

The Mustang Chronicles:

Monstrous Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea, wearing baggy grey sweats that doubled as pajamas and ratty sneakers, sat on the front stoop of the vast Georgian mansion, sipping a steaming cup of hot chocolate. The rising sun predicted a pleasant April morning - a tranquility the 19-year-old relished.

Since emigrating to Scotland, she’d endeavored toward such tranquility, after nearly three years of dealing with the chaos caused by an affinity with nature bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons, scientist and occultist, and her biological grandfather.

The green ceramic mug warmed her palms, deeply scarred by frequent travels via lightning bolt. She breathed in lungfuls of fresh air, not unlike that of Montana, where she’d formerly lived, yet carrying a different scent. She listened for the birds to create their dawn symphony...

Nothing.

This silence was too... silent.

Almost ominous.

The teen’s mind drifted back to snowy nights on her father’s horse ranch when she stayed up late, watching classic horror movies on the small television in her bedroom. Snuggled under a thick hand-sewn quilt, every nerve tingled as suspenseful music built to a climax or, conversely, absolute quiet preceded a monster’s attack on the heroine.

The likes of Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Vincent Price and Peter Lorre had generated more cause for fear than modern computerized special effects, in her opinion.

Gravel crunching under tires broke the stillness; Mustang rose as the white pickup rounded a curve between the trees. She recognized her neighbor Glenn MacDonough’s vehicle, shuddering at the disruption of her solitude.

“Good mornin’, Your Ladyship!” this balding construction project manager hailed through his open window as he braked near the barn. He knew her as Lady Elizabeth Neville, an alias meant to keep her off the radar of the FBI, Interpol and other agencies that might be interested in abusing her powers.

She waved absently, setting aside the cup.

MacDonough alighted from the truck’s right side; the Mistress of Boleskine still had difficulty acclimating to the driving habits of the locals.

Not that she’d ever driven, even in the States.

His boots kicked up dust as he approached. “A bonny day, aye?”

The thick Scottish burr made his words almost incomprehensible to her ears, which could mentally translate practically any language, except this dialect.

“Beautiful,” she responded.

“I came t’ tell ye I’ll be gone for a fortnight.”

“Gone? Where, if I may ask?”

“T’ Glasgow for meetin’s aboot a huge project.”

“Who will be caring for your horses?”

MacDonough smiled, teeth crooked. “Kind o’ ye to ask. One o’ the shopkeeper’s bairns from Dores will be comin’ ‘round to feed ‘em every day.”

“I hope everything goes well for on the trip.”

“Aye, ‘twill. Do ye ha’ need o’ anythin’ before I go?”

Mustang glanced around, as if seriously considering his offer. “No. A grocery order is due on Thursday, and I have plenty of oats and straw for my horses.”

“I ha’ a spare mobile, if ye wish t’ keep one handy in case o’ emergency...”

“No, thanks, Glenn. I’ll be fine.”

The elder’s watery blue eyes squinted uncertainly. Ever since she’d contracted him to renovate the historic dwelling where the notorious Aleister Crowley and rock guitarist Jimmy Page had previously lived, in addition to her grandfather, MacDonough had maintained a fatherly concern for her well-being, especially since she possessed no phone, computer, television or radio.

“Well, I ha’ left a house key under the primrose plant near m’kitchen door, in case ye ha’ a need.” He retreated toward the pickup.

She wished him safe travels and watched him depart, breathing a sigh of relief.

The hush enveloped her once again, and she stood on the porch, puzzled.

Not even so much as a rabbit scuttled through the underbrush beyond the corral, or deer foraging for their breakfast.

Baffling.

The squeal of severely rusted hinges reverberated through the woods; birds fled their nests *en masse*, wings propelling them skyward. Mustang might’ve been satisfied that the noise originated from the gate at the end of the drive near the highway, except she’d removed it from the posts months prior, due to its deteriorated condition.

The only other source of such a noise would be the Gate Lodge, a four-room cottage once inhabited by Jack Parsons in the guise of Jock White. She drained her mug and trekked in that direction, accompanied by a rhythmic pounding and an occasional, mournful groan.

She felt very much like the naive characters in those old films that had - admittedly - given her nightmares, walking blindly into danger.

MacDonough's truck was parked beside the structure, left rear tire flat. Its owner stood in the Gate Lodge's main doorway, testing the warped panel in an effort to recreate the eerie sound.

"You heard it, too?" queried Mustang when she joined him.

"Aye."

"What about that thumping?"

"I dinnae ha' a clue, lassie." He crossed the threshold into the darkness as the sound dissipated. "Unless..."

She echoed, "Unless?"

He spun toward her in the shadows. "There be tales in these parts o' monsters..."

"The Loch Ness monster, I know."

"Nae, lassie. Other monsters, prowlin' on land."

"Nonsense!"

"Dinnae be so sure. Ol' Jock, he welcomed strange ones now an' again."

The girl swallowed a sudden rush of fear. She couldn't deny her grandfather had delved into practices that confounded her, even tricking her into thrusting a knife into his chest during a pre-dawn ritual on the hillock where a picnic table he'd used for an altar now rotted.

"Ha' ye searched the cellar o' this bothy?" MacDonough wondered.

"Cellar? I didn't know..."

"Aye."

"There aren't any stairs inside..."

"Nae. Ye get in through a hatch at the back."

"Hatch?"

The project manager preceded her outside, leading her across an overgrown herb garden and pausing beside what would have been the kitchen window, facing the trees.

A dense tangle of brambles and weeds comprised the back yard. MacDonough made a point to stomp his feet on the ground in a predetermined pattern, a grin transforming his solemn mien when the clang of metal proved him correct.

Not that he made an effort to clear the vines concealing the panel.

"I ha' t' be off," he stated with a nervous inflection. "As 'tis, I'm already late, what wi' having t' repair that puncture. When ye ha' time, and a good torch in hand, ye will want t' check what's down there."

Mustang managed a sarcastic chuckle. "In case there's a monster that needs to be killed?"

"Or a treasure chest wi' thousands in gold an' jewels."

She'd never suspected her grandfather might have stashed a fortune on the property; she'd always imagined him as eccentric, young for his age, and bitter over being exiled after the FBI staged his death in a Pasadena garage decades earlier.

She addressed MacDonough's receding form. "I'll... get to it... someday."

As she observed this uninvited visitor change his tire - muttering expletives about nails dropped on the gravel by his own construction crew - she detected that lonely groaning from the opposite direction.

