. They were happy and when he presented her with a beautiful engagement ring down on one knee she accepted with the understanding that he needed to speak to her father. To her surprise, he had already done that and received his approval though her father told him that it was Annette's decision. She is an independent woman and knows her own mind.

Communication with William had become nonexistent. Still, she sent him an invitation to the wedding. He replied with his regrets.

Life as a married couple brought many changes over the years. Bob and Annette purchased a beautiful house just outside of the city limits with a wrap-a-round porch and garden. Annette was pregnant with their first child, a boy they later named Benjamin. She continued her design business with a studio in their home which had a separate entrance for clients. Some of them

loved her wild flower garden and requested to have their wedding photos taken out there, which she proudly agreed to.

At the publishing company, Bob was given the opportunity to add romance fiction to his department as the employee who had that was relocating with his bride to her hometown. He accepted and was given a much-needed salary and benefits package with the baby. Their life blossomed like Annette's flowers as they added a second child, a girl name Melody.

With the two children Annette found she had to reduce her event design time down and instead turned to canvas landscape painting. Her first painting was the Mustang ranch of William's land that he had first sent her all the years before. She submitted her painting to a small gallery in Raleigh who immediately loved it and put it on display for sale at a price that astonished her. What happened next no one could have predicted. She received a letter from an attorney to remove the painting from the gallery for sale. Their client indicated that it was his land in the painting and was an infringement on his privacy. She had not requested permission to paint it nor to have it in the gallery for sale. The gallery had no choice but to comply. In fact, William secretly decided to purchase the painting, which he thought had showcased the ranch beautifully. Annette was upset and fired off a letter to William indicating that he should have telephoned her rather than putting her through an embarrassment with the gallery. She wrote, "How could you say you would love me forever and then treat me like a criminal?" William did not respond back. Several months later, Annette set up her easel in her summer garden and began to paint on canvas again. Her color scheme and flowers captured the immediate attention of a client for the gallery who once again accepted her work with the understanding it was her Property and she had the sole right to paint it. When she was informed that the painting was purchased she asked the gallery who the buyer was. The owner told her they did not provide the purchasers information to the artists.

Later she learned that each time she submitted a painting the same client was quick to purchase it at whatever price it was listed for. She was becoming annoyed that her paintings were not receiving the exposure she wanted which made it impossible to have an artist event. Sure, the money was great but it still limited her potential. As a result, she decided to change galleries with a legal agreement requiring that none of her paintings could be sold. They were for display only until she could have an artist's opening event. The gallery agreed to her contractual terms.

One day she was contacted by the owner of the publishing company where Bob worked. He wanted to discuss having hiring her as the design and event coordinator for their thirty-years in business anniversary celebration. The owner belonged to a country club where the event would take place. He estimated that the guest list would be around 500. Annette was delighted to be able to do some event design, planning, and execution again.

Right in the mist of all the planning for the business celebration Bob came home and asked Annette to please give him some quiet time to talk with her. The kids were still away at college and there was something important he needed to tell her. He asked her to sit down even though she was already sitting, which set in motion some concerned emotions in her. She said, "Are you sick? Did you lose your job?" "No none of those. Please listen as he sat down on the sofa next to the easy chair she was in. "There is no other way to say this so I'm just going to say it. I've fallen in love with another woman."

"What does that mean? You're having an affair after twenty-five years of marriage? How long has this been going on; a couple of months?"

"Actually, for a year now."

"A year! How could I not know this?"

“Who is she?”

“She’s the owner’s daughter who came to work at the company after college.”

“For heaven’s sake Bob, she is half your age! You’ll end it now.”

“No, Annette, I love her and she loves me. I want a divorce. I will always love you and treasure the marriage we have, but I want a new life with her.”

