

The Mustang Chronicles:

Haunted Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Glenn MacDonough braked his white pickup at the edge of the clearing near Boleskine House. Slipping from the cab, his work boots crunched gravel as he approached the terry robe-clad, disheveled female staring at the Georgian mansion. A chill October breeze rustled her dark tresses, and she shivered.

“Ach, Lady Elizabeth!” the construction project manager hailed. “Be there a problem?”

Mustang Duryea, known in Scotland’s Loch Ness region as Lady Elizabeth Neville for her own protection, swiveled toward this neighbor.

Her neck was covered in bruises.

“What happened, Your Ladyship?” MacDonough gaped.

“I... don’t know. I was asleep, dreaming about... well, never mind that. Then, two rough hands were trying to strangle me. I woke up, and saw a man...”

Her balding, wispy-haired visitor rushed forward, inspecting the steel front door. “Are any windows broken? Did he force an entry?”

“No. All the doors and windows are still locked; I checked once I managed to regain my wits. It’s as if he disappeared into thin air...”

MacDonough visually examined the mottled purple impressions of fingers on Mustang’s flesh. “Nae mere ghost could do such damage. Do ye wish me t’ take ye t’ a doctor?”

“No... no.” The Mistress of Boleskine cleared her head with a firm shake. She blamed herself for possibly manifesting someone from her past - as she had St. Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi and Samuel Clemens. A chance word, an unguarded thought...

She slowed her breathing. “Thanks, Glenn.” Mounting the stoop, she added, “Were you stopping by for a reason?”

“Only t’ check whether ye required any additional repairs t’ the house.”

“Everything is perfect,” Mustang assured him. “Thanks for being so attentive.”

He bowed slightly in deference to her feigned nobility. “A pleasure, Lady Elizabeth.”

Performing a skilled U-turn on the circular drive, the pickup vanished between the trees. Mustang sank on the step, frustrated.

Since settling at Boleskine after traveling the globe while she waited for MacDonough to complete her requested renovations to the centuries-old structure where her grandfather, Jack Parsons, had once lived, she discovered the men she

had accidentally summoned from the ethereal plane could come to her at will, for an evening chess game or a quiet chat.

None of them - not even World War II German general Erwin Rommel, who also challenged her occasionally at the inlaid chess board - would lay violent hands on her.

Someone else inhabited the premises, but who?

The estate boasted a rather notorious history, once the residence of occultist Aleister Crowley. That drug-crazed mage had moved on to Sicily and other locales well before his death, leaving him no reason to haunt.

If it could be defined as a haunting, when tangible limbs applied such pressure on her windpipe not 30 minutes prior.

Poised over her bed, the grey dawn hadn't provided enough light for her to see the assailant's face. She retained the notion of one lean and fit... but who even knew she had fled Montana and, then, California after the FBI had killed Jim Neville?

Only Ben Espinoza, and he would be too ashamed at his own failures to acknowledge the pact he'd made with her.

Resigned, she pushed aside the heavy door and crossed the threshold. Along a corridor lit by strategically placed wall sconces, she veered into the kitchen, hungry. The grocer in Dores, some miles north, had delivered her regular order of staples, meat and treats that Monday; she set about cooking breakfast.

An ominous presence preempted the effort. The sensation of someone standing at her shoulder, prompted her to whirl from the stove, cast iron skillet aimed at head level.

She completed a 360 degree rotation, no target contacted.

"Forget this!" she swore, abandoning the dwelling in favor of the barn, where five horses awaited their day's allotment of oats.

"Calm yourself," came the soothing nasal tenor as she cleaned the stalls. "Those whose souls linger on earth usually died a violent death..."

"I know, Sam," she addressed the famous author in his signature white suit, white mop and bushy mustache. "A lot of people I've met since... this" - she held her scarred palms toward the lone bulb - "have experienced such a demise. It could be any of them."

"You do not wish to consider whether one or another..."

"They died in the States!" the teen protested. "What would bring them here?"

"The laws of the afterlife do not conform to the physical realm," Twain explained. "A chance touch, a memento you carry, could bring a bereft soul..."

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang dropped on a wooden bench near the tack room, pitchfork plunged into a bale of straw.

She had no choice.

First to die had been Jack Parsons, in that deceitful ritual where he'd blindfolded her and wrapped her fingers around a ceremonial dagger. The thrust into the altar at the propitious moment, as he'd directed, had been his death blow after he laid himself upon that modified picnic table beneath the blade.

As he expired, his command of the natural forces had been transferred to her, causing her to wreak havoc over the past two years.

“It can't be him,” she reasoned. “He wanted to die.”

Lyndon Bixby, a man with his own anger issues, died through her negligence when a motorcycle gang attacked and she failed to properly protect him with her power. Their connection had been very real, after she initially saved him from falling off a ladder...

She'd accidentally transported Rick Shimoto to his homeland via lightning bolt, when the samurai sword they'd both been holding provided a link. His death, though, had been caused by a blown tire on the trailer he'd been hauling from farm to farm, shoeing horses. She couldn't be held responsible...

“Couldn't you?” Twain prompted.

“Oh, come on, Sam! I'm not a god, with omniscient control over every chance occurrence!”

“But, if you hadn't... traveled to Japan, he wouldn't have been in that situation at that particular moment.”

“A tire can blow anywhere, anytime.”

Her companion shrugged.

She might justify those deaths, but Jonas Fairchild, alias Wilfrid Bailey, died in her very presence. The psychotic orthopedic surgeon had embarked on a reign of terror, killing innocents from California to Montana, including students at her alma mater, Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School. Captured once, he escaped to avenge himself on her by delivering her to the FBI. Recaptured, he escaped Atwater Prison and murdered his way back to Montana, executing Mustang's double, created through an inadvertent utterance.

Shot by a sheriff's deputy during the pursuit, she had allowed Fairchild access to a poison he had created...

“His blood, literally, was on your hands,” Twain reminded her.

And her coat, her jeans, her shoes.