Hiking back to the mansion, she discounted it as wind rustling tree branches still bare after a long, hard winter.

Bacon and eggs over-easy satisfied her grumbling stomach, then she meandered to the barn, where five horses awaited fresh water, oats and exercise.

By mid-afternoon, Mustang had made the rounds of the 47-acre property - and MacDonough's open pasture - with each of her mounts, trotting along narrow trails, cantering along the plank fencing, then breaking into a full gallop across fields just beginning to show spring green. She walked the last roan mare over the rise above the house, a pair of male voices drifting on the breeze.

Scottish voices.

In her brief tenure at Boleskine, the teen had grown accustomed to tourists wandering the grounds during the day, hoping for a glimpse of the infamous domicile where the lunatic Crowley held drug-fueled orgies in the early 1900s. These sorts she could avoid, the steel front door securely bolted against intruders.

The locals were another story.

Gossip about her began within days of her arrival, she estimated. MacDonough's company vehicles, delivering both materials and laborers to the site during the refurbishing of the buildings, were noted and only increased the level of curiosity. Once she settled in, she periodically glimpsed youngsters or their parents prowling through the woods, hoping to catch sight of her.

After a few weeks, this practice got rather annoying.

But, no one could cause harm in daylight. At night, however...

A series of booby traps had been activated, in conjunction with nature, so anyone venturing off the B852 after sunset would never dare trespass again.

Nudging the horse's flank with her shoe, she steered toward the barn. Whatever their mission, the pair could go about their business unhindered.

Except, the origin of their conversation had tricked her, and she met the decidedly odd couple on the path. She tugged the reins.

“Who’s this, then?” asserted the tall, sandy-haired twig in a melodic tenor. He wore a brightly colored patchwork hoodie, jeans and white Converse sneakers.

As if reciting lines from a script, his companion replied playfully, in a deeper tone, “A sprite or fairy, perhaps?”

“On horseback?”

“Aye, my mistake.”

You have no idea, Mustang snorted inwardly. “Are you looking for someone?”

The broad-framed individual, slightly older than his comrade, sported a shaggy, jet-black mullet, blue dress shirt and navy cargo pants. He cocked his head to the left. “Found someone, we ha’.”

“Indeed.” The younger grinned, his upper lip vanishing as straight, white teeth glistened. “We’ll apologize t’ your parents, if we must.”

Better not explain the situation, Mustang determined. “That... won’t be necessary,” she bluffed. “Just be on your way.”

“Ye may be able t’ help us, in fact,” remarked the older.

“Why should I waste my time...”

Brushing longish locks away from his eyes, the tall one chortled, “Ach, she’s an obedient wee lass, who’s not supposed t’ talk t’ strangers.”

His sidekick: “In that case, we should introduce ourselves.”

Too much like a deliberate comedy routine, Mustang squirmed in the saddle.

The skinny figure bowed slightly. “I’m Campbell Bain, and this is Fergus MacKinnon. We’re picnicking on the loch wi’... wi’...”

He glanced at MacKinnon, who shrugged.

“If that’s the case, you’re lost. The loch is that way.” She pointed over the tree tops.

Bain stammered, “We’re...”

Mustang’s fists clenched; the ground tremored.

Both men recoiled, glancing around at pebbles jarred loose and rolling down the incline.

“You’d better get back to your friends,” she advised, urging her mount past them.

MacKinnon pursued her at a quick pace. “Ye... dinnae understand.”

An auburn head whipped toward him. “There’s nothing to understand. Be on your way, *please*.”

Bain's long legs allowed him to duck through the trees and get ahead of her, blocking her progress. The roan shied and, had she not been such an experienced rider, Mustang would've landed in the bushes.

The incident angered her further, causing another jolt beneath their feet.

"What do you *want*?" she demanded.

The lad averted his gaze from her blazing hazel orbs. "M'mum's cousin's step-father's college roommate... before he died... told a story about his greatest invention being buried at Boleskine..."

"Oh, hell..." muttered Mustang through grit teeth, stroking the horse's mane in a soothing motion.

MacKinnon tugged Bain's t-shirt sleeve. "C'mon, Campbell. We're nae welcome here."

The forlorn duo trudged toward the gravel drive; Mustang felt no sympathy for them.

Still...

If a long-dead associate of Jack Parsons had been allowed to construct some contraption that he felt compelled to hide from prying eyes, she didn't want those who believed the tale to repeatedly invade her privacy...

"Wait a minute!" she called, dismounting and tethering the roan at the corral. "Where did your cousin's mother's step-father supposedly bury this invention?"

Bain flashed that smile. "M' mum's cousin's step-father's college roommate."

"Whatever."

Long fingers extracted a small black leather notebook from the hip pocket of his jeans. He flipped the pages. "In the cellar o' the house."

Mustang shifted toward the dwelling she occupied. "There's no cellar..." She nearly choked on the words. What fates had driven Glenn MacDonough to mention the Gate Lodge cellar that very morning? And, what about the creaking hinges and loud moans?

On impulse, she grabbed Bain's forearm and guided him toward the crumbling edifice. "C'mon."

MacKinnon brought up the rear, himself beaming with excitement.

"You came down from Inverness?" she inquired.

Bain corrected, "Glasgow."

"For a *picnic*?"

"We came on a bus," MacKinnon supplied. "From St. Jude's Hospital."

"You're... patients?"

“Loonies,” Bain declared.

Mustang halted and whirled on them. “Huh?”

MacKinnon patted her shoulder. “We’re harmless.”

“Well medicated,” added Bain cheerfully.

The girl had gone head-to-head with the mentally-ill before, including quite recently. She’d discovered her command over the natural elements didn’t function as expected when dealing with those whose minds defied the norm...

“I’m bipolar,” Bain continued. “Fergus hears voices, but he’s a genius. An electrical engineer, which is why I brought him along. Depending on what this invention turns out to be, he can probably make it work.”

Mustang involuntarily shivered, inhaled slowly, then proceeded along the drive.

II

Campbell Bain and Fergus MacKinnon weren’t impressed by the Gate Lodge’s general condition. Mustang momentarily regretted not instructing Glenn MacDonough to restore the modest domicile at the same time he renovated Boleskine House - as a shrine to her late grandfather, if nothing else.

Then, again, she wished to forget what had happened during her short acquaintance with Jack Parsons, his gruesome death and its aftermath.