Calmly she said, “I don’t want a divorce. I would rather have a separation and work on saving our marriage. I certainly did not ever think you would ask me for a divorce. I thought we had a very good marriage and raised two wonderful children. Since you have made this decision I hope that as time moves forward in dissolving our marriage that we do not destroy our relationship. We are parents and will need to continue to make important decisions with our children. Telling them about the divorce will be the first one.”

“I’ve found an apartment closer to the office so I’m going to pack some things to take with me.”

“Fine. Is she going to move in with you?”

“She already has. We’ve had the apartment for a couple of months. I was not honest with you when I told you I had to go out of town or was working late. I’m sorry.”

Annette rose from the chair and walked into the kitchen. “I’m going to make some tea. Do you want some?”

“No. I’m going upstairs.”

When he came back downstairs with a duffle bag, he found her in the garden sipping her tea.

“I’ll be going now and will make sure you are taken care financially. I have retained an attorney which you will be hearing from and I recommend you get one too.”

Annette did not respond. She just continued to look out at her garden. When she heard his car leave she began to sob later calling her friend who came over right away.

Six months later after the divorce was final and the celebration for the publishing company was at hand, Annette had come through the divorce better than she had imagined she would. Her appearance was different having gone to a salon for a new hairdo and she was eating healthier. The dress she wore for the event was a black elegant evening length dress that fitted her body and swirled at the end. The plunging neckline was definitely something she had never dreamed of wearing before and yet she was pleased with her decision to do so.

Bob and his mistress during their marriage were in attendance and talking to her father when she arrived. The roaming waitstaff offered a glass of champagne which she accepted. Bob came right over to her and said, “Annette you look stunning! You never dressed sexy the whole time we were married!”

“Thank you Bob.” She smiled and walked with grace and sophistication away from him.

His mistress saw what took place and quickly came to his rescue putting her arm through his and guiding him to talk with one of their authors.

Annette circled the crowd and came over to the owner who proceeded to share how pleased he was with the event. “He didn’t say anything regarding Bob and his daughter, rather, asked, “Who is the artist whose work is on display throughout the ballroom?”

“They are mine,” she replied. “I am also an artist that focuses on landscapes and horses.”

“They are wonderful. I would be interested later to discuss purchasing one or two of my favorites.”

“Yes, of course. That would be fine.”

As Annette turned away from the owner to again chat with the guests she noticed William was in attendance talking with Bob. She thought, *How do they know each other?*

William saw her and left his conversation with Bob to come over and reacquaint himself with her. “Hi, long time apart. I love the landscape Mustang paintings you’ve done.”

“William, why are you here? Do you know the owner? How do you know my ex-husband Bob? I never introduced you and you didn’t attend our wedding.”

“So, you don’t know that I wrote a book about the Mustang dude ranch and apparently it is their number one seller. I’ve been writing for this publishing company even before Bob got a job with them. I didn’t know he was your husband or ex- as you now share until this very moment. Is he the one you left me for?”

“Yes. We had been married for twenty-five years and have two adult children. He came home one day and told me he wanted a divorce for the woman he is with now, the owner’s daughter.”

“When did all of this happen? You look amazing and hardly a woman suffering from a divorce.”

“Thank you. It has been a challenging journey. I think I’ve come out of it fine.”

“How about we get out of here and go and have drinks elsewhere to catch up.”

“Sounds lovely, however I have to stay until the end since I am the event manager. Call me sometime when you’re in the area again. For now, excuse me while I circle and check on the guests. I would love to read your book if you would send me a copy.”

“I’ll call you and will send you a signed copy.”

A few months later he left a voice message on her answering machine indicating he was in town for and would love to take her to dinner. He left his telephone number and the hotel he was staying at. Annette first decided not to return the call. A few minutes later she changed her mind and would be glad to have dinner with him. He asked her to wear the same dress she was wearing at the celebration event because they would be going to dinner and dancing at a fine restaurant. He said, “I will send a limo for you at 7:00 PM.”