Cal Simmons, the Canadian detective who so resembled actor Robert DeNiro, had stepped in front of a bullet intended for her. His blood had spattered her clothing, too.

Even more recently, Stephen Jamison, Catholic priest and marathon runner, had died while fleeing staff from a mental institution. His heart had given out in the Arizona desert.

“Not my doing,” she breathed.

Twain countered, “Unless you factor in his obsession with you as a worker of miracles, which drove him to the edge of sanity.”

“All right, all right! It could be any or all of them! It could even be...”

She choked back a sob. Jim Neville, himself a Montana State Police officer, had been brutally murdered by FBI agents at a southern California convenience store, because he’d been helping her evade custody during the Feds’ hunt for Jack Parsons’ anti-gravity formula.

“Do the dead hold grudges?” she asked the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*.

“Once released from earthly bonds, no.”

She squinted hazel eyes at him. “Then, you’re saying, if a soul is trapped here, the desire for vengeance can be very real...”

Twain sedately puffed his cigar.

“How do I rid myself...”

“There is no set means...”

“And my power?”

“Adding a bit more chaos to the universe...”

“Gee, thanks for your confidence in me.”

He sank beside her on the unvarnished bench. “My dear child, you had the good sense to comprehend how using your power on someone who is mentally unstable could have dire implications. The disembodied spirit of such a one would be equally non-receptive, if logic holds true.”

Fitting the last piece of a puzzle into place would have been no more enlightening. “The only man that statement describes is Jonas Fairchild.”

A smile glinted beneath Twain’s ample mustache.

Mustang rose, irate. “If you knew all along, why put me through this torture?”

Smoke curled around his head. “Periodically reviewing one’s mistakes can fortify the resolve not to repeat them in future.”

Repressing the insult on the tip of her tongue, she stalked from the barn.

Her plan to rid the house of this discontented soul would have to be postponed, she realized, when Glenn MacDonough's pickup rounded the curve before she reached the front door.

Biting her lip, she met her neighbor as he stepped from the vehicle.

"Twice in one day, Glenn! I'm honored... and confused."

Sheepishly, the older gentleman indicated his passenger, staring at her over the bonnet.

He wore a clerical black shirt and stiff white collar.

"Oh, hell..." muttered Mustang, then, louder, "Who's this?"

"'Tis Reverend Fairchild, o' Foyers' Church o' Scotland," MacDonough introduced.

Mustang didn't move to clasp his hand, greeting insincerely, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I met Mr. MacDonough this morn in Inverness," replied the grey-haired elder with a thick burr. "He kindly offered me a ride to m'kirk. On the drive, he told me o' your little problem..."

"Problem?" she echoed.

"The ghost," supplied MacDonough.

"Ah. And why would that bring you here?"

Fairchild bristled.

"Lady Elizabeth! Reverend Fairchild 'tis the Highlands' most renowned exorcist!" the project manager pronounced.

Again, "Oh, hell..."

"I asked Mr. MacDonough t' pay this call, t' determine the lay o' the land, so t' speak," Fairchild proclaimed. "If, indeed, a demon inhabits the precincts, I can fetch m'cross, book and candles t' perform the deed..."

With a gulp, Mustang refused. "That... won't be necessary."

"Ye would consort freely wi' the evil spirits?"

MacDonough eyed her harshly.

"It's not that," she objected. "I don't think..."

"'Tis for me t' judge." Fairchild assessed the mansion, shoulders squared, jaw set. Wire-rimmed spectacles slipped down his straight nose; he ignored them.

Tempted to create an artificial disturbance to frighten both men from the property, Mustang controlled her emotions with considerable effort. She pursed her lips to keep from smiling as the cleric circled the building, cocking an ear at the twittering of a sparrow or rabbit scampering under brush.

Rejoining the pair near the construction vehicle, brown orbs glistened with excitement. “The evil o’ this place ‘tis almost palpable,” he gushed. “The exorcism could take days...”

“Thank you, no,” Mustang declined. “I’ll not have my... home invaded in that way.”

“Your home has already been invaded, Your Ladyship,” countered the Scottish churchman. “If ye dinnae rid these walls of the demons, ye shall end up like them!”

If only he knew, she chuckled inwardly. “Still, I appreciate the visit.”

“Are ye sure, Lady Elizabeth?” MacDonough prodded.

“Absolutely, Glenn. Thank you for your concern.”

He hoisted himself behind the steering wheel; Mustang retreated toward the house.

A thought striking her, she spun on her heel. “What did you say your name was?” she called to the figure climbing onto the passenger seat.

“Fairchild,” he responded. “Reverend Jonas Fairchild.”

Her mouth gaped. Honing in on his features, she glimpsed the crow’s feet at the corners of deep-set eyes, his thick eyebrows, thin lips, cleft chin. A handful of bronzed strands peeked through the grey mane...

He might’ve been the murderer’s father, or grandfather.

That would be too damned hilarious, Mustang sniffed, unsteadily clutching the wrought iron porch railing.

“What’s wrong, Lady Elizabeth?” MacDonough cried, leaning out the window.

She recovered quickly. “Nothing, Glenn. At least...” She shouted to the cleric, “Are you married, Reverend?”

He hesitated, unsure of this inquiry’s appropriateness. “I’ve been a widow this past year.”

“Any children, or grandchildren?”

“A son. He, also, is dead. M’wife passed o’ a broken heart after hearing the news.”

“How did he die?”

She saw his Adam’s apple bob self-consciously. “Suicide,” came the strangled answer. “Why are ye...”

“What was his profession?”

“He was a surgeon.”

No way, she mused. Coincidence only. “What was his name?”

“Your Ladyship!” interspersed MacDonough, one boot on the ground.

“It’s not idle curiosity, Glenn,” she grumbled. “It may figure into this whole... mess.”

From behind her, a gentle, accented whisper, “Do you really want to press the matter?”

“Well?” she insisted.

His pointed black shoe dug into the gravel. “His mother named him after m’self.”

She marched toward the corral before twirling, her lungs expending every ounce of air at the edifice in a resounding bellow. “Jonas Fairchild!”