She led the pair toward the back, where MacDonough’s boot prints remained an indication of the approximate location of the cellar hatch.

Neither Bain nor MacKinnon seemed keen on ripping up thorny vines to access the metal plates without protective gloves.

Mustang could have left them there, fetching pairs of rugged work gloves from the barn; a quicker way existed.

“Go, find a thick branch,” she instructed. “We’ll need it to pry the doors open after years of being closed.”

No more had they shuffled toward the tree line, than creepers retreated like startled snakes from discolored steel panels, which summarily parted like a butterfly’s wings.

Reappearing with a suitable length of wood, the men gaped at her. Bain even reached over to squeeze her upper arm, testing her muscle tone.

“For a wee lass, you’re awfully strong,” drawled MacKinnon.

She wasn’t about to reveal the truth. Once they reclaimed whatever invention lay below, they’d be gone and out of her hair.

Iron rungs bolted to a cement block wall showed indications of severe deterioration, but sunlight illuminated the floor ten feet below. An agile man could jump that distance...

“Ha’ ye a rope?” Bain asked.

In the barn, certainly, but fetching it wasn’t on Mustang’s agenda.

MacKinnon shoved open the Gate Lodge’s rear door, hunting for the necessities. He emerged five minutes later with a folding aluminum ladder and a flashlight - torch, in these parts. He flipped the switch on the latter without the bulb activating.

“Needs batteries,” he sputtered.

Mustang cleared her throat, and a shaft cut through the gloom shrouding the hole.

A blood-curdling howl preempted their descent.

Bain croaked, “What the devil...”

“A wolf, maybe, protecting her cubs,” speculated Mustang, shivering.

“Or a bear.”

MacKinnon shuddered. “Whatever it is, I’m nae going down there.”

“Chicken,” Bain taunted.

“Then, you go.”

If left to their own resources, Mustang realized this ordeal could take the rest of the day. She hissed, “Silent and motionless,” before maneuvering herself onto the off-balance ladder.

“Are ye sure, lassie?” MacKinnon rumbled.

Bain interspersed, “We dinnae know your name, in the event somethin’ happens, and we need to make a report to the police.”

“Don’t you dare!” she warned. “Besides, nothing *will* happen.”

“How can you be sure?”

Was his Scottish burr more pronounced due to anxiety? she wondered, testing the packed dirt floor for solidity.

This area reeked of damp, but held nothing of value, being just a cubicle where perishable foodstuffs might have been stored in the era before refrigeration became readily available to those living so far from the city. As the light arced along the walls, she saw a heavy, riveted door on the east surface, fitted with an oversized rung of twisted metal in lieu of a knob.

And, a tarnished brass double cylinder deadbolt.

Even without the need of a key, Mustang nevertheless would not enter the chamber alone.

“C’mon down,” she called.

The loonies, as they'd deemed themselves, were not about to let a female take risks they hesitated to attempt. Bain descended first, MacKinnon relying on him to hold the ladder steady.

"Give it a yank, then," Mustang urged, stepping aside.

The scraping of metal on metal - the door against its frame - nearly deafened the trio. They created a gap wide enough for them to slip through, perspiration glistening on their brows from the exertion.

A flashlight with far greater capacity would be required to fully illuminate the room within, Mustang realized. Or, groping around the clammy surface near the door, she flipped a switch, activating a series of unshielded fixtures running the length of the space.

"Oh, hell..." she gasped at this initial view of the contents.

A laboratory that would make most scientists envious.

Beakers, test tubes and glass piping had accumulated quite the layer of dust, as had lengthy steel tables supporting experimental apparatus. MacKinnon slipped on splintered steps onto rough-hewn planks, recovering quickly, awed by electrical equipment wired into the main generator control panel.

Browsing the aisle between tables on casters, Bain was the first to catch sight of the surgical instruments and the autoclave, used to sterilize them, in the far corner. "Look at this!" he hailed.

Neither Mustang nor MacKinnon hurried to join him, each enthralled by implements on display, among them an unusual type of bed covered with a cracked glass case and hooked by tubes to an unmarked silver cylinder containing oxygen or other gaseous substance. When Bain removed a mouldering linen sheet from a tall set of shelves, shrieking in terror, they rapidly moved in that direction.

Then reversed, stunned by the stench of decaying flesh.

Disjointed remains of animals - legs, organs, skulls - had attracted maggots and rodents that fed on the dead.

Mustang sensed she would vomit, searching for a container to avoid spewing on the floor.

She detected a pair of disfigured bare feet visible beneath an open cabinet door and cringed. Her eyes moving upward, she saw misshapen fingers holding the metal in place, as if hiding behind it.

Was this what she'd commanded to be silent and motionless?

Delicately, she moved dented tin forward.

"Oh, hell..."

MacKinnon yelped as the lab's secret was exposed. "Oh, *bloody* hell!"

Bain didn't utter a sound, rushing toward the exit with long strides.

Less than 90 seconds saw the three collapsed on mossy earth beneath a brilliant afternoon sun, the lab door wedged shut and locked, cellar hatch slammed in place.

“What... the divil *was* that?” squawked Bain, lungs heaving from exertion.

Mustang, though flustered, retained a calm facade. “Better to say ‘who’ was that.”

“You mean, it’s alive?” MacKinnon snorted.

“There’s one way to find out.”

Mentally, she released the being from constraints she had placed upon it; a heart-wrenching groan escaped the subterranean facility and reverberated through the forest. Animals sheltered nearby raised a frightened din with their own voices, scurrying away through the brush.

The pounding she’d heard that morning resumed, its force redoubled. Now, she grasped how enraged fists assailed steel layers, begging for release.

Rising, Mustang deliberated why she’d never heard the noises prior to that day.

If this... this... *invention* had been buried in a man-made tomb for decades...

She glowered at Bain. “This cousin’s mother’s step-father...”

“M’ mum’s cousin’s step-father’s college roommate.”

“Whatever.” She waved away the family connection. “If he invented *that*... why didn’t he destroy it, or take it with him when he left?”

“I dinnae ha’ a clue,” grumbled Bain. He consulted the miniature notebook. “While his writing is hard to read, all I can make out is that he fell ill, and ne’er could work again.”

“Leaving *that*... to fend for itself?”

The youth shrugged.

“How old are you, anyway?” asked Mustang above the clamor.

“Nineteen.”