When she exited the limo he was standing there dressed in a tuxedo smiling and reaching for her hand. Annette smiled back and thought, *How is this happening. He is a cowboy who owns a dude ranch! He instead looks like the most distinguished gentleman I’ve ever seen!*

They ate an eleven-course meal with a wine to complement each selection and champagne in-between. When they finished dinner he escorted her into the orchestra room for dancing. He had a special table set back in a corner so they could talk privately. The evening wore on with them having a delightful time dancing, talking, reminiscing and laughing that they hardly knew the time came for the restaurant and orchestra to end.

The orchestra announced, “We hope you’ve had a wonderful time listening and dancing tonight. This is our final song for the evening so take your loved one in your arms with this romantic tune, “I Love You, Truly, Truly Dear.”

William said, “Shall we my Dear?”

Annette accepted his hand to escort them onto the dance floor. He held her closer with more emotion for he did love her truly his whole life. There had never been another woman for him and he hoped after tonight they would get a “Second Chance.”

The limo traveled with both of them to Annette’s house. She noticed on the way that he was suddenly very quiet tapping a couple of fingers on his knee. Annette remembered he used to do that in high school when they were dating and was in deep thought. When they arrived at her house he exited the limo rather than letting the chauffeur open her door. William helped her to exit offering his hand. He walked her to the door slowly as if not wanting the evening to end, hoping she would ask him inside for a nightcap.

“William, I cannot remember when I have had an evening as elegant and fun as this was with you.” He leaned in to kiss her and she accepted though did not let it get passionate. She placed

two fingers on his lips afterwards and said, "I wish I were ready for a relationship because I would certainly want it to be with you. I've been divorced for less than a year and frankly I have never had the opportunity to find myself. After college I went right into an apartment with Bob, marriage and children followed. Now I want to know who Annette is."

"I understand. I ask only one thing of you here and now. When you know who you are and what you want please come to the Mustang ranch even if it's for a vacation."

"Yes, I will do that. I am interested in where you live and seeing the Mustangs would be a great experience for me to paint them in full view of reality."

"I'm satisfied then." They kissed lightly and said goodnight.

It was over a year before Annette called William to come to the Mustang ranch on vacation. He was thrilled that she was coming and wanted everything to be natural as it always is. He didn't go to great lengths to change anything. He wanted her to see him as he always is, a man who gave up college for the love of horses and became a millionaire writer/author along the way. He knew that he was going to have to tell her of his monetary wealth this time and he was concerned that she might not want to be a host to the wealthy people that come to the dude ranch like celebrities. He planned to tell her the first night over dinner.

A chauffeur greeted her at the airport and brought her directly to the ranch where William met the car. He opened the door greeting her with a big happy hug. "I'm so pleased you are here. There is so much to tell and show you. I'll bring you to your room and let you get settled and then give you a tour of the ranch and have you meet some of the trained Mustangs that our guests use for riding the trails."

"Sounds great."

While walking around the ranch William told Annette that there are 130 Mustang horses some of which are trained for riding while others live here as retirees from other locations that no longer want them. "So, we are sort of a Mustang sanctuary too. There's lots of wildlife and 3,000 acres of ranch property. Throughout most of the year except for times for me to take a break or to travel for a book signing, the ranch operates as a B&B. There are trail rides with our horses and during the winter guests can snow shoe, cross-country ski and just sit and watch the wild birds of prey soar up high and dive down each day when they spot something to eat. They went into one of the barns where the trained horses were stabled this time of day for dinner. They are outside all day but these are the ones that come inside at the end of the day.

These Mustang horses can be almost any color from the basic bay, brown and chestnut. They can be palomino and roan and appaloosa. This beauty is my favorite with her color being pearl and that is also her name. She is not available to the guests to ride. I like to ride her early in the morning just after sunrise. The air is clear and crisp. We ride over to the lake and have our breakfast. She likes to graze and I drink my coffee."

