

The Mustang Chronicles:

Musical Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

In her brief time living at Boleskine House, Mustang Duryea learned to enjoy riding trails around the 47 acres, exercising the five horses housed in her barn. Even though steady traffic on the B852 highway skirting the shores of Loch Ness might have disrupted her idyll, the property's numerous trees absorbed the noise, allowing her relative peace.

A sweltering August morning, however, the squeal of tires, crash of metal against a barrier and - oddly - the discordant resonance of a piano broke into her jaunt on the back of a sorrel gelding.

"Oh, hell..." she muttered, steering her mount toward the accident.

Reaching the scene, Mustang surmised the lorry had swerved to avoid some obstacle - a deer, perhaps - and slammed into the guardrail. Ropes securing the cargo, a pair of grand pianos, had ripped from the hooks, sending the instruments from the box down the bank toward the water.

The driver stood on the berm, staring down at the wreckage, muttering expletives.

Tempted to leave him to his fate, Mustang remained in the saddle on the opposite edge of the road. She'd just twitched the reins to retreat into the woods, when the man turned and she noticed his tears.

Truck drivers, as a rule, didn't weep over damaged goods, the teen grasped. This youthful figure, wearing a grey Greek fisherman's cap, denim jacket, jeans and black sneakers, could not have been a seasoned professional in the trade.

"Are you hurt?" Mustang called across the macadam.

Brown eyes glanced up, moist cheeks wiped on his sleeve. A slight Scottish burr peppered his baritone. "I'm not, but those..."

"They can be replaced."

"Nae, they can't. Not in time. They were due in Inverness for a concert tomorrow, and would've needed to be tuned beforehand..."

"Surely, there are other pianos..."

"Those are two specially-made Steinways. I scrimped and saved ten years to buy them."

That explained his emotional reaction, at least, Mustang realized. "You rent them to musicians?"

"I *am* a musician. A concert pianist. I make a point of transporting them myself, so I'll be sure they aren't..."

Mustang alighted and crossed the road. "And, now they are. I'm sorry."

“It’s not your fault. A car going south crossed the center line on the curve, and I wanted to avoid a collision...” He removed the cap, crushing it with long, elegant fingers.

At this range, the Mistress of Boleskine studied the roundish countenance, high cheekbones, and shaggy, sun-bleached light brown mane. Not more than 35, his sturdy build suited neither a truck driver nor a musician.

“What’s your name?” She suspected it a mistake to ask, but politeness won the day.

“Stuart McKay.”

She laid gentle digits on his left arm and guided him to a tree stump. “Sit here, Stuart. Let me see what I can do.”

“You can’t *do* anything...”

“You’d be surprised,” she grumbled under her breath. “Close your eyes and sleep.”

The powers bequeathed her years earlier by Jack Parsons - American scientist, occultist and her grandfather - during a bizarre ritual on the Boleskine grounds caused nature to obey her instructions. McKay slumbered, his head resting against mossy bark.

First, Mustang inspected the lorry. The radiator had been pierced by a length of steel. The vehicle rolled slowly backward and, when the front end was freed, the components repaired themselves.

She even mended the guardrail, eradicating evidence of the impact.

Shuffling to the hill above the pianos, she directed the elements to raise the expensive instruments and restore them to perfect condition, replacing them in the truck’s box.

This did not transpire without weather-related manifestations. The wind increased its speed, and the earth tremored beneath her feet. Lightning cracked in the clear sky, followed by a rumble of thunder.

So much for staying off the local radar, Mustang lamented.

When she swung onto her gelding once more, the scene resembled a driver napping beside Loch Ness during a long journey.

Stuart McKay would believe that scenario, himself, when he awoke.

Or, so she hoped.

Sadly, she miscalculated.

Emerging from the barn after grooming and feeding the horses mid-day, she recognized the pianist trudging up the winding gravel drive.

“Oh, hell...”

“Excuse me, ma’am!” he shouted. “May I use your phone?”

“Sorry, I don’t have one.” She didn’t stop, continuing toward the dwelling.

“Are there any other houses nearby, then?”

“Two miles north.” She pointed flippantly toward her neighbor Glenn MacDonough’s estate.

“Could I trouble you for a drink of water, in that case?”

Growing impatient, she demanded, “Why? What happened?”

“I have a puncture on the road, and I lost my mobile.”

“Oh, hell...” She hadn’t bothered to check the lorry’s tires, and never guessed the collision would send his cell phone flying into a ditch. “Come in, I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

“That’s very kind, but I’m on a tight deadline. If I don’t get the tire fixed, I won’t reach Inverness...”

“In time to have the pianos tuned for the concert.”

McKay’s left eyebrow arched quizzically. “How’d...”

Scolding herself for this impulsiveness, Mustang ignored his question and led him through the steel-reinforced door. She retrieved a tumbler from the kitchen cabinet, filling it from the tap.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he stated, draining the contents in one gulp. “Now, which way is the phone?”

“Never mind. By the time you walk back to the truck, you’ll forget about the flat, and find your phone.”

As if in a daze, McKay left the Georgian mansion and strode toward the highway. Listening from the threshold, Mustang waited until she heard the diesel engine rev and head north.

Simple.

A lot simpler if she’d abided by her resolution to have nothing to do with human beings in general. On every occasion she dropped her guard and tried to use her power in a positive way, she managed to create a catastrophe. If she allowed her anger to hold sway, she committed horrible mistakes, even causing the deaths of those she intended to help

Toying with chess pieces on a table beside her cane-backed rocker in the living room that afternoon, Mustang detected tires crunching gravel and drew aside thick draperies to see Glenn MacDonough’s pickup brake near the entrance.

The construction project manager rarely called, having long since completed the renovations she’d requested after leaving the States at FBI insistence. Making sure her black tresses were secure in their pony tail - deliberately altered from a natural auburn for her own protection - she greeted him on the stoop.

“Ah, Lady Elizabeth!” he hailed, using the name she’d concocted to hide her identity. “How are ye farin’ in this heat?”

“Just fine, Glenn. It’s probably worse for you on the jobsite.”

“Aye, ‘tis that.”

She invited him inside, offering him lemonade. They sat at the metal dinette table in the kitchen as MacDonough drained half the pitcher of icy liquid.