The same age as her, though far less experienced in life. But, then, he hadn’t been obliged to deal with abilities capable of destroying the planet, or transporting her across the globe with a word.

He’d been incarcerated in the psychiatric ward of a Glasgow hospital, drugged to keep him compliant with established protocols.

“What about you, Fergus?” she persisted.

“I’m 27.”

“Educated at university?”

“Aye. I was sectioned shortly after I graduated.”

Mustang’s nose twitched. “Sectioned?”

“It’s Scottish law, under Section 26, that anyone who poses a danger to themselves or others can be involuntarily committed to hospital for a set period of time, with their recovery periodically evaluated.”

“Wow. That sucks.”

“Aye.”

Bain chirped, “But, we are loonies, and we are proud!”

“Good for you.” Mustang couldn’t muffle her laughter.

She extended her hand; he clasped it and she jerked him upright.

“What now?” he prodded.

“Are you hungry?”

MacKinnon smirked broadly. “He’s always hungry.”

“Either of you know how to cook?”

No response.

“All right. Hamburgers and chips - as you call them over here - and maybe a salad.”

Bain and MacKinnon jostled each other. “Better than we’d get in Glasgow!” they chorused.

“What about a booze up?” proposed the younger of the pair.

Mustang’s stumbled over a tree root. “Huh?”

“I’ve always said: the first thing I’d do when I get discharged is have a good booze up with m’ mates.”

“I still...”

MacKinnon clarified, “He means getting pissed.”

The term meant nothing to Mustang.

“Drunk.”

“Ah!” Her shoulders drooped. “Unfortunately, there’s no liquor in the house.”

Bain’s enthusiasm waned. “Bugger all.”

The trio tramped along the gravel drive.

Mustang pressed, “When are you due back in Glasgow?”

“Who knows?” Bain answered.

“But, if you’re patients...”

“A bunch o’ us convinced the nurses and doctors we’re well enough t’ go on a wee trip to the countryside, so the hospital’s bus...”

“Where are the others?”

“Wi’ the nurses at the loch.”

“Won’t they notice you’re... absent?”

MacKinnon scoffed. “How not?”

“Won’t they come looking for you?” Something she dreaded.

“Nae,” countered Bain. “Fergus is a right escape artist, but they know he always comes back.”

“Even with it getting late, and it being a long drive back to Glasgow?”

“Aye. They will nae worry about us.”

No, she’d do enough worrying for all of them.

Bain and MacKinnon made themselves at home in the Georgian mansion’s living room while Mustang busied herself in the kitchen. When she checked on them - between grilling half-pound burgers over an open flame outside the kitchen door and cutting vegetables for the salad - she found them hovering over the inlaid chess board in the midst of a game.

Loony, yet intelligent? she mused. Except, loony wasn’t a politically correct term. Mentally ill, perhaps? She’d so disassociated herself from the news that she’d lost track of current trends.

Setting plates on the aluminum dinette table, she pondered whether they’d told her the truth about their presence at Loch Ness. She’d had scant interaction with the United Kingdom’s health care system, of which Scotland was part, beyond being temporarily confined on Inverness’ psychiatric wing after she’d confessed to the police about killing her grandfather.

That whole ordeal sparked a gut-churning awareness of her connection with nature: the wrist and ankle straps had loosed at her verbal decree, and she’d walked off the ward, unimpeded.

“Come and get it!” she hollered, beef patties sizzling on the platter she carried across the threshold.

Fortunately, she’d cooked enough for each of her guests to consume two burgers, complete with buns and ample toppings. Butterscotch Angel Delight for dessert satisfied their respective sweet teeth, as well.

“May we finish our chess game?” MacKinnon petitioned after depositing his dishes in the sink.

Their hostess responded, “Sure,” before hinting, “What time will the bus be leaving for... home?”

“Oh, they’re gone already,” commented Bain.

Mustang stiffened.

They’d played her like a two-bit fiddle.

“We will nae be any trouble,” MacKinnon promised. “We’re used t’ sleeping rough.”

“You mean, hitch-hiking back to Glasgow?”

“Aye.”

“You’re... you’re...” She couldn’t say “crazy,” even though that’s what she believed.

With four spare bedrooms, only one of which was furnished, the men could sleep indoors... She vaguely recalled a folding cot stuffed in one of the otherwise empty closets, used by the construction crew who alternated keeping guard on the house while the renovations were ongoing.

Besides, their clothes needed washing, splashed with mud and muck from their underground expedition.

Resigned to her dilemma, she delivered two sets of sweats to the well-appointed guest room. When MacKinnon reappeared, his frame filled the oversized red garments well. Bain’s purple sleeves and pants rode up on his limbs, being far taller than Mustang.

She’d arranged the cot in the vacant bedroom at the back, hoping if either snored, the distance would muffle the din.

What, though, would muffle the recurring background noise of pounding and copious sobbing, audible through the peculiar silence that shrouded the estate?

“I will nae be able t’ sleep wi’ that ruckus,” MacKinnon acknowledged, joining Mustang as she finished rinsing dishes and arranging them in the drying rack.

“Have you any solution to the problem?”

“From what I saw, ‘tis nae human.”

“Agreed.”

“‘Tis Frankenstein’s monster, resurrected.”

“Or, recreated.” She wiped her hands on a tea towel and threaded it through a drawer handle. “How much did Campbell tell you about this... inventor?”

“Nae much. He ga’ me a look at the notebook, but I could nae read the handwritin’.”

“In the morning, we’ve got to go back down there.”

MacKinnon shuddered. “Nae. Nae e’en at gunpoint.”

Mustang grasped that she couldn’t compel either of them to abide by her mandate; their mental state precluded employing her powers.

If she must, she’d go alone.

When she turned, Bain stood beneath the lintel, solemn. “Where do I sleep?”

“Your feet would hang off the cot,” said Mustang. “So, you get the bed.”

MacKinnon muttered a subdued, “Cheers,” as he trod toward the room where the canvas stretched on a wobbly frame had been provided with a pillow, sheets and blanket.

Bain lingered in the hall, uncertain.

“What is it?” prompted Mustang.

“Ye are angry wi’ us.”

“Not angry, just... confused. You don’t want to make me full-blown angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“I swear, we’ll get this sorted come first light.”

He started to close the bedroom door; Mustang blocked it.

“Campbell, do you know the name of the inventor who buried that... creature?”

“Aye.”

She waited; he said nothing.

“Well?”

“Best he be forgotten, gi’n what we found.”

