

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Sainted Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

# I

When exercising her horses, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea tended to ride trails on the northern perimeter of Boleskine House’s acreage. On the rare occasions she’d ventured south, she found barbed wire dividing the estate from neighboring property, strung decades earlier, if the amount of rust on the steel cable was any indication.

This chill March Sunday, not the slightest breeze rustling bare tree limbs as her roan Molly relaxed after a brisk canter, she detected an erratic popping noise coming from that direction, however, and decided to investigate.

The sound grew louder as she neared the fence line - not an axe splitting wood, as might be expected in these remote areas of the Scottish Highlands, nor any manner of construction, such as hammer on nail or even an electric staple gun.

Corroded twine between two rotting posts had been severed by a fallen tree during winter storms, most likely. Mentally calculating the gap, Mustang urged her mount over the obstacle, clearing the jump without hooves touching wood or tangled strands.

While the Mistress of Boleskine had become well acquainted with her neighbor at the opposite point of the compass - project manager Glenn MacDonough - she’d never sought to meet the owner of this wilderness. For that matter, she’d not intended to encounter anyone beyond the borders of her home-in-exile, but random strangers frequently managed to intrude on her solitude.

Causing all manner of trouble.

She shivered in the near-freezing temperatures, despite layers of clothing. Not a propitious time to deal with those memories.

The unusual noise originating to her left, she nudged Molly. Uncharacteristically skittish, the horse resisted this command and reared abruptly.

Mustang ducked in the saddle as a projectile whizzed past her ear and lodged in the trunk of a nearby oak.

In rapid succession, a spray of metallic objects swarmed toward her, some deflected by the forest before they reached her, others criss-crossing beside her.

Bullets, unmistakably.

Without a word or extraneous motion, she intercepted the last, and sent it back from whence it came at double the speed.

A moment later, she heard an Irish baritone exclaim, “What the fuck?”

“So much for killing a deer for dinner,” grumbled a second voice.

Another boomed, "That's why I brought you out here. You waste far too much ammunition. Our target requires precision and stealth, unlike those sods in Boston..."

"Oh, hell..." muttered Mustang.

Jerking the reins so Molly retraced her steps, additional discharges reverberated less than 100 meters distant.

They fell short.

"That deer should've been dead a hundred times over," remarked one of the trio.

His elder countered, "Except, that wasn't a deer."

In the safety of the barn, Molly munched oats in her stall while her owner transferred the saddle to the sorrel gelding, Sarge. She kicked his flank no more had they emerged from the structure, so that - as he broke into a gallop - gravel flew in all directions.

White fringe of hair crushed beneath a glengarry cap, Glenn MacDonough wore a tweed jacket and black trousers as he crossed from his ranch-style house to his white pickup.

Bound for church? Mustang puzzled, slowing the horse as she approached his drive.

"Lady Elizabeth!" he greeted warmly in a thick Scottish burr, fingers on the door handle. "How may I be o' service?"

"Do you know whether anyone is living at the place south of mine?"

"Aye, lass. M' lads just finished a complete renovation o' the cottage so a father and his two sons - twins, I ha' been told - could take up residence this past week. O'er from Ireland for a holiday, so 'tis rumored."

She swallowed hard. "Is there a way you can find out... to be sure?"

"Are they makin' too much o' a ruckus for ye? Or, trespassin' on your land?"

"I... think they're hunting deer illegally."

"On their own property, 'twould nae be illegal..."

Mustang sucked air through grit teeth. "Oh, hell..."

"If ye will excuse me, milady, I'll be late for services..."

Sarge backed from the pickup. "Thanks, Glenn."

"I'll say a prayer for ye," he called through the open window in parting.

Prayers weren't what she needed at that juncture, Mustang conceded as she guided the gelding to Boleskine. She needed an ample dose of self-control to prevent her from growing so angry she did something horrible to the men occupying the adjoining property.

Yet, if they were engaged in less-than-ethical activities, why shouldn't she...

Grooming the horses took most of the afternoon, along with hauling wheelbarrows filled with old straw from the barn, her mind freed temporarily of hostile thoughts.