“The reason I stopped,” the aging, wispy-haired Scot finally spoke, “is t’ invite ye t’ a concert tomorrow night in Inverness. Our company is co-sponsoring the charity event, and I ha’ two tickets. Ye would be most welcome...”

“Concert?” Mustang echoed. “A piano concert?”

“Pianos will be featured, aye. The full orchestra will play, as well.”

Preferring the life of a hermit, the teen’s curiosity about Stuart McKay’s talent tempted her to accept a venture into the public realm. “I’d be delighted.”

He rose, emptying his glass. “I’m that glad. Ye dinnae get out enough, Your Ladyship. I’ll fetch ye at six o’clock, and we’ll have dinner in town beforehand. Ye have a suitable gown?”

“Of course,” Mustang bluffed.

MacDonough departed, giddy as a school boy. His hostess meandered into her bedroom and opened the antique carved oak wardrobe. Sweats of various colors, jeans, t-shirts and a parka filled the hangers.

Not one dress.

She considered her scarred palms. Easy, really, to summon lightning for a trek to Paris, where she could purchase a fashionable ensemble from the winnings she’d amassed during a visit to French Riviera casinos.

Just as she could transform piles of detritus into whole pianos, she could take any piece of existing attire and command nature to reweave the cloth into a suitable dress.

A modest, deep purple chiffon with billowing skirts.

The same technique remolded sneakers into medium-heeled black pumps.

When she took one of the roan mares for a late canter, she used trails well away from the highway. No sense jinxing her good fortune again.

On the hillock where Jack Parsons had enacted his rituals, Mustang paused to contemplate the remnants of a wooden picnic table which had doubled as his altar. Though he’d looked much younger, the man who’d been key in inventing solid fuel rocket boosters and founding the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California had lived well into old age, after being reported killed decades prior in a freak accident in his garage.

The girl dreaded how the FBI could manipulate facts and make criminals of honest people.

They'd even killed Jim Neville of the Montana State Police, who would've proposed marriage if not for the Feds' interference.

Not that she'd ever wed. The most innocent kiss could ravage buildings, as she discovered when the inebriated actor Thomas Burton expressed his affection for her after her cousin's funeral three years previous in Idaho. The roof had almost collapsed on their heads.

She couldn't imagine giving birth to a child, and what destruction each labor pain would generate.

At 19, she'd already shut herself off - mostly - from romantic notions.

She'd shut herself off from the world, owning no television, computer or radio. If humanity wished to start wars over religion or land, she would remain pleasantly oblivious.

Cleaning the stalls and replenishing them with fresh straw occupied her time. She had books to read, or played chess with the manifested images of Mark Twain, Mahatma Gandhi, Erwin Rommel or St. Francis of Assisi.

On a bi-weekly basis, she might update herself on current events when the grocer in the village of Dores sent her standing order, wrapped in discarded newspapers. The delivery boy offered his own perspective and a plethora of local gossip, as did the driver who hauled bags of feed and other supplies for the horses.

Ebony waves cascading over her shoulders, Lady Elizabeth Neville slid onto the passenger seat of Glenn MacDonough's Mercedes that Friday evening. With old-fashioned propriety, the tuxedoed gentleman escorted her to the car and held open the door, closing it only when assured her dress wouldn't be caught.

She watched the sun set as they drove north, memories of her initial trip to Scotland revived at the sight of Inverness in the distance.

Arrested for her grandfather's murder, which she'd confessed in her angst over his death, she'd bolted from the city's jail when walls crumbled at her utterance. Strapped to a bed in a psychiatric ward, the doors had unlocked themselves so she could escape the confinement.

The Eden Court Theatre overwhelmed Mustang; MacDonough patted her hand - resting in the crook of his arm - reassuringly. They proceeded to seats in the Empire Theatre, where the cream of Scottish society had gathered to support cancer research.

Curtains already drawn aside, the teen recognized two Steinways on the stage. Introduced to MacDonough's co-workers and the construction company

owners, she made no effort to remember their names. Settling on the cushion, she perused the programme, Stuart McKay's name prominent.

In the various pieces presented, Mustang heard sounds of nature, the progress of civilization, strife, madness, joy and revelry. Some melodies she recalled from classic movies she'd watched - and preferred.

McKay's proficiency on the keyboard of the massive grand enabled the girl to grasp why he'd been so possessive of the instruments. Rather than regretting her assistance, she felt justified in giving way to impulse in this particular instance.

She hadn't realized, or been informed of the reception after the concert for the sponsoring organizations, each having donated thousands to the cause. Mustang permitted Glenn MacDonough to lead her into a vast, ornate ballroom, where champagne, hors d'oeuvres, fruit and cheese were being served.

Hundreds in attendance, her brain ached with the barrage of idle conversation. A string quartet provided background music, barely audible above the din of voices. She yearned to flee, yet felt trapped by the press of bodies.

A horde of rotund matrons converged on her, prattling admiration for her gown. She pretended not to hear their inquiries about the designer. How could she answer without lying?

Spinning on her heel, she came nose-to-nose with Stuart McKay, elegant in white tie and tails. His eyes searched her face, as if struggling to resurrect a memory.

"You... play magnificently," she stammered.

"Thank you." His forehead furrowed. "I know this will sound like a line, but haven't we met before?"

"You're not from these parts, are you?"

"My father grew up in Edinburgh, my mother is from Cornwall. I've lived many places between the two cities."

"Now near London."

"How'd you..." he puzzled.

She flashed the programme, with the musician's brief biography.

He chuckled, a pleasant sound.

Another patron hailed McKay on the left. Before moving off, he grasped Mustang's hand. "Even if we've not met before, I hope we meet again."

"Be safe driving those magnificent pianos back to London," she responded, immediately biting her tongue and drawing blood.

II

“Lady Elizabeth, are ye ready t’ go?” Glenn MacDonough queried, having wound his way through the assembly to rejoin her.

“More than ready.”

She’d glimpsed Stuart McKay’s abrupt glance over his shoulder after she wished him well. She detected his turmoil: those attending the reception might know details of his life from the concert programme, but not his habit of hauling valuable cargo cross-country on that lorry.

Presuming he would stop at some Inverness hotel for the night, he’d be gone the next morning and, if she had any control over the situation, their paths would never again intersect.