“That’s a cop-out. The only way we can figure out how to handle this mess is by digging up all we can about him...”

“His name was Charles Matthys.”

Mustang withdrew her hand from the wood. “Oh, hell...”

III

A disjointed memory swirled in Mustang Duryea’s brain like the clothes agitating in the washing machine before her.

She’d been sitting in the parlor on a well-worn sofa in her grandmother’s Massachusetts home, while the old woman reminisced about her younger sibling as they browsed through a scrapbook’s yellowed pages. Charles Matthys had been an up-and-coming biological scientist in the mid-20th century, acquainted with Jack Parsons through their work at Cal Tech.

Charles had introduced Sylvia to Parsons...

Charles was Mustang’s great-uncle.

According to Sylvia, he’d received a hefty federal grant to research and develop chemical weapons. In the course of his trials, he’d gushed to his sister over dinner one evening how he’d accidentally discovered the “secret of life.”

That Charles, possibly rejected by the university’s administrators for unsanctioned experiments, would have sought refuge with Parsons in Scotland in order to continue his work...

Sent to Boleskine by Sylvia, perhaps the only person who knew Parsons had survived the explosion of fulminate of mercury that supposedly caused his death?

The same way that aging matriarch had arranged before her death for her granddaughter to seek out the co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory?

“Oh, hell...”

Jack Parsons never mentioned Charles Matthys in his journals. Mustang couldn't consult those volumes, however, since they remained hidden behind the drywall at the back of her bedroom closet on her father's Montana horse ranch.

She could read what Charles himself had written, though, in the notebook Campbell Bain had brought with him on this outing from Glasgow.

Trembling hands rinsed off remnants of laundry soap in the utility sink; the rag towel used to dry her palms was tossed toward a wall hook, arcing short, falling to the floor.

Mustang ignored it, reviewing the past few hours to deduce where the young man had left the black leather diary.

She'd emptied his jean pockets prior to tossing them in the washer, finding nothing but loose change and an empty cigarette packet. Few lights still burning in the otherwise quiet dwelling, she checked the living room - he might have left it near the chess board - and the kitchen, in case he set it on the counter or the table.

No luck.

He must've transferred it to the sweats when he changed clothes, she reasoned, and now slept with it on the guest room's double bed.

Or...

Bare feet crept through the crack in the door - Bain was probably not accustomed to sleeping in a room by himself, if the hospital where he was a patient provided him a bed on an open ward. He might even suffer from claustrophobia on top of his bipolar diagnosis.

As she suspected, his height caused him to lay at an angle on the mattress, to prevent his feet from dangling over the end. He'd shed the sweats and might be naked beneath the quilt, for all she knew. His breathing even, he didn't stir as she plucked the garments off the braided area rug and groped in the pockets.

Nothing.

Mustang sucked air through grit teeth as distant banging on the subterranean metal door vibrated the window panes.

Had the creature fallen asleep from exhaustion, she contemplated, only to awaken and renew its efforts to free itself?

Moonlight through open curtains played about the night stand, where the Mistress of Boleskine recognized the notebook. As she extended her arm, twig-like fingers seized her wrist.

She jumped backward, yanking Bain off the pillows so they both landed on the floor.

And started to giggle as they untangled themselves from twisted sheets.

“What were ye doin’?” queried the Scottish teen.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, until that bangin’ started up again.” He rose, lifting her to her feet with an effortless motion.

Painfully thin, yet hardy, Mustang realized.

“Ye didn’t answer m’question.”

No need for guilt. “I need to see what Charles Matthys wrote about his experiments.”

“If I cannae read his writin’, what makes ye think ye can?”

She wasn’t going to explain about the power that allowed her brain to translate almost any language, and would undoubtedly decipher illegible script.

“I’ve got to try.”

Bain’s gold-flecked brown eyes glowered at her. “Ye know who he was?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“Who?”

“My grandmother’s brother.”

She could almost see the gears grinding inside Bain’s skull. If Matthys had been his mother’s cousin’s step-father’s college roommate, did that make the two teens relatives?

“I’m in no mood to diagram how we’re *not* related,” she mumbled. “Will you let me have a look at the notebook?”

Bain bent, as if to touch his toes; nimble digits plucked the item from where it had slid beneath the wooden frame. “Aye. Just dinnae lose it.”

“I won’t.” Mustang spun toward the door, then reversed. “May I ask you a question?”

“Aye.”

“Why are you named Campbell? In the States, that’s the name of a company that makes soup.”

He snickered in that melodic register. “M’ mum’s family are Campbells. M’ dad’s are Bains. It’s an old tradition for the son to be named after both.”

“Oh, I get it.” In her opinion, a rather idiotic tradition.

Bain stared through smudged glass at the stars. "Is there any way ye can stop that racket? I really need some sleep."

A wry smile accompanied Mustang's mental directive for the creature to suspend its assault on the steel panel.

The Glaswegian believed the cessation of the noise a fortunate coincidence, and that's how his hostess preferred it. He twirled toward her, youthful countenance bathed in shadows. "One o' the things I plan t' do when I'm released from hospital is lose m' virginity. Bein' 19, I think 'tis time t' lose m' virginity."

The young woman tensed.

"I hope 'tis wi' someone as special as ye," came the compliment.

She summarily bid him good night and withdrew, concern about missed medication - both his and MacKinnon's - gnawing at her.

Switching the load of clothes into the dryer, Mustang retired in the living room to peruse Charles Matthys' jottings from the years 1959-1965. The scribbles worse than many doctor's, she stirred embers on the fireplace grate and added another log as the ink adjusted itself into more comprehensible variations of the descriptions, then settled on the cane-backed rocking chair.

By the time she reached the last page on which anything had been written, her stomach churned in revulsion. This man's blood ran in her veins - diluted, of course, by that of the Duryea clan - but, still...

Could she be capable of such abuses as recorded on these sheets?

Her throat constricted...

She already had.

The only difference: she hadn't warped living tissue into a hideous brute, she'd destroyed the living without so much as a flick of her finger.

And, would do so again, if the predictions of Samuel Clemens, Mahatma Gandhi, St. Francis of Assisi and German General Erwin Rommel rang true.

Her persistent lack of self-control boded ill.

Just as Charles Matthys' failure to limit his experiments had unleashed hell on the world.