Annette was rubbing her hand along Pearl's neck talking to her. "Pearl, you sure are a beauty. I would love to paint you while I'm here." William watching her hand couldn't help but feel a sexual stir in wanting to stroke Annette and make love to her. With the tour over, they returned to the ranch house and sat in the rocking chairs on the open porch. Annette said, "I can see now why you made the decision you did all those years ago. The ranch, and the whole area is stunning with the majestic mountains in the background. I could sit here forever."

"Annette, that's music to my ears." He stood and held out a hand for her to join him. She rose going into his waiting arms. He kissed her lightly and asked, "Are you ready to give us a Second Chance?"

“I want to be. It’s been two years since my divorce. Melody is married and expecting their first child. Benjamin works too hard and currently lives at the house with me. He is a great help to me. I know he wants me to be happy and begin a new lifelong relationship. I’ve told him about you and how we were once high school sweethearts. He suggested that I come here and rekindle that long ago sweet love and give us a Second Chance.”

“Sounds like a wise young man. Now that you’re here how do you feel about a Second Chance?”

“I think we should spend time together and find out if we want to take that step. I’m sure there are things you would want to share with me as I appear to be an open book on my life. Other than this ranch and your success as a writer/author, I don’t know much about you. So, let’s start there and see where it leads us.”

“Fair enough. There is something important that I want to share with you because it will affect how we live our lives here on the ranch and when I travel for book signings and charity social events.”

“Go on.”

“I’ve never married and have no children if that’s what you are thinking.”

“The thought did cross my mind.”

“No, there has never been anyone for me since you. I believe we are soul mates and these Mustangs that tend to be spiritual in nature, especially Pearl, have brought you here.”

“What is it you feel you need to tell me?”

“Decisions I’ve made over the years with the ranch, the Mustangs, my writings, and investments have generated a millionaire result for my income. With that there are certain responsibilities as a philanthropist, commitments to social events plus being a host for the B&B guests. Of course, there will be some travel for the book signings, which you can come with me or stay at the ranch. What are your thoughts?”

“The last time we were together for the dinner/dance, I met a woman in the ladies’ room who asked me how I got to meet you. She said that you never come to these events with a woman and that she had been watching us and thought that we must have known each other a long time ago. She went on to say, ‘He’s quite wealthy and yet he is as sweet and kind as can be. Whomever he decides his life will be with, she will be one lucky woman.’”

“You’ve known for the past two years and you came here letting me think you didn’t know. Why?”

“It was important to me that you be honest and tell me. I had made the decision before coming here that if you told me then I would stay but if you didn’t before I was scheduled to leave then we would go our separate ways forever.”

He reached in his pocket and got down on one knee and said, “Annette you have been and always will be my forever love. Please accept this engagement ring as a token of that love, marry me and live on this Mustang ranch with me for the rest of our lives.”

William rose and removed the sapphire ring from the box and said, “What say you, my love?”

“Yes, yes, I will, marry you and live out our lives together here on the Mustang ranch.”

He slid the ring on her finger. They kissed and embraced with a long-lost passion now rekindled. Annette shared, “William when I married Bob, we didn’t go on a honeymoon. He had work and we had the children. I always regretted not having a honeymoon.”



William turned to her and said, “Where would you like to go on our Second Chance Honeymoon?”

“There is a place I read about in Upstate New York that has a lighthouse and a B&B on a rivers gorge. The light beams out onto the river every night because the channel is challenging to navigate. The area also has a Wild Birds of Prey Sanctuary and Rehabilitation Center where they care for the birds and if possible release them out into their natural habitat. The description in the article sounded lovely. Seeing the eagles here reminded me of it.”

“Then that’s where we will go. I, too, like the sound of it and I have never stayed in a B&B or climbed a lighthouse so that would be fun and romantic.”

The chef came out to let them know that dinner was ready. They walked inside hand-in-hand and ate the meal after which they relaxed by the fireplace snuggling up together like the high school sweethearts they once were. The Mustangs spirits had given them a Second Chance.