II

The ground shifted ominously beneath their feet; Glenn MacDonough and Rev. Fairchild hopped into the pickup and sped off in a cloud of dust. As windows cracked and Boleskine House’s foundation split, Mustang Duryea stood fast.

“Some exorcist,” she chuckled, as shingles rained down from the roof.

A microburst of wind slammed the steel door inward. Moments later, a trim, masculine figure wearing a black quilted jacket with a torn sleeve, gold turtleneck, straight-legged jeans and scuffed leather boots appeared beneath the lintel, bronze hair perfectly combed from a right part, brown orbs heated by a menacing spark, mustache twitching, elegant fingers flexing.

She recalled him so, the one thing missing: blood. Lots of blood, after the deputy’s bullet pierced his chest.

He inclined his head toward her in silent salute.

At that instant, she comprehended her mistake.

Samuel Clemens sighed, “I warned you.”

“Thanks.” Her brain scrambled for a plan of action, the results a blank. “I met your father just now, Doc,” she announced, grasping at straws.

“That hypocritical preacher?”

“An exorcist, so he claims.”

“Right enough,” barked Fairchild. “He exorcized me from my homeland.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

He guffawed maniacally, “You’re why I’m here!”

His stride toward her propelled her backward until she was wedged against the corral gate.

“So, despite your bravado that night in the woods, you *are* frightened of me,” he gloated, his straight nose inches from hers.

“I... don’t understand how I can be responsible...”

Calloused digits gripped the wood slats. “For my death? Are you kidding? You led the authorities right to me... They followed your horse’s hoof prints from your ranch through the snow!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You should have been content I killed your double... how did you manage that little trick, by the way? You should have let me bury her in the shallow grave. When the cops dug her up, you would’ve been legally dead, free to disappear anywhere in the world...”

“I tried that. Didn’t work,” Mustang lamented of her ‘round-the-world travels.

“Oh, poor thing,” he mocked, stroking her cheek.

“You died in Montana. Why are you here, in Scotland, if not to deal with your father’s sins against you?”

“You bear scars I inflicted upon you, and vice versa.” He nudged up his sleeves to display a host of puncture marks.. “We are inextricably linked, until I take my revenge.”

“That’s ludicrous!”

“Is it?” Burning eyes glared down at her. “Twice you dangled me between the trees. The pain of being scratched and poked... You threatened to set me ablaze...”

“You threatened to cook and eat me,” she retorted.

“No more than you deserve, to this day.”

“Except, the dead don’t eat.”

“Not flesh, perhaps. But the discontented can cleave a soul to pieces, which can be far more agonizing.”

“And, you are one of those discontented?”

He turned, sleeves lowered. “You better believe it! Ever since my self-righteous father decided my behavior shamed him in the sight of his congregation and banished me to the States - ostensibly to study medicine and have a suitable career - financed with funds he embezzled from the weekly collections...”

“You let the grudge you had against him fester over time, until it drove you to insanity and murder...” she concluded.

“If you hadn’t interfered...”

The scene invaded her memory: a science classroom with three students mauled on the tiles, the instructor unconscious, clenching a cast saw.

“If I hadn’t, you would still be confined to a maximum security prison.”

His stony expression froze her. “At least, I’d be alive.”

“What, concocting another ‘Slow Death’ potion to test on fellow prisoners?”

“That’s nothing compared to what I have in store for you.”

She grinned feebly. “The dead have limited capacity against the living.”

“Wanna bet?” He caressed the fresh bruises on her neck. “You can’t forego sleep forever, my dear.”

Oh, hell... she spat mutely. In their first encounter, Jack Parson’s bequest still an unknown quantity, Mustang had discovered her commands were rendered invalid once she dozed.

Training herself since then, that deficiency had been rectified.

Yet, he’d come to her in the wee hours of that very morning and nearly killed her.

“Why the delay?” she posited on a whim, detecting guilt flicker across his lined visage. “Why didn’t you wreak your vengeance on me immediately after your death?”

His chest appeared to heave. “Those I’d killed... were given sway, weakening my resolve.”

“Good for them,” she chuckled.

“Had you remained in Montana, or the States overall, you would have avoided this... unpleasant demise.”

“So, my coming to Scotland freed you from your victims’ supremacy?”

“Very astute, my dear.”

In retrospect, she wished she hadn’t been so cunning, cutting the deal with Ben Espinoza to become a hermit at Boleskine.

“If you’re free, why not concentrate on enjoying your... present situation?”

“I will, once you are consigned to your own version of hell.”

“I’m living that, right now,” she confessed. Side-stepping this spectre, she trod toward the house. “I’m hungry, and I’m going to enjoy steak, diced garlic potatoes and corn on the cob, if you’d like to join me.”

He pursued her, his rapid gait catching up in short order. “For your last meal? Of course.”

An idea had sparked in her brain. While it developed into a concrete strategy to vanquish - and expel - the younger Jonas Fairchild from the earthly dimension, she would lull him into a state of relative calm with idle chatter, sensory enticements and intellectual stimulation.

Wordless instruction repaired the damage to glass and cement as she crossed the threshold, securing the deadbolt behind her.

After a brief detour into her bedroom to shed the robe and red plaid night-shirt in favor of a Beatles t-shirt and jeans, she led him into the kitchen, its stainless steel appliances rarely used since she'd taken up residence. Cooking for herself seemed a waste of time most days, so she contented herself with bowls of cereal, peanut butter sandwiches, or salads.

The freezer crammed with packages, she selected two sirloins, running a sink full of cool water to thaw them. From a sack of Irish-grown potatoes, she selected four moderate sized spuds, chopping them into small pieces, smearing olive oil on a cookie sheet, and sprinkling garlic and oregano atop the lot before opening the oven.

"Would you like to shuck the corn?" she invited Fairchild, freeing four ears from a pantry bin.

"I... never learned how," he replied, shedding the quilted jacket.

She sat opposite him at the kitchenette table. "Let me show you."