Bad enough, he'd willingly sold his soul for a \$200,000 grant offered by desk jockeys from the Pentagon to manipulate common viruses into deadly killers. As that process proved futile, he veered onto a tangent, splicing genes from a plethora of mammals, injecting the results into a captive chimpanzee and, as he described it, "letting nature take its course."

What a course!

After the mutated chimp died in agony, its distilled blood was injected into rats that became rabidly violent. Progressive mutations were inflicted on other animals.

Mustang didn't understand many of the technical, scientific terms, and hadn't the energy at that hour to hunt for a dictionary - not that she owned one. She estimated the creature seeking to escape from the Matthys' lab amounted to a pig-dog-rat-ape-cow-squirrel-wolf-human.

The latter occurred when vials of the serum from the scientist's latest victim - what else could these lab specimens be called? - waiting for analysis, were inadvertently mixed in with inoculations intended for Edinburgh university students participating in trials of a new vaccine to prevent measles.

Meaning, Matthys had transplanted his work to Scotland by then.

Of the six jabbed with syringes containing the wrong formula, five died within days. The sixth morphed over 18 months into the captive of the cellar.

Matthys should've ceased his operations when the Cal Tech board ousted him from their campus, his great-niece mused. The phrasing of subsequent entries left no doubt he'd passed from scientific curiosity into complete madness.

He'd become Frankenstein, cobbling together his monster.

He'd even tested the solution on himself - an option anathema to any ethical researcher.

That's what led to his death, if the final insane ramblings were to be trusted. As his own physiognomy initiated an unsustainable transformation, he rushed to devise a make-shift cryogenic unit, freezing the deformed graduate student until any successors to his work could undo the errors he'd made.

Matthys left Jack Parsons in charge of the lab, to ensure the unit functioned properly.

After Parsons' death at Mustang's own hand, no one had ventured down to the cellar...

Whether caused by a refrigerant leak or power outage, the creature had thawed, now seeking to escape its prison.

Fergus MacKinnon, mullet tousled and eyes bleary, stumbled into the living room as dawn broke over Boleskine House with pastel hues. He sank with a thud on the green sofa and began rearranging the chess pieces for a game.

"Would you like some hot chocolate?" offered Mustang.

"Only if ye can guarantee 'twill stay down."

"Huh?"

"I can tell ye are goin' back to that hole and will need our help t'... deal wi' that... abomination. Whatever happens, I fear m' stomach will nae like it."

“You’re probably right.”

“I usually am.”

The teen squinted at this uninvited visitor. “How’d you... end up where you are?”

“I hear voices, and I made the mistake of *tellin’* people I hear voices.”

“What do the voices say?”

“Mostly that I’m a stupid bastard.”

Mustang hid a chuckle behind her hand. “In a way, I’m always telling myself that, with some others reminding me of the same.”

“Others?”

Uncombed auburn tresses bobbed as she nodded.

“How so?”

“I... there are... I can...” How could she - should she - explain about those she’d raised from their graves?

Obviously intelligent, despite his mental illness, he might actually understand her predicament.

Yet, if he divulged her secret upon his return to the Glasgow hospital, the men in the white coats might come for her.

Better she keep quiet.

“Your clothes are in the dryer, if you want to get dressed,” she announced.

“Cheers.” He rose. “I’ll roust Campbell...”

“It’s early; let him rest.”

MacKinnon’s smile implied a roguish nature. “Not too early for our... friends t’ be comin’ for us.”

“Friends?”

He leaned against the doorframe. “Y’see, we engineered this trip so some o’ the patients could have a couple days away from hospital. It gets very borin’ inside those walls.”

“The plan being that you’d leave them behind...”

“Aye. The staff could nae go back t’ Glasgow and report two o’ our lot missin’. When they dinnae find us yesterday, they stopped at one o’ the hotels in Inverness, startin’ the search again this mornin’.”

“Why, you crafty...” Mustang felt herself grinning.

“It’s our gift t’ those wi’ little hope o’ e’er bein’ released.”

“What about you and Campbell?”

“Campbell’s not been sectioned. He was committed by his parents, and is up for review in a few weeks. Me? I think the staff would be glad t’ be rid o’ me.”

“Why?”

“I escape three times a week, or more.”

“Why?”

He tapped his temple lightly. “Keeps me thinkin’. Inventing ways t’ get out o’ the buildin’. Makes the others laugh, too.”

“You always return?”

“I need food an’ a bed.”

Practical.

Mustang headed for the kitchen, then changed her mind about eating a bowl of cereal, based on MacKinnon’s dire prognosis. Better to wait until after...

Twenty minutes later, Bain and MacKinnon joined her on the front stoop in their own gear. They lifted her by the arms and carried her along the gravel drive as her legs dangled in mid-air.

“Put me down, you... you...” she protested.

Bain countered, “We need t’ get this sorted.”

“I just received a text that the bus is on its way,” MacKinnon proclaimed. “Since ye cannae do this alone...”

The young woman spouted, “Says who?”

“Ye are a girl...”

An electrical current contracted their muscles; Mustang landed on the rocky surface, momentarily off-balance. Lightning flashed overhead, thunder rumbled, a microburst of wind uprooted nearby trees.

“What the devil...” croaked Bain.

Mustang smoothed the fabric of her grey sweats. “I may be a girl, but I’m unlike any girl you’ve ever met. We don’t need to go down that ladder for me to...”

MacKinnon fastened his gaze on her. “Ye would end that creature’s existence wi’out first lookin’ it in the eye?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“Maybe ye belong in St. Jude’s wi’ us.” No humor tinged his baritone. “Ye are quite the psychotic.”

She boasted, “No hospital, no prison cell, can hold me.”

“Ye dinnae know Stuart,” quipped Bain.

“Stuart?”

“The nurse assistant on our ward. He’s a right mean sod. He’ll get ye in a choke hold and put ye out...”

“I’d like to see him try.”

The patients glanced at each other, unsure whether to believe her, as the sound of heavy tires approached on the drive.

“Ach, here comes our transport,” stated MacKinnon.
Bain sprinted toward the trees. “They’ll ha’ t’ find us first!”

IV

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang Duryea didn’t have the knees to race after the tall, sandy-haired Campbell Bain. Nor, evidently, did Fergus MacKinnon, whose physique more resembled a rugby player. Nonetheless, they ducked into the woods before the white bus with “St. Jude’s Hospital” painted on the side rounded the curve.

The couple navigated prickly undergrowth until they caught their companion near the metal hatch leading to the cellar beneath the deteriorated Gate Lodge.