As much as she longed to sleep late Saturday morning, the horses needed food and fresh water no more had the sun painted the sky with delicate pastels. She loved the animals, a life-long affection stemming from her upbringing on a Montana ranch. Their behavior so honest, she empathized with their desire to run free, without care.

The corral gave them space to roam and, after she caught an afternoon nap, she threw on gym shorts and a tank top, taking the bay mare for a gallop through Glenn MacDonough’s clearing.

He didn’t mind her trespassing; he raised his own horses and loved them as much as she did.

Racing through the grass, she sensed movement to her right and slowed her mount to a trot, shuddering. A very familiar box truck had rolled up MacDonough’s drive, the occupant jumping from the cab.

McKay!

Mustang should have anticipated he’d pass along Loch Ness en route to his next destination; her exhaustion and frustration during the reception had muddled her thought processes, she determined. That he might make inquiries about her, tracing her as MacDonough’s guest, proved his resourcefulness.

Those she’d encountered who showed such resourcefulness usually meant trouble.

Cooling the bay as she returned to Boleskine, Mustang debated ways to dissuade McKay from whatever course he’d chosen. Like as not, he wanted something - as many had in recent years - and she had to remain firm in her refusal to grant any additional favors.

Still, she’d stuck her own foot in the mess, and must deal with the consequences.

Emerging from the barn, the teen shivered with déjà vu: McKay trekking along the drive toward the mansion, as he had two days before. She almost blurted, “Another flat tire?”

She grit her teeth instead.

“Lady Elizabeth?” McKay greeted, removing the Greek fisherman’s cap, so a lock of his light brown hair flopped over his nose.

“Hello, Mr. McKay. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing special.”

“Then, why...”

“I was going to drive straight to London - I’m on holiday the next two weeks - but I decided on this alternate route so I could finish our conversation.”

Men! Mustang mused. She waited for him to continue, deliberately not wishing to make any untoward statements.

His sudden embarrassment raised a flush in his cheeks, so he resembled a guilty child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Of all the women in the room last night, you struck me as the most perceptive...”

Oh, here we go! she restrained a chuckle.

“If we hadn’t been interrupted, I was going to ask if you’d listen to a concerto I’ve composed, before I submit it to the international competition...”

“I know very little about music, Mr. McKay,” she replied honestly.

“Be that as it may, while I played last night, I saw your face. You were... absolutely transported, as if listening to the music from a different plane of existence.”

Oh, hell... rang inside her skull.

“That’s why I sought you out at the reception, but we were separated before I could... and when I tried to find you again, I was told you’d gone. Fortunately, I was able to secure contact information for your escort, and he told me your name.”

Damn him! Mustang swore silently.

Best to get it over and done, she surmised. “How do you want to handle this? I have no piano.”

“I do.” He neared, nimble digits plucking a length of straw from her black tresses. “In the lorry.”

“You can’t sit in a truck, in this heat, and hope to perform on the side of the road...” she chastised.

“Have you a suggestion?”

The ground shifted ominously.

McKay recoiled. “You have earthquakes in these parts?”

“Sometimes.” She preceded him toward the house. “Come in.”

“But, you said you have no piano.”

“None that I use. There’s an old Steinway in one of the spare bedrooms.”

Covered with a sheet, McKay’s own instrument featured a thin layer of dust when it was exposed to the murky daylight from smudged windows in the fourth of the five chambers. Mustang had only furnished two when she took up residence, making this ruse plausible.

“It’s perfectly in tune!” the musician marveled, running scales on the keyboard.

She replied dismissively, “Glad to hear it.”

Adjusting the bench, he propped his cap on his crown and warmed up with some basic exercises. “Would you like a chair, so you’ll be more comfortable?”

“I’m fine.”

McKay launched into three movements of exquisite fire and delicacy. Whereas some modern composers banged away with what equated to irritating dissonance, Mustang envisioned herself watching day break from the shore of Loch Ness, swirls of colors, bird song and lapping waves engulfing her.

She didn’t immediately grasp the realism of her vision extended to McKay.

When he raised his head from the last strains of the concerto, he found himself in the midst of this natural setting.

“What the devil...”

The exclamation dispelled Mustang’s reverie, restoring them to their tangible location.

“Are you some sort of clairvoyant?” the man whispered, awed.

“No, but your music... how utterly beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“Your life must’ve been... incredibly filled with love and kindness for your soul to imbue so much into...” At a loss for words, she stumbled, “Would you like some dinner before you continue your journey?”

A cloud passed across McKay’s countenance, momentarily frightening his hostess. She’d offered him a sandwich on his way to Inverness, and if the mention of food caused him to recall...

He replaced the sheet on the piano before accompanying her to the corridor. No more had he secured the door than the piano vanished. When he retraced his steps - “I forgot my keys” - Mustang didn’t have time to reverse her directive.

McKay found the fob in the vacant space, on the floor.

Mustang found him, unconscious, against the wall.

“Oh, hell...” She bent to tap his cheek. “Every time I try to be nice, it comes back to bite me.”

She supported him at the waist, moving him to the living room’s green sofa. “I’m sorry...”

“What... just happened?” the pianist choked, eyes unfocused and body trembling. “Is this house haunted?”

The Mistress of Boleskine snickered. “Probably. If I told you the... antics which have taken place within these walls...”

“I feel like I’m going mad.”

“Around me, that’s normal. Sit still a minute.” She scurried to the kitchen, breaking out a bottle of Jameson Special Reserve Whiskey and two glasses.

She had one filled and in his hands before he could protest. The liquor washed down his throat in a single gulp.

“So much for driving tonight,” she sighed, adding, louder, “Better?”

“A bit.” He held the glass for a refill, not speaking further until he swallowed the half-portion she poured. “What, exactly, is going on around here?”

Mustang dropped onto the cane-backed rocker. “Do you play chess?”

“Of course.”

The pieces arranged, she opened by moving her king’s pawn. “Will my tale distract you?”

“No,” he replied, countering with his queen’s bishop.

Her plan: integrate the narrative into the game so, when “check mate” was announced, McKay would forget everything he’d heard and seen since his arrival.

He would remember two friends enjoying a pleasant evening, nothing more.

She didn’t expect long delays between each move as he peppered her with questions.

A third and fourth glass of whiskey increased her difficulty understanding his words, as his burr became more pronounced.