Ordinarily, she would have verbalized a crack about his surgical skills, but antagonizing him was not her intent.

As she demonstrated how to remove the husks and fine hairs caught between rows of kernels, she observed his face. Yes, he must've been a dedicated physician. The focus exhibited by his angular mask did not waver once he began the task at hand.

Just as he'd been engrossed in tormenting her own double, suspending her in the wilderness, injecting her with poison, then severing her Achilles tendon before he perceived she'd already expired.

A half-hour before she could grill the meat, Mustang suggested a game of chess. In the simplistic living room, she asked her guest to light a fire on the grate. She arranged black and white carved figures in their starting positions and sank on the cane-backed rocker.

Fairchild opted for the straight-backed chair from the roll-top desk. Admiring the inlaid table, he moved his king's pawn in a very familiar gambit.

"How 'bout playing 'Truth or Dare' chess?" she ventured.

"What's that?"

"Each time you take one of my pieces, you ask a question. If I don't answer... well... and so forth."

Fairchild huffed, "I've got nothing to lose."

Mustang permitted him to dominate the game until he took her queen's knight. He peppered her with trivialities.

First pawn: "You never did explain to me how you trussed me up in the trees that way."

“Is that your question?”

“Sure. How did you truss me up in the trees?”

“The trees obey my requests, thanks to an affinity with nature I inherited from my grandfather.”

Second pawn: “Who was your grandfather?”

“Jack Parsons. A scientist back in the 1930s and ‘40s.”

Fairchild smirked. “I think I read an article about him in an old magazine in the prison library.”

“Could be.”

Queen’s rook: “You inherited this power when he died?”

“Yes.”

Third pawn: “How did he die?”

“I killed him.”

Fairchild’s knight hovered above the board a mere second before bumping her bishop off its square. “I always knew you weren’t the innocent you pretended to be. How did you kill him?”

“A knife, through the heart.”

The edge of his mouth quivered in a momentary grin, the prospect of her harshness impressing him. “Damn!”

Fourth pawn: “Did he beat you, or... worse?”

“I hardly knew him. He was into... the occult, and I was supposed to help him with a ritual, but he tricked me.”

The disappointment couldn’t be misinterpreted. “So, you’re not cold-blooded.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Queen’s knight: “Are there any limits to this power?”

“Not that I’ve found.”

Mustang commenced a drive to reduce the number of white pieces on the table.

“Where did you grow up?” she began.

“Edinburgh.”

“What’s this beef with your father?”

“He’s a sanctimonious prick. Wouldn’t let me party with my friends from school, ragged me about my grades...”

“Typical kid stuff?”

Fairchild nodded.

“How did you find out about his embezzlement?”

“His bishop exposed him after an audit of the books. Exiled him to a tiny church in Foyers. Served him right, arrogant git.”

“My neighbor told me he’s a renowned exorcist.”

“He’s a sham, pure and simple. Couldn’t exorcize a donut from a paper sack.”

Mustang hid her smile behind her hand. “He wants to exorcize you.”

“The fool!”

“He doesn’t know it’s you. I didn’t know it was you, until he told me enough to establish the bond.”

“Don’t let him waste your time.”

“Were you aware your mother died shortly after...”

He snorted, “Sure. She’s been trying to convince me to discard my plans and join her... in whatever heaven she created for herself.”

The timer’s chime signaled a need to flip the potatoes and cook the steaks.

“Will we finish this later?” Fairchild wondered.

“Sure. There’s plenty of time.”

Mustang set up a small hibachi grill on the back porch, lighting the charcoal without need of a match. Within minutes, the meat sizzled, dripping fat and causing flames to leap into the afternoon air.

“After we eat, would you like to go for a ride?” she suggested.

“You don’t have a car.”

“But, I do have horses.”

“I’ve... never ridden.”

“It’s something everyone should do once...” She omitted, “in their lifetime.”

“Sure.”

Tantalizing aromas filled the kitchen when they sat down before loaded plates.

“Don’t stand on ceremony,” the Mistress of Boleskine advised as she buttered her corn. “Dig in.”

“I... can I?”

“Sure.” She patted his arm. “You’re as much flesh and blood as you were... before...”

Dig in, Fairchild did, with gusto. Given the last time she’d seen him alive - he’d been cooking a pan of canned stew, and had spilled it in the fire when she appeared from the gloom - he must’ve been starving.

He might not have enjoyed a home-cooked meal for years, in fact. On the run from California, posing as a biology teacher in Montana, ultimately confined to a maximum security prison... she gagged at the thought of such disgusting fare.

“How ‘bout some chocolate ice cream?” she offered when he’d soaked up the last juices from the steak with a slice of bread.

“That would be fantastic.”

Drops of the melted treat flecked his mustache as he relished the taste. They left dishes unwashed in the sink, strolling to the barn as they zipped their jackets.

Fairchild helped Mustang saddle two roan mares; they set out along a trail through the trees.

“Just a slow walk around your property?” he taunted.

“Not always. There’s a field where we can gallop, a few downed trees to jump...”

His boots tapped the mount’s flanks. “Let’s go!”

She gave chase. “Hey, I thought you said...” Tugging the reins, she shook her head, extracted a hair tie from her jean pocket and pulled her black tresses into a pony tail. She leaned forward and jerked the leather, trained legs bursting forward full speed.

The horses nearly collided on a rise near Glenn MacDonough’s fence line. Fairchild had halted when confronted by the construction project manager and the Scottish exorcist carrying a battered wooden trunk between them.

Glancing up at the rider, the elder Fairchild released his share of the load, collapsing on the grassy knoll in a faint.

Mustang grit her teeth. “Oh, hell...”

III

“So much for keeping things calm,” the young woman gasped.

“Ach, Lady Elizabeth!” hailed Glenn MacDonough, depositing the trunk and squatting beside the cleric. “I’m that sorry.”

She dismounted, closing the gap between them. “For what, precisely?”