Over a late lunch/early dinner of peanut butter and jelly sandwich, milk and chips - she reminded herself Scots referred to them as "crisps" and cookies were "biscuits" - her frustration returned. She subdued the urge to imagine three men ablaze in the rented cottage, fully cognizant that such an impulse would come to fruition instantly if unchecked.

Such was the aftermath of her grandfather, Jack Parsons, bequeathing her an extraordinary power over the natural elements.

"Would a game of chess alleviate your ire?" queried Samuel Clemens.

"That, a good book, anything."

"You're going to have to probe deeper into this..."

Mustang retorted, "I don't dare."

"If you don't, your nerves will remain on edge until you explode. You know what happens then."

"Yeah," she led the spectre of the renowned American author to the living room. "Chaos."

"Indeed."

An incomplete game was scrapped in favor of restoring carved black and white pieces to their starting places on the inlaid board. The sun set as Mustang perched in a cane-backed rocking chair, Clemens on the green sofa, with neither claiming any real advantage.

The young woman yawned as her opponent took her queen's bishop.

"You'd best get some sleep," advised the congenial phantom.

"I won't close an eye, if this... this..."

"I promise to accompany you in the morning. Will that ease your anxiety?"

She rose and stretched. "I suppose."

"Good night, then."

"Thanks."

Auburn tresses loosed from a ponytail, she flopped, fully clothed, on the king-sized mattress.

A distinctly odd couple traversed the woods that overcast Monday morning: one clad in a white linen suit with wild white mane and a bushy matching mustache, his companion a veritable twig bundled in stained, fur-trimmed parka, jeans and muddy boots, her ample locks jammed beneath a red knitted cap.

Mustang did not wish to be mistaken for a deer again.

She preceded Samuel Clemens through the break in the fence, pointing out slugs wedged in the oaks as they neared a quaint but homey stone domicile, smoke rising from the chimney indicating a fire heated its interior.

The pair remained beyond the clearing, where a silver Peugeot rental was parked. Mustang realized Glenn MacDonough must've misunderstood the tenants' intentions: no way could that vehicle have held more than two small suitcases - insufficient for any sort of real holiday.

To her consternation, the top half of a red-painted front door flew open in that instant. She flinched, bumping into Clemens, who sedately puffed a cigar.

As did the back-lit silhouette framed in the gap.

She couldn't distinguish his features, but he had square shoulders and the top of his head nearly touched the lintel.

"Da, close that!" piped one of the younger voices from within. "It's fuckin' cold!"

The response: "To succeed in the work we must do, son, you must be able to endure any sort of weather without complaint."

This statement uttered in a near whisper, the man might have been standing beside her, due to the absolute silence enveloping her - no wind, no birds singing, nothing. The world might've been holding its breath in anticipation of some horrendous catastrophe.

"Let's get out of here," she hissed toward her escort.

Who had, already, vanished.

"Gee, thanks," she snarled, dodging a low branch.

But, not unseen.

A layer of frost complicated the trek over the downed tree and broken barbed wire. Ungloved fingers slipped off fragments of moist bark as she tried to hoist herself over the 50-year-old pine, lodging a jagged shard in her palm.

"Oh, hell..."

She pitched backward, caught before landing on the frozen earth by strong hands.

On her feet once more, she spun and nearly stumbled anew, shocked by the sight.

"Oh, hell..."

An iron grip steadied her at the waist. Too stunned to wriggle free, Mustang could only stare at the black-clad image, wavy white mop extending past his shoulders, jaw covered by a thick white beard, hazel eyes smoldering with a combination of curiosity and hatred, teeth clamped around a stubby cigar.

They spoke simultaneously: "Who are you?"

That, at least, broke the tension. Two shadows - brown hair with scruffy mustaches and goatees, black turtlenecks, peacoats and jeans - converging from the flanks also defused the confrontation.

Their smiles were... pleasant, if not sincere, Mustang decided. They saw no threat in a skinny youth originally from Montana,

She hoped to maintain that illusion.