“Ye are the world’s best kept secret!” he eventually drawled, his queen four moves from capturing her king. “Why have ye shut yourself up in this hole, when life awaits?”

She could’ve explained, but people tended to die after hearing the truth, almost like some unseen force fulfilled the movie cliché, “If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Stuart, when you awake tomorrow, you won’t remember any of this, for your own good. I’ve made my decision, and nothing can change that.”

“Think what fun we’d have on holiday together!”

“It would be no holiday, believe me.”

“You’re jaded, because you’ve been isolated too long...” His head drooped, then bounced up, brown orbs bleary.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

His weight made transferring him to the guest room a challenge, limbs limp from alcohol. She managed to relieve him of his sneakers and denim jacket, leaving him otherwise clothed.

Unable to close an eye, Mustang cooked a late supper of pork chops, mashed potatoes and broccoli. She’d scooped herself chocolate ice cream when she whirled on McKay framed in the doorway.

“You should be asleep...” she scolded.

“I was hungry, and I smelled something delicious.”

“Sit down.”

The skillet and pans not yet washed, she prepared a sumptuous repast for her uninvited visitor. He devoured the meal and a heaping bowl of ice cream, with the teen understanding how he’d developed such a sturdy physique.

Across the board, he leveled his gaze on her. “Lady Elizabeth, will you come with me on holiday?”

Not startled by the request, she nonetheless countered, “Why?”

“I don’t get much time off with my concert schedule. Next month, I start a six month tour of the Continent. I’m surrounded by parasites who want to secure their own reputations by backstabbing me...”

“Which is the main reason you drive the lorry yourself - to escape them, albeit temporarily.”

“You *are* clairvoyant!”

“Not really. Go on.”

“Last year, on holiday, do you know what I did?” McKay asked.

“No.”

“I took a flat in Stratford-on-Avon under an assumed name, spending ten days rehearsing Mozart!”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a vacation.”

“It wasn’t. But, at least, I was at peace.”

Mustang smirked. “With me, you’d never be at peace.”

“It’s not peace I crave. I want some excitement, real fun. I want to stand on a lakeshore and watch the sun set...”

The entire fiasco had descended into a complicated morass and, the clock reading past two a.m, she could not devise a quick and easy resolution.

“Where are you planning to take this holiday?”

“I have reservations on the Isle of Man.”

Grasping at straws, Mustang suggested, “Why not take your girlfriend, or a classmate from your school days?”

She already knew the answer; she could commiserate with the gifted musician. The men she’d met - barring Jim Neville - wooed her to use her power in their own interest, and former classmates... well, they equated to the parasites McKay had mentioned.

Impossible to trust anyone, really.

“Can we discuss this tomorrow, over lunch?” she hinted.

“I’m... awake now.”

“But you shouldn’t be. You need your rest. I’ll wake you in time to shower and dress.”

He half-rose. “You need rest, too.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

The prospect of a vacation in a secluded spot, the Isle of Man being located between Ireland and Great Britain, might assuage her present irritation. Glenn MacDonough would not object to tending the horses in her absence, and maybe a novel location would refresh her troubled spirit.

If she could go 14 days without using her power, she could build on that foundation and, perhaps, ensure herself a placid future.

She hadn’t grilled McKay about accommodations. For only the second time since beginning her Scottish exile, she’d met an honorable gentleman, the other being her neighbor - who believed her the widowed Lady Elizabeth Neville and nothing more.

Telling McKay her real name during the chess game might have been an error of judgment; he might not recall it when he awoke, fully sober, in a few hours.

He might rescind his offer, especially if a hangover addled his brain.

She would finalize no plans until they spoke at lunch.

Before retiring to her room, she pulled a package of rib-eye steaks from the freezer to thaw. Sunday would be a good day to light the kettle grill outside the kitchen door for some American-style cooking.

Stuart McKay presented a new man, showered, shaved and clothes changed to an orange t-shirt and khaki Dockers while beef sizzled on the grate.

“Where did you park your lorry?” Mustang asked, preparing a salad on the kitchen’s marble counter.

“Just beyond the trees. I wasn’t sure of having a turn-around...” He paused, and she squinted at him, “even though I feel like I’ve been here before.”

“You may have seen photos of the place, since it has some historic significance,” bluffed Mustang. “Pour yourself some milk, or lemonade.”

“Water will do fine.”

“Help yourself to ice from the freezer.”

The pair ate with gusto and, mostly, in silence. Periodically, they both looked up from their plates at the same instant, eyes meeting.

“All right, say it,” Mustang responded to the pianist’s twitching lips.

“Have you made up your mind?”

“About what?”

“The holiday.”

She couldn’t help her grin. “Yes.”

“Yes?” His fork, a chunk of lettuce dripping bleu cheese dressing, stopped short of his mouth. “Yes, as in ‘Yes, I’ve made up my mind,’ or ‘Yes, I’ll go on holiday with you’?”

“Yes, I’ll go on holiday with you.”

McKay shot from the metal chair and grabbed Mustang by the waist, lifting her into the air and twirling her around the kitchen. “This will be a great adventure!” he shouted.

When her feet touched the tile once more, her laughter continued. She hoped his assessment of the coming excursion correct.

III

If leaving Boleskine House meant discarding her power over nature, Mustang Duryea would have been content. Stuart McKay agreed to drive his lorry to Glenn MacDonough’s with her note about the horses, while she packed and secured the mansion against curiosity seekers wondering about previous owners such as occultist Aleister Crowley and guitarist Jimmy Page.

She met him where the gravel drive blended with the highway, climbing onto the passenger seat, an interesting vantage point as they headed south.

Roads meandered through the Scottish countryside. Mustang reveled in the silence, McKay not one for idle chatter. She gazed out the window at the scenery, lush and green. The small towns might have still existed in the 19th century, with their white-washed structures and homey atmosphere.

McKay steered through Glasgow, where they refueled and ate dinner before continuing across the border. The thriving metropolis transfixed the teen, so long having been absent from what could be termed “civilization”.

Merging with traffic on M74, the lorry sped toward Liverpool. Mustang dozed most of the last leg, having been tending her horses early after not sleeping the previous night.

Roused in the car park of a modest hotel, Mustang accompanied McKay while he made arrangements with a garage attendant to store the lorry and its precious cargo in a locked facility for the next two weeks.

“We can walk to the waterfront in the morning,” the pianist explained, riding the lift to their lodging’s third floor.