“Reverend Fairchild insisted he be allowed t’ perform the exorcism. I drove him t’ Foyers and, on the return trip, he laid out a plan whereby ye would not be disturbed by his... activities. I had no choice but t’ assist..”

“How would he have managed to prevent such a disturbance?”

“He intended t’ stand on the hill where that damaged picnic table has been left t’ rot...”

“What, and exorcize the whole estate?” she hissed.

Her neighbor lowered his wisp-covered white head.

Exasperated, but not wishing to create a scene - especially one she could not explain - Mustang stared down at the elder Fairchild. “Go home, Glenn. I’ll make sure the Reverend isn’t hurt.”

“M’tanks to ye... and the gentleman,” MacDonough said, his bandy legs moving as fast as they could toward a narrow gap in the whitewashed barrier.

Searching for a pulse on both wrists, then on his carotid artery, Mustang didn’t see Dr. Jonas Fairchild slide from the saddle and approach his father. She did, however, bar his hand from making contact with the unconscious form.

“Is he dead?” asked the former surgeon.

“Not quite.”

“Then, I’ll finish the job.”

“No, you won’t.”

“It’s easy, really. Rip out his heart...”

She rose, glaring. “And your vengeance is complete.”

“One part of it, at any rate.”

Insistent digits yanked him upright by the collar. “Look, Doc. You’re an intelligent sort - or, at least, you used to be. There’s a witness who could testify before the bench that this man’s sole injury might be a bump on his head from where he hit the ground. If an autopsy shows... additional damage, who do you think they’ll blame?”

“Not me.” Fairchild’s demented chuckle reverberated around the clearing. “I won’t be here.”

“What if I ensure you are?”

“You... can’t.”

“Are you willing to bet on that?”

“No court of law could... do anything to me!” He met her gaze, his own mind calculating options. He continued in a fiendish bass register, “But, they could prosecute you for murder. How ironic a justice, for you to experience a taste of my fate!”

“Except, no jail can hold me,” she declared.

Rev. Fairchild stirred and blinked.

Mustang stooped to the prone figure. “You’ll be all right, sir,” she mumbled. “You... had a nasty shock.”

Disoriented, he attempted to sit up. “I saw... m’son. M’late son, a man full grown.”

“A trick of the light.” She eased him onto the grass. “Best to be still.”

In her current position, she blocked any view of his offspring. “Get on your horse and ride back to the house,” she directed the latter in an undertone. “I’ll join you there shortly.”

“What about him?”

“I’ll send him on his way.”

“You don’t know him like I do. He’s stubborn as a mule. If he’s decided to exorcize this land, he won’t quit until the deed is done.”

“Then, we’ll let him do it.”

The younger Fairchild seized her shoulders. “He’ll die first, I swear!”

“No harm will transpire. I can... shield you from the effects.”

“On your honor?”

The laughter burst forth like a fountain. How could a murderer speak of honor? Why should she treat him with honor, at all? Let the father obliterate the son, then dispatch the old man to his misguided congregation.

Distracted by these ruminations, Mustang didn’t notice the elder had maneuvered himself to his knees. Gnarled fingers groped to unhinge the trunk, snatching a crucifix from within the moth-eaten confines.

“Be gone, thou foul spirit!” he intoned, extending his arm.

The younger Fairchild smirked at his hostess. “See what I mean?”

“I don’t deny it’s rather pathetic...” she agreed.

Requesting the natural forces ring the cleric in non-penetrable energy to confine his supplications, she led her companion to his mount, twining her roan’s reins around his palm. “Please, now, go back to the house. I’ll handle this.”

“Twenty minutes, my dear. Otherwise, I’ll...”

At a trot, Fairchild vanished along the trail.

She shifted her attention to his father. “Now, Reverend,” she interrupted his muttering. “How can I convince you this idiocy must cease?”

He lowered the cross in defeat. “If the dead wander these grounds, ‘twill take an army o’ exorcists t’ complete the required rubrics.”

“Better you lend your strength to being an example of tolerance and charity, as the god you profess mandated.”

Hooking her arm through his, she ushered him at a leisurely pace along the estate’s perimeter to the highway near Loch Ness. Behind them, the trunk and its contents disintegrated into dust.

Before his damp shoes steered onto the macadam, he’d forgotten ever meeting Glenn MacDonough that morning, or trespassing on Boleskine acreage.

“No!” Fairchild shrieked from the barn door when she traversed the gravel drive. “You let him go?”

“It’s quite a distance from here to Foyers. If you’re so determined to commit another murder, let him be found mutilated on the side of the road. Then, I’ll not be suspect.”

He grunted approval of her device. “Ah, but you’ll be complicit.”

“I’ve been complicit in far worse.”

“Given what I’ve seen, I suspect you have, at that.”

Jonas Fairchild the younger jogged toward the rusted gate posts as Mustang opted for the barn, spending the next hour grooming and feeding her horses.

When she emerged, smelling of hay and saddle soap, the sun painted the western sky in pastel hues. Fairchild did not await her indoors; she checked every space, including the vacant spare bedrooms.

If he’d accomplished his goal, might he have automatically been transported to the ethereal realm?

“I can say this much, dear Elizabeth,” rumbled Mark Twain. “Don’t let your guard down.”

She paused, pouring herself a tumbler of orange juice at the kitchen counter. “Thanks, Sam. How ‘bout a game of chess?”

“My pleasure.”

For no other reason than to keep herself awake, Mustang sat across the board from this font of humor and insight, allowing him to expound on any and all topics while the carved pieces defied a preconceived strategy.

“You’re amazing,” Twain diverted from his own narrative around midnight, after she took his queen. “There’s no logic to your play...”

“It’s the logic of non-logic,” she snickered. “Do the unexpected to disrupt an opponent’s tactics.”

“Very... astute.” He slid the white king out of check. “Is that the same concept you employed against Doctor Fairchild?”

“In a way. A man motivated by hate has his plans thwarted by a bit of kindness.”

“You show great insight into the human heart,” Twain praised.

She bumped his bishop off its square, yawning. “I’m just a kid trying to stay alive.”

“You need sleep.”