Before she could speak again, though, the elder angled her appendage toward the light, inspecting blood gushing from the wound. The son to his left offered an impressive, ivory-handled switchblade and, suddenly, two sets of arms restrained her while minor surgery removed the fragment.

Mustang came very close to running a high-voltage charge of electricity through the lot.

She shook free of them roughly. "I could've done that myself."

"I doubt it," commented the lad on the right.

She cautioned, "Don't underestimate me, kid."

"Ha!" guffawed his brother. "She called you 'kid', and she's not even sixteen!"

"Allow me to take you home and explain to your parents," declared the father, his Irish brogue resonant and soothing.

"There's no need." She recoiled as he reached for her. "Who are you, anyway?"

Did the man's spine bend in a slight bow? she mused.

"I'm Ronan McMahan, and these are my sons, Aidan and Ryan."

"Twins?"

"Aye."

Fraternal twins, as they didn't resemble each other. "It looks like you cut their hair with sheep shears." She immediately regretted the sarcasm, given their scowls.

"They... did it themselves," Ronan clarified solemnly.

"There's a barber in Dores who could... fix them up."

"Not necessary." He clasped her hand, where congealing blood failed to obscure other scars on her palm. "If you tell me who inflicted these marks on you, I will fix *him*."

"I... did it myself."

"Burned yourself accidentally?"

She nodded, to preclude dicey explanations of how she traveled on bolts of lightning from place to place.

“Still, that gash should be cleaned and properly bandaged. Your parents...”

“I live alone, Mr. McMahon. I’m known in these parts as Lady Elizabeth Neville, and I’d appreciate if you’d let me go on my way...”

The trio’s demeanor altered unexpectedly. They stiffened and glanced at each other beneath hooded lids.

Mustang sensed the truth, but preferred to ignore the knots in her stomach.

They’d recognized her name.

“Enjoy your holiday,” she said in parting, gingerly navigating the obstacle before her and disappearing past a thicket along the trail.

Ronan’s stern directive - “Bring her to me” - prompted her sprint, though her knees had never enjoyed running.

The boys - young men? - in excellent physical condition, gained on her when she burst onto the gravel drive west of the barn. Glenn MacDonough’s pickup idled near the front door; he’d been knocking and caught sight of her as she doubled over, lungs heaving.

Battered work boots hurried toward her with shouts of, “Lady Elizabeth, are ye all right?”

MacDonough’s presence ended the McMahons’ pursuit; their prey discerned exclamations of defeat as they reversed course.

MacDonough glimpsed the young woman’s injured hand, and conducted her into the mansion. Inside, he scrounged gauze and adhesive tape from the bathroom, washing off the blood and wiping the nasty cut with alcohol before wrapping her flesh to prevent infection.

“Ye should rest,” he advised.

“I’m... okay.” She inhaled serenely. “Now.”

“What happened out there?”

“I... tripped on some ice.”

“This is nae good weather for a hike, milady. Ye must be more careful.”

Mustang patted his arm gratefully. “I will be, Glenn. Thanks.” She moved toward the refrigerator. “Why did you stop by?”

MacDonough hesitated, then remembered the purpose of his errand. “I rang the estate agent who let the cottage. The family is named Emerson, a father and twin sons, as I told ye yesterday. They flew over from Boston for a few days of fishing.”

“Emerson?” she echoed, befuddled.

“Aye.”

A jug of milk and carton of eggs were maneuvered clumsily off the shelf. “That’s... very helpful.”

“If they bother ye in any way, let me know and I’ll...”

“You’re a good neighbor, Glenn. I appreciate it.”

“After ye eat, ‘tis t’ bed wi’ ye.”

She steered him to the exit, closing the steel-reinforced panel and securing the deadbolt. Then, her knees gave way, and she sank to the floor, sobbing.

## II

Mustang Duryea opened her eyes to unfamiliar surroundings. She wasn’t in bed, the surface beneath her unyielding. Scanning the surface above her awkward position, she recognized wall sconces in the hall leading from the foyer to the kitchen.

She’d exhausted herself crying, and fallen asleep on the floor.