Two double beds in the plainly decorated chamber provided ample space for both to stretch out in comfort, though Mustang chuckled at McKay’s near-snoring. The dawn glow illuminated Monday’s delivery vehicles on the lane below; she absorbed the bustle through the window, towel-drying her black hair. She already missed the daily chore of feeding her horses.

McKay rolled off the mattress after 8:00, hair hanging over his face. His traveling companion was unaccustomed to those who moved at a leisurely pace. In Montana, her father would be up and out the door in ten minutes every day, along with the ranch hands. Joe Duryea expected the same of his daughter. The concept of “low gear” didn’t exist for her.

That first morning tried her patience, and emphasized why she’d chosen to live alone. McKay’s priorities differed from hers and, though just 19, she could not foresee herself altering her routine for anyone.

Finally packed, they checked out of the hotel. A quick breakfast of juice and croissants from the corner bakery preceded a stroll to the ferry dock. McKay presented two tickets to the attendant as they boarded the craft; Mustang said nothing until they reached the top deck.

“I’d planned months ago to take my little sister, and made the reservations accordingly. She decided to join a school chum in Rome, leaving me with the extra.”

“Her loss is my gain,” Mustang remarked, the boat’s engines sputtering to life.

The weather temperate, the crossing to Douglas caused no major seasickness for the teen. She stood at the railing, feeling salty spray on her skin, watching schools of fish - dolphins, possibly, though she couldn’t be certain - not realizing McKay passed the time studying her innocent reactions from a bench near the bridge.

He jotted musical notes on hand-drawn staves, filling two pages before they docked on the Isle of Man.

His countenance beamed like a beacon as they disembarked; Mustang marveled at his inspired radiance.

“Are you okay?” she wondered.

Playfully, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I’m looking forward to the best holiday of my life!”

Loading their belongings in a cab, they drove north to where a complex of log cabin lodges was perched above a picturesque shoreline. The largest, reserved by McKay, boasted a full kitchen, two bedrooms and a sitting room with a spinet piano.

“You couldn’t forget music for a few days?” Mustang puzzled.

“Music is my life. It flows through my veins like blood.”

The possibility of sitting indoors listening to him play wouldn’t have been distasteful, but she’d come to the island to bask in the local culture.

“Don’t worry. I can practice after you go to bed, since you’re a lark and I’m an owl,” he promised. “And don’t think you’ll have to cook for me. I like cereal to start the day, we’ll eat the main meal out at lunch, and maybe sandwiches for supper.”

“Sounds good.”

“Change your clothes, and we’ll go for a walk along the beach.”

Not one to dress and undress, she kicked off her boots and socks, cuffing her jeans at the calf. “Ready.”

McKay chuckled at this simplicity of thought. He mimicked her gesture, casting off his jacket and collared shirt in favor of a plain red t-shirt.

This natural setting conducive to relaxation and inspiration, the musician unloaded his deepest thoughts as waves lapped against their ankles.

“The other day, you mentioned how my life must’ve been filled with love and kindness. In that, you were correct. Growing up, though we moved quite often because of my father’s work, the one steadying element was the love my sisters and I experienced from our parents.

“They made certain we had every advantage: schooling, music, art, whatever talent we demonstrated. I never really thought I’d be a concert pianist, though I loved playing and composing as a teenager. An audition to get into Cambridge’s program landed me offers from agents, and that’s where the trouble started.”

Mustang understood her companion’s point, yet didn’t interrupt.

McKay recounted being manipulated by managers and agents, in the game for their percentage. Where he performed for the love of the classics, others vied

for notoriety and behaved like prima donnas, making demands and insulting those deemed unworthy.

“I’ve grown to hate the business of music,” he concluded, pausing to watch the sky turn brilliant pink, water reflecting the dusky hue. “I’ve even considered playing for tips in a pub.”

“Let it go, Stuart,” the teen advised, feeling ridiculous at speaking so to the older man. “We’re on holiday. Tomorrow, we’ll find some horses and go riding. Personally, I wouldn’t mind learning to dance the polka, and shooting pool.”

“Pool? You mean, swimming?”

“No. Pool. You Brits call it snooker or billiards, if I’ve heard right.”

He slid her arm through his as they reversed course. “We can manage that, along with climbing a mountain, bicycling, visiting castles...”

“You’ll run me ragged!” Mustang snickered.

“We won’t be bored, I swear!”

Washing sand off their feet with a hose outside the log cabin, they hiked to a nearby grocer’s to buy food. Dining on peanut butter and jelly, Mustang retired to her room before 9:00.

She fell asleep in the wee hours to the sound of McKay working out a melody, with gaps to scribble notes.

Seated on the rustic back porch early Tuesday, the teen sipped piping hot coffee while the sun rose, the blue tank top and cut-off jean shorts suitable for anticipated sultry temperatures. By 8:00, she’d walked to the village of Bride and back, relishing scents on the breeze and the open fields.

A silver Nissan parked near the cabin’s front door, Mustang couldn’t imagine who might be calling at that hour. Inside, however, McKay sat alone in plaid pajamas at the round kitchen table, munching corn flakes.

“What’s with the car?” she asked.

“It’s from the car hire in Douglas. It was returned late, so they delivered it this morning.”

She tried to hide her smile at his weary mien. “Woke you up, did they?”

He nodded.

Selecting a white ceramic bowl from the cupboard, Mustang joined him for breakfast. “What was that piece you were playing during the night?”

“Something of my own.”

“Incredible. To have such talent, and be able to express joy in that way...”

“It’s a blessing most of the time and, occasionally, a curse.”

“I know what you mean.”

Placing the dish in the sink, McKay moved toward his room. "Let me get showered and dressed, and we'll head for Snaefell."

"Snaefell?"

"The highest point on the island. There's a railway to the top, where the view is exquisite."

The pair motored south into Laxey, itself a scenic journey between sea and land. While Mustang normally shunned conventional forms of transportation, she opened herself to the possibilities of experiencing abundant sensations and sights.

The Snaefell Mountain Railway consisted of single, wooden body electric cars. McKay and Mustang boarded just prior to departure, sliding onto a polished bench at the rear. Speed wasn't a factor for the trip, allowing passengers a view of the grand vistas as the route climbed over 2,000 feet to the summit.