“Not until Doc is gone.”

Twain relaxed on the green sofa. “I remember how you conjured me from that statue in Hannibal, and restored me to my pedestal. How will you dispose of the errant doctor?”

“I... don’t know.” She positioned her queen. “Checkmate.”

“Brava, my dear.”

Abandoning the living room, Mustang brewed a pot of coffee in the kitchen, though she abhorred the taste. Exhaustion laid claim to her muscles, and she feared closing her eyes while Fairchild remained a threat.

Caffeine supplied sufficient artificial stimulation until dawn peeked over the eastern horizon. Zipping her parka against the chill morning breeze, she trudged to the barn, sliding the door on its rollers.

To be confronted by the wild-maned, disheveled Jonas Fairchild, pacing between the stalls. The horses nickered and whinnied, unnerved by the strange presence.

“What the hell...” Mustang murmured.

The unwelcome visitor spun. “It’s about damned time!”

“How’d you get in here?”

“When I got back from... well, I thought I’d find you here. The door jammed shut somehow, and I couldn’t get out.”

The Mistress of Boleskine knelt to survey the track, finding a rock stuck between the grooves. Nimble fingers extracted it.

An accident? she puzzled, looking toward the house where Samuel Clemens stood on the stoop, his smile visible beneath the trademark mustache. He shrugged playfully, and she acknowledged the deed with a faux salute.

No more had she straightened, than the sound of tires crunching gravel reached her ears. Glenn MacDonough’s pickup sputtered to a halt near the barn, the project manager leaping from the cab.

“Ach, Lady Elizabeth, have ye heard?” he panted, his countenance pinched with near-panic.

“Heard what?”

“Reverend Fairchild, poor man, was found on the side of the road in the wee hours, dead.”

Mustang feigned surprise. “What happened?”

“The constables arna quite sure. He may have been walking t’ m’house - or t’ Dores - t’ catch a ride, when he was attacked by a wild animal.”

She peered briefly over her shoulder at the animalistic human shrouded by shadows within the barn. “Attacked? How so?”

“His throat was slashed, his heart ripped clean from his chest. He must’ve put up a valiant fight, though, because... oh, I beg your pardon, Your Ladyship. Such details aren’t appropriate for a woman o’ your position.”

MacDonough must've noticed her disgust at his description or, rather, her disgust at Fairchild's cruelty.

"They're planning the funeral for Thursday in Foyers. I expect the whole region t' attend," her neighbor concluded.

"A fine send-off, indeed," Mustang concurred. "Thanks... for letting me know."

"Nae trouble, Your Ladyship. I'll be off t' work, then."

"Have a great day!" As the construction vehicle bounced toward the main road, she exhaled loudly. "Is that what you have planned for me, Doc?"

She sensed his lean frame immediately behind her, felt his breath on her hair.

"You'll sleep eventually," he hissed. "Then, you'll find out."

Whirling, she glared up. "Did no one in your life teach you the meaning of love?"

"You ask that of the son of a Scottish minister mired in antiquated traditions?" he scoffed. "He rarely touched my mother, in anger or affection. As his heir, he pushed me to behave as a proper little gent, and had enrolled me in the seminary before my tenth birthday! The only book I was allowed to read openly was the bible. No television, no radio, no cricket matches or football..."

"What about your mother?"

"She tried her best, given the circumstances. When he threatened to beat me after I got poor marks in school, she stepped between us and he nearly broke her arm."

"And you?"

"I couldn't sit for a week, and the stripes on my back hurt every time I moved."

That explained a lot for the young woman. A childhood mired in cruelty warped any willingness to express positive emotions.

She squeezed his sleeve tenderly. "How 'bout some breakfast?"

"I could use some."

Entering the kitchen, Mustang giggled at the sink filled with dishes from the previous day as she shed the parka. She'd been so absorbed...

"I'll wash," Fairchild volunteered, draping the black quilted jacket on a chair, a pensive cast to his chiseled profile.

"I'll dry."

She let him contemplate whatever emotions churned inside him, herself meditating on ways to thrust him back to the ethereal realm. The complication of voicing a command involving a mentally unstable individual remained.

"Mustang..."

His somber baritone shook her from this reverie; she nearly dropped a china plate.

“Sorry,” he apologized with a sincere edge. “May I call you Mustang?”

“Sure.”

“Isn’t that what the hands on your ranch called you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“I like it better than Elizabeth.”

“Or Lizzy, Betty, or Beth?”

She bristled. “No one...”

Soapy hands raised in surrender. “Okay, okay.” He pulled the plug to drain the water, leveled smoldering brown orbs on her. “I know we’re not playing ‘Truth or Dare’ chess now, but would you answer a question for me?”

“If I can.”

“Didn’t anyone ever show you love in your young life?”

“My mom and dad... didn’t get along, didn’t talk much, except to argue. I wasn’t beaten, at least, but I was pretty much ignored the past few years. I could relate to the ranch hands, and better still to the horses. Being in the saddle, out in nature was my one solace... like it is here.”

“You care keenly for your horses.”

“If I say yes, will you use them against me as... part of your revenge?”

A mischievous twinkle lit his eyes. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“What, you hadn’t considered robbing me of what I hold most dear prior to... ripping out my heart?”

“No.” He crumpled the tea towel after wiping droplets from the marble.

“The fact you did validates my suspicion you possess a cruel streak equal to mine.”

“Of necessity, to defend myself against...”

When she hesitated, he clasped her wrists and flipped her palms upward.

“The first time we... crossed paths, I noticed these wounds. Professional interest. I’d never seen the like. After I... incapacitated you with the sedative, I examined your flesh at length while waiting for the FBI to collect you. Seeing them now, whatever caused this damage has been repeated, multiple times. I’m astounded you have any range of motion.”

Mustang averted her gaze. “The lightning...”

The opportunity to expand on her statement vanished when a persistent pounding rattled the window panes. She extricated herself from his grip and scurried to the front door.

The haggard figure on the stoop could have instigated a panic attack, had not Fairchild caught her before she collapsed on the foyer tile.