Feeling quite the idiot, she climbed to her feet, spine stiff, knees aching, hand throbbing. Shuffling to the bedroom, the clock on the night stand flashed 3:30. She’d wasted much of the day, when she should have been tending to her horses.

She sank on the mattress, despondent. Idly, she removed the bandage; anyone else would’ve required stitches to mend such a deep, ugly puncture.

As she watched, the flesh knitted together.

That was the least of her troubles. How could she go about her normal routine when three suspicious men, just a stone’s throw away, stalked her?

With a sigh, she noticed her reflection in the mirror attached to the chest of drawers.

“Oh, hell!”

A shower and clean clothes would refresh her, she presumed. She could think clearly after enjoying a slice of chocolate cake, too.

Thinking clearly without proper information did not improve her dilemma, however. At times like this, she wished she owned a desktop, or even a mobile phone, so she could search the internet for facts about the McMahons/Emersons.

Not that the internet would be available so far from what might be termed civilization.

Even with Loch Ness - just across the B852 roadway - a popular tourist attraction, getting signal remained a challenge, as Glenn MacDonough had mentioned on occasion. Drivers who delivered her bi-weekly orders from the Does grocery store and feed dealer lamented the inability to contact their bosses while traveling in the area, as well.

So, had she equipment available, she probably wouldn’t be able to use it.

She'd never liked computers, seldom using the one her father had bought for the horse ranch where she'd grown up in Montana. She had no friends to email, and wasn't interested in reading the latest breaking news as it was posted online.

Asking her frequent companions, whom she manifested from the dead on a whim during various debacles, would garner no insights, either. St. Francis of Assisi had pledged - while he, Samuel Clemens, German general Erwin Rommel and Mohandas Gandhi existed on the ethereal plane - they could not divulge what they knew about any current predicament or future entanglements.

Their sole function, she'd concluded: offer pithy advice, critiques of her lapses in self-control, and a decent game of chess.

"You're short-changing us," stated Rommel as she washed two days worth of dishes in the kitchen sink.

"Am I?" she snapped, facing the window.

"We have comforted you, protected you..."

She snorted, "Protected? Tell me when you've done anything but... deflect my questions with inane platitudes?"

"You... don't usually use such language," noted the World War II military tactician.

"I like to keep things simple, but I'm so mad, I could chew nails." She threw the tea towel on the counter and stomped from the room.

Rommel dogged her steps into the living room, where she stirred dying embers back to life on the fireplace grate. "What do you want to know?"

She whirled on him, iron poker leveled like a sword - though she knew it could not harm him. "I want to know who they are, and why they're here."

Tremors beneath the carpet might have been Mustang's expression of rage, or a warning that Rommel should change the subject... or dissipate outright.

He chose neither option, instead relieving the Mistress of Boleskine of her weapon and guiding her to the cane-backed rocker. "This is... nothing you can't handle with ease. You've done far... um..."

"Worse?" she interspersed.

He shrugged, multi-colored ribbons on his khaki uniform bouncing.

"Meaning, I'll have to kill them."

"I didn't say that, nor did I imply it."

Hazel orbs averted, "Like hell, you didn't."

In the style of a career soldier, he paced the floor, deliberating a means to diplomatically extricate himself from this squabble. Finally, he paused and executed a precise about-face.

“They are self-appointed angels of vengeance, according to accounts by the American press,” he announced. “They send those they deem evil to their eternal reward, which is - contrary to what they believe - not hell. We’ve seen dozens cross over after their wholesale slaughter.”

“They’re here to kill me?” croaked Mustang.

“They have been... misinformed about you and assume what they have been told is the truth.”

“Misinformed? By whom?”

“They have...” Rommel ran a trembling finger between his neck and uniform collar, “connections in the FBI.”

Mustang buried her head in her hands. “Oh, hell! Espinoza?”

Since their first meeting after Jack Parsons’ death at Boleskine, agent Ben Espinoza had haunted her like a bad dream.

“Not directly,” said Rommel. “A few of their number have gone rogue, bypassing the justice system to rid the streets of violent criminals...”