Mustang had to frequently remind herself to close her mouth, feeling her jaw agape at the spectacular landscape. She also eavesdropped on nearby conversations - travelers from many countries expressing similar sentiments about the ride.

Warned about the likely potential of fog on the mountain - while skies remained clear at sea level - the group easily distinguished the Irish coast, Wales and Scotland from the peak.

"Rumor has it, you can see heaven from here, too," McKay quipped while his companion gradually made a 360 degree circuit to catch every angle.

Dining in Laxey, they roamed the village and stopped to see "Lady Isabella," the huge water wheel that had pumped water from the mines in a bygone era.

"How anyone could build such a huge... contraption in the 1800s, with so little technology available," Mustang gasped.

"Technology isn't... always a good thing," countered McKay. "Because of technology, the Irish Sea has been polluted beyond repair."

He didn't recognize the gleam in the Mistress of Boleskine's hazel eyes. How easy it would be to utter a command...

"No, I won't do it," she mumbled.

He heard her voice, but not the words. "What?"

"Nothing." She slipped her hand through his arm and drew him toward the car.

"I know," he chuckled. "You want to go riding."

Her years of experience with horses did not require a slow, guided walk along narrow trails. McKay, though, hadn't been in the saddle since his school

days. They compromised on a canter around an old race course, with Mustang taking the jumps and the pianist keeping to the flat land.

“Nothing quite like the smell of horses and heather,” he said, surrendering the reins to a stable hand as the sun descended in the west.

Mustang stroked the mane of her mount, whispering her thanks.

A glorious day concluded at the kitchen table, devouring meat and cheese sandwiches, potato crisps and large tumblers of ice water. Mustang showered and settled into bed; McKay migrated to the piano, plunking out a very upbeat tempo.

In his bass line, Mustang alternately distinguished the rotation of railway car wheels and the cycle of the water wheel performing its erstwhile function. McKay’s right hand created a swirl of images: the distant coastlines from Snaefell’s crest, Laxey’s cozy shops, taking her horse over the jumps.

Abruptly, the music halted.

Concerned, Mustang crawled from beneath the sheets and poked her head through a crack in the door. “You okay?”

Brown orbs dazed, McKay shook his shaggy mane as if to clear some disturbing vision. “I... it was like I was somewhere else for a minute.”

“Back on Snaefell?”

His head cocked slightly. “Yes.”

Not difficult for the teen to assess the problem. McKay’s music excited her imagination and what her mind’s eye saw in those moments was mirrored to him.

Damn you, Jack Parsons! she swore internally.

“You’re tired,” she stated. “Better get to bed.”

They both rose early Wednesday, sharing the first cup of coffee on the porch.

McKay, wrapped in a green terry robe, remained troubled by the previous night’s experience. “I’ve never before...”

“Leave the music for a few days,” Mustang suggested. “Focus on the moment. We can drive to Castletown and see the sights...”

His blank expression conveyed a disconnect she dreaded. As had many who’d witnessed her power, he’d begun to doubt his own sanity.

“C’mon, Stuart. Shake it off. Let’s have an adventure.”

Castle Rushen, on the southern coast, stood as a testament to an ancient era. The town had served as the island’s original capital, with the 800 year old stone structure used as a prison, a fortress and a palace.

Mustang trod delicately on the drawbridge, and scampered up stairs to the ramparts, where she could see the entire town and beyond. Cannons on display, the grandeur of the banquet hall and the medieval chapel delighted her.

On the return jaunt, they dined in Douglas. The pub featured a billiard table; Mustang convinced McKay to teach her the game.

How tempting to direct nature to roll the striped balls into the pockets, even when she miscued. She refrained, managing to laugh aloud at making a complete fool of herself.

A steady stream of chatter intended to distract McKay from mulling over his troubles failed miserably. His smile was forced, she noticed, worry evident behind his eyes.

She couldn't bear being the cause of another human's suffering, albeit unintentionally. Whatever bond had developed between the two - perhaps from those first moments when she restored his Steinway pianos - the need to break it could not be denied.

Others who'd formed a bond with the teen, if they didn't die, came back to haunt her, so to speak. Wilfrid Bailey, the psychotic murderer, had stalked her after escaping from prison. Peter O'Donnell, her cousin's step-father, had summoned her to Ireland to stop another madman and save Thomas Burton.

She didn't appreciate such loose ends, the constant uncertainty of who might appear on her doorstep unexpectedly.

She'd erased the memories of some - as she'd initially done to McKay, yet he still managed to rebound on her. Even after she bared her soul, he insisted she join him on holiday, though she wondered if his intoxication had caused him to forget what she'd told him during the chess match.

The drive north passed in silence, McKay concentrating on the road, unlit by natural or artificial means, except the Nissan's dim lamps.

Alighting at the log cabin, Mustang caught his arm. "Stuart?"

He spun, gazing down at her.

"It's best I go. You... have other things on your mind, and my presence is..."

"No, Mustang. It's not your fault. It's as if a door in my mind has been closed and locked, and I'm fighting to open it. I won't be able to finish this latest composition unless..."

She had closed and locked that door: his recollection of their initial meeting. To consciously quash a near-genius' creativity merely to protect herself... a tragedy of the most heinous sort.

Yet, to expose the truth might... do more harm than good.

"Come inside, and I'll brew some coffee," she said. "It's going to be a long night."

IV

Diplomacy not Mustang Duryea's forte, softening the blow of what Stuart McKay would discover when she freed his mind of its blockage proved a torment.

They'd already drained one pot of coffee before she gathered sufficient courage.

"You remember, at the reception after your concert, when you asked if we'd met before?" she attempted.

"Yes. I had the feeling..."

"Correctly so. While transporting your pianos, you had an accident near Loch Ness..."

"The puncture?"

"More than a puncture. A car crossed the center line, and you swerved to avoid it, hitting the guard rail."

"I... don't remember!" he shuddered, brow furrowed. "Why wouldn't I remember such a thing?"

"Because I was there, and I ensured you'd forget, so you wouldn't tell anyone..."

"Tell anyone what?"

She reached across the table and stroked his hand.

As if he'd been slapped across the face, McKay stiffened. He clutched her fingers, nearly crushing them with the muscular contraction.

"Oh, God!" he croaked. Then, he jerked backward. "What are you?"