Rev. Jonas Fairchild - blood dying his grey mop a sickly auburn, staining his white collar, black shirt and hands - gurgled his request. “Please, help me.”

IV

“Don’t worry, he’s dead,” announced Dr. Jonas Fairchild.

Mustang staggered backward at the hideous cleric dripping red on the threshold. “How...”

“From personal experience, I know it takes awhile to get cleaned up after...” He propped her against the wall. “Better?”

“Give me a few.”

He countered, “There’s no time.”

“What do you...”

“His own well-concealed evil has consigned him to the same limbo I’ve endured since my demise. He must be sent on, or I’ll be shackled with him for eternity.”

“Sent on?” she echoed.

“To hell, Mustang. To hell.”

Rev. Fairchild’s crippled claws seized his son’s shirt with phenomenal strength and yanked him from the dwelling. Mustang moved to observe the battle; unrelenting vices restrained her.

“Sam, what the...”

“This is a private matter,” warned Twain.

“Private, hell! I caused all this!”

“True, but let father and son resolve their issues...”

When the author deftly kicked the door closed, Mustang blocked the motion with her sneaker, wriggling away and bolting outdoors.

Spectral beings wrestled on the gravel, pebbles flying in every direction as they struggled for advantage.

Nature responded in kind. Clouds converged in the stratosphere, pouring rain as lightning flashed and thunder spooked the horses. Tremors underfoot jolted the pair off-balance, providing an opening for the teen to intervene.

“Stop, both of you!”

The younger Fairchild complied with the request, gold turtleneck mangled, chest heaving as he retreated.

With the cessation of hostilities, the sky instantly cleared.

Wiping streaks of mud from pale cheeks, his father snarled, “You impudent pup! How dare you...”

She ignored him. “Doc, if his desire for revenge is stronger than yours... won’t that merit him a trip... well...” She pointed downward. “Without the need for you to...”

Aiming the thick branch he’d snatched off the ground at his son, Rev. Fairchild swung wide and struck Mustang instead.

She toppled onto the earth, stunned, pain shooting through her torso.
“Damn you, Father!” the physician roared. “You’ve hurt an innocent child...”

The older man dropped his weapon. “And how many innocents did ye murder in cold blood, my *son*?”

“Dozens. Hundreds,” Fairchild confessed. “Because you never taught me how to respect myself or others!”

He lifted Mustang with solicitous concern; she limped to the stoop, crumpling on the step. Squatting beside her, he examined her collarbone, shoulder and right arm with the skill of his chosen profession.

“You may have a dislocation,” he opined, his fingers straying to the bruises around her neck. “I *am* sorry about those.”

“You’re forgiven,” she gurgled. “You just need to forgive yourself for... being unable to transcend the abuse your father heaped upon you.”

Fairchild smirked, crow’s feet deepening around his eyes. “Is that all there is to it?”

“From my perspective, yes. I can send you...”

Rev. Fairchild cursed, arms raised like some spurious angel. “And I can send you heathens...”

Mustang didn’t twitch a muscle, nor utter a word. The microburst of wind rustled her black tresses and Dr. Fairchild’s bronze mane.

Its force shred Rev. Fairchild into microscopic dust.

Sunlight played on the dispersing essence, rainbows flashing in the air.

Fairchild sank beside his hostess with a gasp. “Impressive.”

“Frustrating,” she countered.

“Why?”

“I’m supposed to use my power in positive ways.”

“What’s not positive about commending a troubled soul to his rest?”

“What kind of rest? Will he be tortured for eternity, his tongue burning for the unkind tirade he spewed at the world?”

“Perhaps,” Fairchild remarked.

A more nasal voice joined the conversation. “He might be reincarnated as a horned toad,” Twain hinted.

The trio laughed together.

Then, Mustang stiffened.

“Pain?” queried Fairchild.

She nodded.

“Come on. We’ll get you fixed up.”

“I can... fix it myself, you know.”

“Like you’ve fixed so many things since you inherited this power?”

Mustang grimaced. “Is that a crack?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Doc. Do your thing.”

He led her inside, along the corridor to her bedroom. He arranged her on the king-sized mattress before scrutinizing the chamber.

“Have you any whiskey?” he prodded.

“What, you need a drink *now*?”

“It’s for you, silly. This is going to hurt like a bitch.”

“Not if I don’t want it to.”

He considered her determined mien. “Are you sure?”

“Just do it.”

Fairchild signaled Twain from his observation point near the door. The author applied his considerable weight to Mustang’s torso, preventing her from convulsing when the physician wrenched her socket into its proper place.

Mustang’s scream might have brought the roof down upon them had she not fainted before it attained full pitch.

The men eased their pressure and withdrew.

“Let her sleep,” instructed Fairchild.

“What about you?”

“I hear you enjoy playing chess.”

“Indeed.”

Bizarre images invaded the Mistress of Boleskine’s dreams as the hours elapsed. A procession of the dead - unrecognized but purposeful - paraded past the foot of her bed, commenting on the room’s decor, of lack thereof, as if touring the mansion.

Waking the following day, Mustang felt a slight twinge in her right shoulder when she stretched. A check of the mirror atop the antique chest drew an expletive from her lips; dried mud encrusted her t-shirt and jeans, matted her black locks. She’d been wearing the same outfit for nearly 48 hours.

She shuffled to the bathroom for a soothing hot shower.

A towel twirled around her head, wrapped in a blue terry robe, she followed the sound of masculine banter to the living room, where a chess game was in its early stages.

Two sets of eyes focused on her. “Good morning!” the men chorused.

“Is it?”

“The sun is shining, the birds are singing,” Twain commented.

Mustang flinched. “The horses need food and water.”

“We took care of that already,” said Fairchild.

“Thanks.” She plopped on the sofa, startled.

“What about breakfast?”

“You cooking?”

Fairchild toppled his king, acquiescing to Twain’s gambit. “I can.”

“Then, please.”