“That’s what they think I am?” she bellowed.

“Since you haven’t cooperated with Espinoza’s initiatives, he’s convinced them that’s precisely what you are, and they’ve transmitted that sentiment on to the McMahons.”

She shot off the seat, her cheeks red. “I’ll see him *dead*! I’ll see all of them *dead*!”

Rommel grasped her shoulders firmly. “No, you won’t. I won’t let you.”

“How can you stop me?”

“You’ll stop yourself. You’re a rational human being, and you won’t do anything to harm the innocent.”

“They’re *not* innocent!”

“Deluded, then. You’ll convince the McMahons you’re not what they’ve been told you are and defuse the conflict.”

“And, just *how* do you suggest I accomplish that?” she squirmed.

“Bake them one of your special chocolate cakes.”

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

“It’s what any good neighbor would do to greet newcomers to the area. They’ll ask you in for coffee, and you can chat...”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“I’m willing to bet I’m right.”

“Bet what? You have no money, no possessions...”

“I have knowledge. I’ll bet anything you want to know about the future that, if you do as I say, you’ll not have to kill anyone, and they’ll abandon the idea of killing *you*.”

Mustang extended her hand; Rommel clasped it.

“It’s a bet,” she confirmed.

With the sun still setting rather early in these days prior to the official start of spring, gathering ingredients and mixing batter after feeding and watering the horses occupied part of an otherwise very long night. As a teenager, she hadn’t spent much time in the kitchen with her mother, Maggie, except when a certain family recipe was being prepared: triple chocolate delight.

When she’d been sent to live with her maternal grandmother in Massachusetts, prior to meeting Jack Parsons after that old woman’s passing, she’d learned the secret of the cake, and could imagine that a rocket scientist and occultist would enjoy a hefty slice.

The layers baked perfectly - even if they hadn’t, she could have rectified any flaws with a word - and the frosting tasted marvelous. Rather than hazard ruining the dessert on treacherous trails, she trekked the long way ‘round to the cottage in the gloom: down her drive, along the road, then up a packed-dirt track to the stone dwelling.

A good mile or more, with her knees still twinging from the earlier exertion.

She could smell cigar smoke beyond the door when she knocked on the upper panel. Nothing would spoil the taste of this gift more than a fog of acrid tobacco.

Nonetheless, she managed an amiable grin when the red wood creaked inward.

Aidan McMahon glared at her. “What’s this, then?”

“An apology for my behavior this morning.”

Ronan stepped up behind his son, standing six inches taller. Mustang couldn’t get over the blistering intensity of his hazel eyes, while his offspring’s watery blue orbs radiated other emotions.

She shook off her jitters. “May I come in?”

Ronan’s massive paw unlatched the bottom section of the door. Mustang crossed the open space with antiquated appliances in the far corner, a table and four chairs near the rustic fireplace, a sofa and armchairs below the front window, and two sets of bunk beds near a plaster-walled cubicle - added well after the structure had been built - for indoor plumbing.

Not that these men would mind using an outhouse, she surmised.

Aidan and Ryan practically drooled over the cake when she lifted the carrier's scrolled aluminum lid, displaying it on the granite counter; Ronan retained his suspicions. Their guest wondered exactly what tale had been concocted about her by the FBI. Was she purported to be a black widow, seducing and murdering men for their money? Or an international jewel smuggler, killing wealthy socialites for their bling?

She realized poison had been involved in the fabricated account when Ronan slapped Aidan's hand away from the cake as he moved to sample a chocolate rosette.

Selecting a large knife from a rack, she sliced the cake into eight pieces. "Pick one for me, and I'll prove it's safe."

Ronan did the honors, using the blade's flat edge to lift a random portion onto a stoneware plate from the cupboard. He offered her a fork from the drawer. She carved out a large, unladylike chunk and shoved it in her mouth, reveling over the sweetness.

When she didn't keel over, the McMahan twins tore into the treat like men starved.

Ryan wrenched open the refrigerator, grabbing two cans of beer, then reconsidered. He grabbed two tumblers and filled them with milk for himself and Aidan, then added a third for Mustang.