"Like you, I'm plagued with what can be called both a blessing and a curse."

"You mean, those visions..."

Her black hair bobbed.

"But, how?"

She reviewed what she'd already explained at Boleskine House. His sober brain accepted the facts no more readily than when he'd been drunk.

Her hands resting on the wood, he detected the scars on her palms. "You seriously can... control nature with a word?"

"A word, or a thought. Which is why the images I see when you play become tangible for you, as well."

"Dear God!"

"I'm sorry. My goal has been to remain apart from others, but you were so upset about the damaged pianos and being late to Inverness..."

He stared at her as the wall clock ticked in the background; she itched to know his thoughts.

When his facial muscles relaxed into a grin, she exhaled, unaware she'd been holding her breath.

"It all makes sense now," he commented, running long fingers through his disheveled mop. "I had a niggling suspicion something untoward had happened, and wasn't sure if someone had slipped a drug into my drink or I was hurdling over the edge. You don't know how performing the most basic activities can be impeded..."

"Yes, I do and, again, I'm truly sorry."

McKay cradled her hand in his. "In your kindness, you took pity on a distraught soul. You have no reason to apologize."

"I still think I should leave, so you can get back to..."

"Absolutely not!" He rose, carrying their mugs to the sink. "You go to bed. Tomorrow, we'll hit the west side of the island, and find a place where I can teach you the polka."

Caffeine notwithstanding, Mustang fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. The vibrations from McKay's hours at the piano provided a weird accompaniment to disjointed dreams, but she woke rejuvenated just before sunrise.

Curiosity got the better of her as she waited for coffee to filter into the glass pot. She gingerly rifled sheets scattered atop the spinet piano, musical notes as meaningless as Greek to her eyes. On what must have been the first page, however, the title "Concerto in B flat Major" was scrawled, with the subheading "Mustang's Delight" in parentheses.

A thrill shot through her frame, echoed by the walls and floor jolting ominously. That she had inspired a piece of music, rather than wreaking havoc...

Tears streamed down her cheeks as McKay rushed into the sitting room, pulling on his robe. "What happened?" he demanded.

She sniffed, "Nothing."

He crossed the chamber in three strides, wrapping her in a tender embrace. "You've been peeking," he remonstrated.

"Yes."

His lips beside her ear, he muttered, "Even before you... confessed the truth last night, I recognized your innocence and unique wisdom. This will be the opus I submit to the competition, and I'm positive it will earn top prize."

"But, I like the other one."

"It can wait for next year. This... this will be phenomenal, magical."

Drying her eyes with the corner of his terry belt, he shooed her toward her room to shower and dress.

The pall which had dampened the pair's enthusiasm dissipated, making Thursday's outing joyful and fun. They started the day riding horses along the east coast, coupled with seal spotting, before motoring west.

In Peel, they wandered the streets, admiring houses and shops. Though not religious, Mustang did not hesitate to enter the Anglican cathedral, where McKay inspected the organ and its myriad pipes.

The promenade overlooked the port, where the fishing industry once thrived. At a pub on the city's outskirts, a trio of locals provided music during dinner. Waiting for dessert, McKay approached the group, introduced himself and convinced them to play a polka.

Space for dancing limited, he demonstrated the step to a reluctant Mustang, then took her by the waist and led her around the floor.

When the last strains of the melody faded, the pair were laughing so hard, they didn't hear the applause from other patrons.

"Now I know why dancing is good exercise!" the teen gasped, reaching for a water glass. "I used to watch old period movies, where everyone behaved prim and proper and barely raised their heart rates. This was... fantastic."

McKay beamed ear-to-ear. "We'd better be getting home."

Their enthusiasm quickly waned upon arriving at the cabin, where an urgent message awaited the pianist. Through grit teeth, he snarled, "Damn!"

"What's wrong?" Mustang queried.

"My sister was struck by a car while crossing a street in Rome. She's in serious condition, and my parents want me to join them there."

"You must go, at once."

"What about..."

"Don't worry about me. I'll make it back to Boleskine."

McKay seized her hands. "This way?"

"It's faster than the ferry." Mustang yanked from his grip. "You'd better pack."

Their embrace prior to his departure prolonged and affectionate, he kissed her forehead and thanked her for adding a distinct pleasure to the holiday. She watched him drive into the star-lit night, before returning indoors.

Within an hour, she carried a backpack stuffed with clothes toward the beach. She'd tried so hard to remain off the weather radar; perhaps the local meteorologists would deem the freak lightning bolt a computer malfunction.

Scottish authorities would note the phenomenon, however, she knew, the like having occurred more than once since her original wish to return home to Montana after Jack Parsons' death had manifested a rogue bolt on the hillock behind Boleskine House.

More acclimated to this transport's side effects than on that occasion, Mustang trekked to the mansion in pre-dawn gloom, humidity a portent of coming rain.

She wrapped charred palms with gauze before checking the horses in the barn. Saddling the bay mare, she rode to Glenn MacDonough's, taping a note to his front door.

The five animals contentedly chomping oats, she shuffled to the house, crawling into bed for much-needed sleep.

Rain tapped a syncopated rhythm on the window panes when she awoke, the bedside clock reading 2:30.

She felt no guilt at this laziness.

Without a phone, Mustang had no means to be contacted about McKay's sister, or any other emergencies. She usually appreciated such blissful ignorance, except in instances where someone's life hung in the balance.

Traveling to Rome so soon after damaging her flesh inadvisable, she ate a light lunch and relaxed in the living room's cane-backed rocker, studying rivulets cascading down the glass. If she could visualize McKay's music as he played - so he also saw the images - could she not view through his eyes the situation at the Rome hospital?

Her respiration measured, she addressed the elements.

Before her, as if on a theater's movie screen, the sanitized room congealed, its lone bed surrounded by beeping machinery. Wires linked the devices and the sleeping patient, along with tubes from intravenous medications hung on metal stands.

A couple - in their late fifties, Mustang guessed - stood on the left. McKay had positioned himself on the right, gazing down at the young girl's swollen, bruised features.

He must've sensed Mustang's presence, his thoughts audible to this mental trespasser.

"Is that you?" came the words across the miles.

"Yes."

"She's dying, Mustang. Massive internal injuries. The doctors here..."

"What would you have me do?"

"Whatever you can."