“I can’t figure it,” murmured Mustang.

MacKinnon wondered, “What?”

“Charles Matthys didn’t live here with Jack Parsons. There isn’t enough space for two people. Where did he stay, then?”

“Maybe he slept” - Bain pointed below - “down there.”

Mustang shuddered. “That would... creep me out. No fresh air, no sunlight...”

“There had t’ be fresh air,” said MacKinnon. “Vents or somethin’.”

“I didn’t see any...”

“We were nae lookin’ for ‘em.”

“True.”

Straining male arms lifted the rusted panels, hinges grating. Mustang scrambled down the ladder, jerking open the reinforced steel door to the lab.

“Where’d ye get the key for the lock, if ye dinnae know any o’ this was here?” MacKinnon prodded.

She couldn’t confess that the tumblers fell into place at her silent instructions.

Coming face-to-face with the creature, standing mere inches beyond the threshold, didn’t allow for further conversation, anyway.

“Oh, hell!”

She recoiled, colliding with her escorts.

The lights had been left on and, thus illuminated, the creature’s misshapen form - covered, toga-style, by a moth-eaten army blanket - was more clearly visible than when they’d viewed it so briefly the previous afternoon. It yowled its own

fright upon encountering these intruders, the alignment of the jaws and few, discolored teeth making it impossible for words to be articulated.

The mouth partially obscured by fur-like, mangy dark hair sprouting from every pore - as was what might have passed for a nose or snout - Mustang could only guess what the clouded black orbs were capable of seeing. Stooped, as with osteoporosis or a severe curvature of the spine, it could not walk upright, but shuffled with a sideways motion as it retreated in terror.

Its left hand appeared semi-human, with five arthritic fingers, though the arm was shriveled and resembled that of a rodent's leg. The right appendage ended in a hoof. What might've been the ribcage and torso seemed crushed or inverted, suspended above the hind legs of a canine.

Whether the student-victim had been male or female could not be determined.

"Ach, Jesus," huffed Bain. "God forgive the twisted git who did this t' ye!"

Mustang swallowed a bubbling hysteria, speaking but not facing her companions. "All right. We've seen it. May I do what must be done?"

MacKinnon concurred, "Aye. Put it out o' its misery."

"What means will ye' use?" Bain inquired. "Ye ha' no pistol, no knife..."

That teen would never know how the most effective weapon possessed by a lass his own age existed in her own mind.

Before she could take merciful action, though, the creature lunged at them.

Mustang reacted on impulse, preventing this hideous assailant from making contact. The mutation exploded, blood and chunks of tissue scattered in all directions.

Bain and MacKinnon stumbled to the outer chamber, retching on the packed dirt flooring. Mustang subdued her own nausea; her work remained incomplete.

She couldn't cave in the roof, since the cellar had been excavated directly beneath the Gate Lodge. Or, had the Gate Lodge been constructed to conceal the bunker, long before Charles Matthys ever considered making use of the space?

The Mistress of Boleskine didn't care in that instant, coated with foul-smelling muck. She noticed a portable Bunsen burner on the table to her left, igniting the methane.

The entire contents of the lab would be consumed by fire, including Matthys' notebook, which she extracted from the grey sweats and pitched toward the flames.

She passed beneath the lintel and shoved the heavy door closed. It locked automatically, not that anyone would ever set foot inside again. She dodged

puddles of gastric fluids, climbing the ladder as Bain and MacKinnon realized their attire would again need to be laundered.

Above ground, Mustang cleansed her hair and garments of putrid slime via a gentle breeze. She listened attentively, detecting glass shattering under intense heat, the collapse of cheap shelving and metal tables...

Her visitors ascended unsteadily, repulsed by their own filth. Bain scowled at his hostess. "How'd ye..."

"Head to the house and get showered. I'll throw your clothes in the wash."

"But, the bus..."

"I'm sure your friends, and the staff, will be glad for a second picnic on the shores of Loch Ness," Mustang suggested. "I'll supply the food and drink."

"Aye, that should do," MacKinnon remarked.

Bain interspersed, "But, we dinnae eat breakfast yet!"

Mustang favored him with a stern expression. "Are you really hungry, this minute?"

He hung his head, licking ill-tasting lips.

MacKinnon tugged him through the undergrowth.

While the men trod toward the mansion, Mustang finished the task with which she'd charged herself. The cellar hatch lowered into place, welded shut by nature's own elements. Plants converged once more on the site, stems weaving into ornate, unbreakable knots and obscuring the surface.

Normally, she would've erased memories of the past 24 hours for those involved - including herself - as she'd done under similar, unpleasant circumstances. Bain and MacKinnon, with their mental issues, might suffer inexplicable repercussions if she issued the command, so she dismissed the notion.

As for herself: this debacle involved her own family history, and could come back to bite her in the form of FBI agents like Ben Espinoza, trying to blackmail her into complying with government initiatives. If she couldn't remember the truth, she might be vulnerable to their lies.

The dwarf bus from St. Jude's in Glasgow, its capacity 15 occupants, idled on the drive near the Georgian mansion when she emerged from the trees. A medical scrub-clad figure lingered on the stoop, waiting for a response to her knock. Six eager faces of various ages were pressed against the vehicle's tinted glass, watching them.

"May I help you?" Mustang hailed.

"We're looking for..." started the buxom black woman, casting a sideways glance at the male poised on the step.

The Mistress of Boleskine supplied, “Campbell Bain and Fergus MacKinnon?”

“Aye.” This in a harsh tone. Balding, with a lame excuse of a tail amidst an otherwise close-cropped mop, a skull earring dangling from his left lobe, wearing a Black Sabbath t-shirt and stained jeans, he must be the Stuart both patients had referenced.

“They’re inside, getting ready. You’re all invited to a picnic across the road by the lake - er... loch.”

The nurse managed a weak smile. “That’s very kind of you, but we’re already overdue in Glasgow...”

“Your friends would be most welcome to help me with my horses.”

Mustang recalled how, on rare occasions when her father was in a generous mood, he would allow a team who worked with the mentally and physically disabled to use horses from the ranch in their therapy sessions.

Indeed, those inside the bus perked up, left their seats and alighted without permission.

Stuart moved toward the group, his drawn features warped with disdain.

Mustang comprehended that such a man had no place working in a health care setting, where compassion and positivity were key to effective treatment.