Ronan even had the wherewithal to extinguish his cigar before opting to join the feast.

"This is fantastic!" praised Aidan, a ring of frosting around his mouth, matting his mustache, with crumbs between his teeth.

"I'm glad you like it."

Ronan dabbed his lips with a paper napkin. "You risked no little danger walking here in the dark."

"To be honest, I might be risking more danger just sitting with you, Mr. McMahan."

He bristled, dropping his fork on the table to grope behind him, a double shoulder holster containing identical semi-automatic pistols fitted with suppressors suspended on the back of the chair. "How..."

"If you tell me who from the FBI issued the contract, I'll tell you who from the FBI set me up."

His brow furrowed as he released the weapons.

"I told you, Da, she's just a kid," Ryan ventured. "She couldn't be capable of the crimes Smithers claims she's committed..."

Ronan grumbled, "Hush, lad."

Mustang flashed a beatific smile. “Don’t blame your Mr. Smithers. His only fault is believing the web of lies Ben Espinoza spun for him.”

“Smithers isn’t that gullible,” proclaimed Ryan.

“Maybe he’s just... too trusting of his colleagues,” she acknowledged. “FBI agents are sworn to maintain their integrity and honor, while being truthful in their investigations. But, we all know that’s not the case, don’t we?”

“You’re very wise for one so young,” Ronan growled.

“Young, but experienced.”

“And you’ll swear the charges of murder, theft and torture leveled against you...”

“I’ll swear to nothing without having the details. Blanket statements aren’t always reliable...”

“Aye.”

“Besides, if we’re dealing honestly with each other, how many souls have *you* sent to hell?”

Aidan sneered, “We’ve lost count. The purveyors of evil in this world are so numerous...”

“You plan to rid the world of them, one by one?”

Ryan added, “Or in batches.”

“So, you’ve focused on the mob, crooked politicians...”

“Aye. Our deeds have been well reported by the media,” said Ronan.

“I don’t see the papers very often, nor do I own a radio, TV or computer.”

“They’ve dubbed us ‘The Saints,’” Aidan boasted.

Mustang stifled a caustic remark. If this trio were saints, then she was God.

“What were you shooting at yesterday?”

“Deer,” replied Ryan.

“With pistols?”

Ronan, disdainfully. “Aye.”

“With silencers?”

“Aye.”

“What, so you wouldn’t scare them away?”

“Aye.”

“Didn’t have any luck, though, eh?”

Ryan, dejected. “Aye.”

“Except for nearly killing me and my horse.”

The McMahons paused in devouring their second slices of cake. “Huh?”

“I was in the woods while you were... honing your skills. You might’ve killed *me*.”

The younger men laughing heartily over their mistake annoyed Mustang to the core.

“I was wondering how a deer could get so big!” huffed Aidan.

Ryan burred, “We wasted a lot of ammunition, for sure!”

Only Ronan retained his composure, leaning back on the wooden chair and relighting his cigar. “How is it you’re not injured?”

“You mean, by the dozens of bullets you and these... clods aimed at me?”

Ronan McMahon rising as he shrugged into the holster might’ve intimidated a lesser soul; Mustang mirrored his ascent, though he towered over her.

The progression of agile digits toward his firearms was interrupted by Glenn MacDonough lurching across the threshold, frazzled.

“Oh, milady! Here you are! I thought... I thought...”

Mustang scurried to him, coaxing him onto the plaid sofa until his breathing resumed a normal rhythm. She sank beside him.

“Why were you searching for me?” she puzzled.

“While I was in Inverness at a jobsite, I saw a news report about... about...” He flicked his index finger in the general direction of the McMahons.

With four strides, Ronan hovered above them. “What news?”

MacDonough trembled visibly; Mustang slipped her arm through his as a sign of solidarity. When his pleading orbs consulted her, she nodded in support.

“The British government has discovered ye entered the country using falsified documents. Warrants ha’ been issued for your arrest. It seems your... efforts t’ mete out swift justice t’ those who violate society’s standards are nae welcome here.”