The teen had never sought to influence nature from such a distance. If she misjudged, Celia McKay - the name written on a metal chart hanging above the headboard - could die immediately.

“Take your sister’s hand,” Mustang directed.

The elder McKays thought nothing of their son making this gesture.

“You may feel... strange.”

A moment later, alarms sounded throughout the facility, triggered by a ground tremor and powerful microbursts of wind. McKay landed on the armchair beside the bed, clutching Celia’s fingers tightly.

Blue eyes fluttered open and discolored lips twitched into a smile.

Mrs. McKay bent to her daughter, repeatedly kissing her cheeks. “You’re alive!”

“Yes, Mother,” the voice rasped.

Inside his head, the pianist vocalized, “Thank you, Mustang.”

“Get the doctor in there to examine her,” she responded. “He may call it a miracle, but best to make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“Right.”

Whatever the tests and x-rays would show, Mustang would never know. She extracted herself from McKay’s optics, suddenly thirsty.

A tall glass of chocolate milk replenished her fluids and sugar level. In the mood for chess, she returned to the living room to find Erwin Rommel setting pieces on the inlaid board.

“You’ve been busy today,” the German general remarked.

“Tying up loose ends.”

“Do not deceive yourself, child. By exposing yourself yet again, you may face impending danger.”

“Stuart is trustworthy, and a gentleman. He is a kindred spirit, of sorts. His... experiences as a musician, good and bad, are similar to mine with this... power.”

“And, when the doctors in Rome begin investigating your miracle?” prodded Rommel.

“They can attribute it to prayer. Such events are common in a country of churches and saints.”

“As Francis can attest.”

Mustang smirked. “Yes.”

Materializing St. Francis of Assisi had been another of her “miracles” and, in her seclusion, she now enjoyed his company, as well as that of Rommel, Gandhi and Mark Twain, in quiet moments.

Struggling to readjust her internal clock after the long daytime nap proved difficult for the teen. Not until Sunday morning did she wake at her usual time.

In the interim, the horses balked at her expressions of kindness, as if scolding her for neglecting them.

She was hauling a barrow of soiled straw from the barn when Glenn MacDonough's pickup appeared on the gravel drive Wednesday evening. Hoping he didn't bring another invitation, she met him near the corral.

He presented a copy of the Inverness newspaper. "I thought ye might wish t' read this," he greeted her.

Reading the headline landed her in the dirt.

"Pianist McKay killed in Liverpool."

The article detailed how Stuart McKay had been driving a lorry with two Steinway pianos from a garage when a larger truck veered into his path as it made a left turn. Both trucks burst into flames and, though the other driver escaped, McKay had been trapped, unable to open the crushed door.

Mustang's sobs raised wind, rain and lightning, causing MacDonough to race for his vehicle when she refused to move.

She vaguely recalled a high school physics lesson, one of Newton's Laws of Motion: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Was this tragedy the opposite reaction to her saving Celia's life? Or, had the accident near Loch Ness been meant as his destiny?

If she hadn't interfered then, would he be alive now?

Mud coated her t-shirt and jeans; she cared not a whit. Again, after so many resolutions and promises, she had caused a death, robbed the world of an exceptional talent.

When the adverse weather subsided, as she recovered her composure, the Mistress of Boleskine dumped the barrow's contents, restored it to the barn and trudged to the house.

She swore never to step beyond the property line again.

Her heart felt shattered, the prospect of meeting another genuinely trustworthy soul in her lifetime slim to none.

Glenn MacDonough visited again Friday evening. "I dinnae mean t' abandon ye, Lady Elizabeth," he explained. "The force o' that sudden storm..."

"No worries, Glenn," she replied. "I... didn't even notice!"

He presented her with an oversized manila envelope. "This came in today's post."

She recognized the handwriting: Lady Elizabeth Neville, c/o Glenn MacDonough.

Stuart McKay had initially traced her by tracing MacDonough. She thanked her neighbor, who excused himself and climbed into his pickup.

The envelope had, obviously, been mailed before the accident. Within, a sheaf of music, computer generated, bore the title he'd jotted at the log cabin.

Linen stationery contained a brief explanation. "Sent this to the competition this morning, and wanted you to have a copy. When I win and premiere it in Paris, I'll want you to be there, front row center. With eternal gratitude, Stuart."

Tears flowed anew.

Mustang stepped outdoors, to prevent any tangible reaction to her emotional upheaval from destroying the house.

The pain - of McKay's death, of knowing she'd inspired something beautiful which would never be performed - consumed her.

The agonized scream reverberated through the woods, rousing birds and wildlife. Beyond the trees, horrified shrieks rose from ferries caught in tsunami-force waves.

Then, as if to soothe her, a gentle breeze caressed her skin.

Might it have been McKay's way of telling her she was not to blame? she mused.

Rommel stood on the threshold. "You don't wish to bring him back?"

"I... can't. I won't. I've caused enough destruction." She followed him to the living room, declining his offer of a chess game. "Not tonight."

"If not now, when? You cannot descend into the realm of depression, or you will never recover."

"Recover, for what purpose? Anything I do..."

The general patted her hand. "You can do much to help the world, if you learn self-control."

"Always the same advice!" she raged. "I'm a failure, and will never amount to anything else!"

Grasping she would not listen in her present state, Rommel vanished.

Mustang remained in the cane-backed rocker through the night, hugging the music sheets to her chest.

Two months later, another newspaper caught her eye as she unwrapped the bi-weekly grocery delivery: Stuart McKay had been posthumously awarded first prize at the International Composers' Festival. The London Symphony Orchestra would perform his "Mustang's Delight" concerto that Friday evening, with a broadcast on BBC radio.

Riding the sorrel gelding to Glenn MacDonough's, she asked to borrow his radio. Instead, he invited her for dinner, so they could enjoy the concert together.

The pianist, whose name Mustang didn't catch during the announcer's introduction, hadn't the light touch she'd envied when McKay played, but the three movements might have been torn from her own being.

Capturing her wonder at the sights and experiences, her passion on horseback, the joy of sharing his holiday - no one else might assess the composition in those terms, but she'd witnessed how the intricate melodies and harmonies had developed.

Thunderous applause through the stereo speakers as the last strains faded eased her conscience slightly; she grinned despite damp cheeks.

Home again, she secured the deadbolt and retired to bed, aching to never awaken.