Whether he froze in his tracks in compliance with the nurse’s dictate or the teen’s unspoken prohibition would never be certain. Mustang led the procession to the barn, where her five acquisitions waited in their stalls for ample portions of fresh water and oats.

A tour of the tack room and the storage bins familiarized the newcomers with the layout before they assisted their guide with filling buckets and troughs. When Mustang mentioned how appreciative she would be if they could help her exercise the animals, their smiles radiated pure joy.

Stuart was recruited to assist with saddling the roans; the reprimand had tempered his aggressive attitude. Isabel, as the nurse introduced herself, held the reins as the wild-haired Francine and prim Rosalie were assisted onto their mounts. The bus driver, a psychiatrist who’d volunteered to lead the excursion on his day off, entwined the leather of the other two horses through his fingers as the ungainly Billy and nerdish Hector swung their legs over broad backs, with Mustang adjusting their stirrups.

From Boleskine’s front door, Bain and MacKinnon, hair still damp, garbed in the previous day’s sweats, marveled at the sight of their mates enjoying leisurely circuits of the corral. Mustang shooed the pair back inside, granting permission to raid the pantry and cabinets for every bit of food available.

By the time everyone who wished - Bain refused, citing a fear of horses - had a turn as aspiring equestrians, the lads' spoiled clothes had completed the wash and dry cycle. Bain's patchwork hoodie lent a splash of color to the paper sacks he toted, while MacKinnon looked dapper in his dress shirt, a duffel filled with paper plates, napkins and cups.

Lunch meat, cheese, loaves of bread, vegetables, condiments, bags of crisps - as the British termed potato chips - and chocolate cupcakes made for a basic but filling lunch. Despite her depleted supplies, and her grocery delivery three days hence, Mustang hadn't enjoyed herself so much in years.

Probably because these folks had no agenda. They didn't crave her power, were unaware of her ability to control nature on a whim. They reveled in the simple pleasures of life, because they lacked such experiences as constant inmates on a hospital's locked wing.

"Isabel." Mustang signaled to the nurse as she monitored her charges tossing pebbles into the water from the shoreline.

"We're grateful for your hospitality, Your Ladyship."

Where'd she learned...

Isabel smirked. "Oh, the shopkeeper in Dores mentioned you liked to keep to yourself, but we had no choice when those two" - she wagged an index finger toward Bain and MacKinnon - "took off. Yours was the only place they could've found shelter last night, and bless you for taking them in."

"They were perfect gentlemen," praised Mustang. "Only..."

"They can be a bit overwhelming to someone who doesn't deal with them on a daily basis."

"It's not that. I just wondered about whether their medication..."

"Skipping a dose or two poses little danger. Fergus just shuts down in such instances, and actually stops trying to escape."

Mustang laughed at the prospect. "And, Campbell?"

"He could go either way, having a manic episode, or threatening... well..."

The teen patted the nurse's arm. "Bless *you* for caring about them."

"They're... marvelous people in... difficult straits." She shepherded the patients up the incline to where Rosalie and Francine had gathered the refuse into neat piles and were folding the blankets on which they'd reclined.

Mustang recognized the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder.

"Time to go!" Isabel announced, to a chorus of disappointment. "Say good-bye, and thanks, to Lady Elizabeth as you get on the bus."

Rosalie voiced her appreciation, holding her hands behind her back.

Mustang made no comment about the slight. Francine mustered the tiniest grin, her

eyes hidden behind curly black fringe. The male patients wrung their benefactor's hand with genuine enthusiasm. Isabel hugged her; Stuart muttered something unintelligible, and the driver/psychiatrist complimented her on her sensitivity to their plight.

"We'll avoid a formal reprimand when we tell the administrators we were the guests of Lady Neville."

"My pleasure."

Bain and MacKinnon prolonged their contemplation of Loch Ness' rippling waters until Isabel shouted at them from the bus steps. Mustang moved to collect the meal's leftovers...

"Ye'll ne'er make it t' the house wi' all that," Bain proclaimed. "Let us carry it for ye."

"I'll be fine. You've got to go."

Fergus might've been a schoolboy with his first crush, digging his loafer in the dirt, afraid to look at her. "Ye are... extraordinary, Lady Elizabeth."

She leaned toward his ear, whispering, "My friends call me Mustang."

That affirmation immediately dispelled his shyness. He squared his shoulders, gripped her shoulders and planted an affectionate kiss on her cheek. "Cheers, Mustang. If ye are e'er in Glasgow, come and visit us."

Not that she planned to leave Boleskine - except to replenish her funds at a casino on the French Riviera - but if she did wind up in that particular city... "I promise." Her lips brushed his cheek in kind. "Take care of yourself, Fergus."

He boarded the vehicle as Bain towered awkwardly above his hostess.

She rambled, lacking sufficient words to bid him farewell. "I know you have a healthy appetite, because you ate most of the food today." She encircled his skinny wrist with her thumb and middle finger. "But, damn, kid, you need to put some meat on your bones."

"Ye're perfect as ye are," he retorted. "I'll miss ye."

Their eyes met one last time; he raised her fingers to his mouth - how relieved she was that he didn't notice her scarred palms! - then hurried onto the bus.

As the transmission grinded into gear and wheels rolled onto the macadam, Mustang waved at the departing assembly. A tear trickled down her nose.

She knew, if she left the piles of detritus and food in place while fetching garbage bags from the house, animals would make a terrible mess in her absence. Therefore, the paper plates, utensils and wrappers disintegrated into their core elements - a practice she'd honed while clearing litter from the highway shoulders

on a periodic basis. Scraps of meat and bread remained behind as fair game for the foragers.

Blankets draped over her shoulders, not a burden and rather comforting with the temperature dropping as evening approached, Mustang trudged past the old gate's moss-encrusted posts and along the drive. She didn't fathom how exhausted she was until she flopped onto the living room's cane-backed rocker.

A lone white pawn sat two squares ahead of its comrades on the ivory inlaid table; MacKinnon had challenged her to a game, and she'd not paid heed.

Men like him - and Bain - were too few and far between. Why did they need to be plagued by mental illness?

Power-hungry, greedy examples of masculinity were deemed sane.

The world operated on a skewed set of standards.

Her right hand, which Bain had kissed, stroked her left cheek, where MacKinnon had left an invisible imprint. She might not wish to recall the tragedy of her great-uncle, Charles Matthys, and his bizarre experiments, but having the two Glaswegians standing with her had made the nightmare bearable.