Aidan and Ryan aimed their pistols at MacDonough, who jolted upright.

Mustang stepped between him and the twins. “Don’t even think about it.”

Ronan brandished his weapons. “If we are to make our escape, there can be no witnesses.”

“So much for your noble cause.” She spat on his boot. “Consider yourselves lucky they only want to arrest you. If I had my way...”

Sirens along B852 penetrated the stone walls. Ryan approached his father, tugging his sleeve. “Da...”

Ronan waved his guns toward the door. “Off with you, into the woods. They’ll never find us in the dark.”

The young men slipped into their peacoats, gathered a few belongings into duffel bags and raced outside.

Ronan fixed Mustang with a harsh gaze. "This isn't over," he promised before plucking a black trench coat off a wall hook and marching into the night.

### III

When two dozen constables stormed the cottage, they discovered a roaring fire, half-eaten plates of chocolate cake, empty milk glasses, but no McMahons.

"Who warned them?" crackled through radio speakers as Mustang listened from the underbrush 50 yards east. She'd sent Glenn MacDonough off in his pickup, so he wouldn't be implicated in what was escalating into a dodgy affair.

Erwin Rommel would lose his wager; someone was going to die.

It might not be Ronan McMahon. Ben Espinoza was her prime candidate as she trudged north.

She shivered as the image of the McMahons terrorizing her neighbor replayed incessantly in her mind. She could have - would have - reduced the firearms to molten sludge had they dared pull the trigger, but that would've only opened the door to a lot more questions from the trio.

After they fled, she collapsed in MacDonough's embrace, and felt his tears of relief trickle along her neck.

"We can't stay here," she'd muttered, tugging him from the building.

That Scottish burr objected, "But, the police will need our statements..."

"They've already got files on these guys, Glenn. Plenty of evidence exists for the prosecutor to press charges and get a conviction that will put them behind bars for life."

Unbeknownst to the project manager, Mustang aided his departure by rendering his vehicle invisible to oncoming police sedans, ensuring his safety.

What she didn't consider - hadn't heeded - is that the cake tin she'd left on the McMahons' table bore the distinctive crest of Boleskine House. She stringently avoided contact with local authorities, but when a brisk knocking on the front door woke her Tuesday morning, she had no choice.

"Can I offer you tea, or coffee?" she asked the detective sergeant and his companion as she ushered them into the living room.

"No, thank you, ma'am. If you'll just provide a few answers about how this item came to be at the cottage..."

"I left it there." No lie. "Being a considerate neighbor, I took over a cake."

"A chocolate cake."

"Yes."

“Delicious,” supplied the blond, rotund constable, pretending to admire the framed copy of a Monet on the wall.

“It is, isn’t it? An old family recipe.”

“Collins, can I get on with it?” admonished his superior, adjusting a narrow green tie.

“Sorry, Sarge.”

“Forgive him, ma’am, he could be charged with destroying evidence for eating the last slice...”

“Evidence? How is it evidence? It’s not like you can dust it for fingerprints.”

Collins chortled, then muffled the outburst behind his glove.

“It proves you were aware they were living in the cottage, and didn’t report it.”

Mustang shifted on the cane-backed rocker. “Sergeant, as you can see, I have no phone here, no computer. I would have no way to contact anyone, even if I’d known the men were fugitives.”

“You saw nothing suspicious in their behavior?”

“All I saw was a family on holiday. A bit unorthodox, trying to shoot deer with pistols fitted with silencers...”

The detective raised brown eyes from his pen. “Silencers?”

“The sound of rifles being fired is a given in these parts, poaching being a constant problem. When those men were out Sunday, though, the noise was... quite different.”

“You say they were after deer?”

“That’s what they told me last night.”

“I see.” The small pad closed and replaced in its pocket, the official rose. “The cake pan will be returned to you once our investigation is complete.”

“No rush.”

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

Leading the pair to the door, Mustang paused. “Sergeant, what do you know about those men?”

“Only what the government included in the warrants.”

“Which is?”