She accompanied him to the kitchen, where he scrounged a skillet, butter, eggs and bacon. She set plates and silverware, pouring orange juice into tumblers while she waited to eat.

Ravenous, having not ingested any food in nearly 24 hours, she devoured three eggs and seven strips of bacon, with two slices of toast. She sensed her strength returning, her attitude rejuvenated.

Fairchild cleared the table, himself partaking of little. “Better?”

“Much better,” she concurred.

“I’m glad.”

“Are you, really?”

“While you were catching up on your sleep, Mr. Clemens and I had a chance to talk, in depth, about life, the afterlife, and you.”

Her nose crinkled. “Thank you for not enacting your revenge as I slept.”

“I’ve... given up on that notion.”

“May I ask why?”

“I realize I was wrong to live as I did, to wallow in hate. I should have tried harder to break from the trauma my father inflicted on me, to learn to love. My life would have been entirely different if I had. It’s too late for me now, but I can give you the gift of living, so you can enjoy love as you receive it, and be able to give it.”

A tear trickled down her cheek; she wiped it on her sleeve.

That tender moment shattered with the interminable knocking.

“Not again!” Mustang mourned.

She navigated the corridor and opened the steel door a mere crack.

Glenn MacDonough shivered on the stoop.

She invited him inside. “What’s wrong, Glenn?”

“Allow me t’ apologize, Lady Elizabeth. I didn’t know ye were still abed.”

“No worries, Glenn. I’m just being lazy today.”

“Ach, I’m that glad.” They proceeded into the living room. “Ye ha’ made this a comfortable space.”

“Yes, thanks to the work your men did.”

“I’m that glad.”

“Glenn, please. What are you trying not to tell me?”

“I bring a warnin’, actually,” he hedged.

“About what?”

“Today’s newspaper ran the story about Reverend Fairchild’s autopsy. It wasn’t an animal that killed him, but a man. A madman.”

“Oh?”

“He’s still at large, Lady Elizabeth. With ye livin’ here alone, I’m that worried for your safety.”

She patted his arm. "I appreciate that. What do you have in mind?"

"Until he's caught, I'd be glad o' your company at m'place, or I could ha' one of m'crew come and stay wi' ye."

"That's not necessary, Glenn. I don't have a need to go out, except to the barn, and will confine myself to the house for the foreseeable future."

"Are ye sure?"

"Definitely."

"I still worry that ye dinnae ha' a phone, no way t' make contact in an emergency."

"I'll be fine, I promise. I'm not a helpless female..."

MacDonough mopped his brow with a red bandana from his trouser pocket. "Ach, not wi' such a strappin' young man close at hand."

Mustang heard Jonas Fairchild approach, the tea towel confirming he'd washed the dishes. At a loss to explain his presence, she guided her guest toward the exit.

In passing, MacDonough extended his hand. "Glad to meet ye, laddie."

"Likewise."

"Are ye here on holiday?"

Fairchild maintained his composure as Mustang glowered at him. "In a manner of speaking."

"I'm that glad ye are able t' offer Lady Elizabeth companionship and a bit o' protection."

"It's been... an enlightening visit, to be sure," he chuckled.

Sensing their desire for privacy, MacDonough departed. "Remember t' call on me if ye ha' need o' anythin', Your Ladyship!"

"I will, Glenn, you can be sure!"

The panel slammed shut and she sagged against it, scowling at Fairchild.

"Enlightening?" she mimicked.

He scooped her in his arms. "Well, hasn't it been, for us both?"

"I suppose." She fought against the embrace.

"You've learned from me, haven't you?"

"I..."

"And I've learned some very profound lessons from you." He steadied her in his grasp. "That love can defeat evil, and hate blackens the soul beyond the grave."

"Then, I won't have to worry about you haunting me anymore?"

"I promise, though, if I hadn't, my agony at the hands of my victims would have endured *ad infinitum*."

"You must still beg their forgiveness," noted Mustang.

"It has already been done."

"Eh?"

“Last night, while you were sleeping.”

Swallowing her heart, Mustang envisioned Fairchild confronting the horde of dead.

“I’d love to hear what Sam has to say about that spectacle!” she groaned.

“I’m sure he’ll tell you in due course.” He kissed her lightly on the lips.

“Thank you for being a beacon in the darkness of this chaotic world.”

Peeking through a gap in the door to ensure the pickup had gone, Fairchild stepped into the brilliance. From beneath the lintel, Mustang watched his slender, bronze-crested form sidle toward the trees, dissolving into the ether.

The door shut more quietly, she veered into the living room, where the last chess game between Twain and the physician remained on the board. She clucked her tongue; Fairchild would have checkmated his opponent in three moves, if he hadn’t capitulated.

“A cunning player,” opined Twain from his seat on the green sofa.

“He redeemed himself, in the end.”

“To your relief, I take it?”

“Yes, I’d rather enjoy a good night’s sleep and not wake up dead.”

Lighting his cigar, smoke curled toward the ceiling. “There’s always the slim chance...”

“Slim chance of what?”

“His victims weren’t unanimous in their forgiveness.”

“What, exactly, happened?”

With a snort, Twain recapped the scene. “They were queued out the door. Like the sentencing phase of a criminal trial, each spoke his piece - some at great length. Their emotions impacted the good doctor, and his plea held not the slightest note of guile or falsity. I noticed a few, however, grumbling their doubts as they went their separate ways.”

Mustang leaned forward on the cane-backed rocking chair. “Sam, how many were there?”

“I lost count after two score.”

“Oh, hell...”

She straightened. Could a serial killer of such magnitude ever really achieve peace in the afterlife?

“There are infinite possibilities after we shake off this mortal coil,” Twain expounded. “Each person creates his own heaven, or hell. Reverend Fairchild, for instance, despised all those he deemed inferior and, so, will be relegated to his place as a demeaned servant, obeying those he wronged in life.”

“And, Doc?”

“Don’t worry your pretty head about him. You can rest in the knowledge you used your power to a positive end.”

“For the first time in ages.”

She retrieved the chess pieces and commenced a new game.