“They’re alleged to have used forged passports when going through customs, and hid illegal firearms in their luggage.”

“Nothing else?”

“No, ma’am.” The men strode outdoors, spring humidity oppressive. “Good day.”

She murmured a distracted, "Good-bye."

The door locked, pulling the yellow terry robe tighter around her waist, she aimed for the bathroom and a shower.

To her regret, Mustang periodically forgot to bolt the kitchen door. As dawn lightened the eastern sky, she'd filled a bird feeder hung outside the window above the sink and, burdened with the bucket of seed, neglected to do more than bump the panel shut with her backside.

So, when Ronan, Aidan and Ryan McMahon - pistols drawn - confronted her in her bedroom fifteen minutes later, a towel wrapped turban-style around her auburn mop, she couldn't really feign surprise or fear.

The twins' faces behind their Ray-Bans, however, softened from callous masks to wanton leers upon perceiving her slender curves, an aspect of the young woman undetectable bundled in her bulky parka against the cold.

Ronan, round-framed sunglasses slid partially down his broad nose, tossed jeans and a t-shirt toward her. "Get dressed. We need to talk."

As she unfastened the robe, the boys hoped to remain; their father knocked bronzed heads together and shoved them into the hall, slamming the door behind them.

She could've opted for layers of shirts and socks, climbing over the ice-encrusted windowsill and escaping to Glenn MacDonough's to ring the police - what would be the point? Best to have done with the fiasco, once and for all.

As she joined them in the living room, she brushed tangles from wavy tresses. The shirt Ronan had chosen - bearing the slogan "Make Love, Not War" - was an extra small, a memory from her teens kept on a hanger in the back of the closet. The fabric clung to her skin, and she'd deliberately not worn a bra, so certain parts of her anatomy would distract the McMahons from their nefarious purpose.

The ruse worked. Neither Aidan nor Ryan could keep their minds on Ronan's monologue. They lounged on the living room's green sofa and blatantly ogled her.

No power of the type Jack Parsons had conferred upon her was tapped to subvert this lot. Their own weaknesses would be their undoing.

They were men, after all, and Mustang had learned - via many trials and tribulations - that men only desired three things: power, money and sex.

She'd not really been listening to Ronan, who spouted about "codes of behavior" and how those who ignored them paid "the dearest cost."

He droned, "The blood of the wicked shall flow like a river. The Three shall spread their blackened wings and be the vengeful striking hammer of God."

Mustang shifted her attention from the drooling twenty-somethings to their sire. “What was that?”

Ronan didn’t repeat the words, but continued, “Whosoever shed man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God made He man.”

“Where did you pick up that tripe?” she demanded.

“Shepherds we shall be, for Thee, my Lord, for Thee. Power hath descended forth from Thy hand.”

She propped the hairbrush on the inlaid chess table, where the unfinished game against Samuel Clemens proved she didn’t really live alone. “So, you see yourselves as instruments of God?”

“We destroy all that which is evil, so that which is good may flourish.”

“Who determines what is evil?”

Flustered at this defiance, Ronan’s tirade faltered. “Evil... stands before us, behind us, on all sides.”

“Bullshit.” Barefoot, she went toe-to-toe with the taller man, her hazel orbs scorching. “If I thought that, I’d erase the species from the planet.”

And, immediately, realized her mistake.

Ryan and Aidan didn’t catch the inference, but Ronan did.

He raised her by her biceps so her head was level with his, scrutinizing her features through tinted glass as if imprinting them on his brain. “That’s why the FBI wants you dead. They fear your capacity for wholesale destruction.”

Smirking, she motioned for him to set her on the floor, and he gently complied. “Fear it, want it to use for their own ends...”

Ronan shuddered, flopping onto the cane-backed rocker as if shot, himself. “They used us...”

“Don’t blame your man Smithers. I would guess he had no idea an unscrupulous colleague was playing him for a fool.”

“Smithers is no fool,” chimed in Aidan, absently.

Ronan grunted, “Then, it’s this Espinoza we shall send to hell.”

“He’ll get there eventually,” Mustang countered. “You can walk out of here, free and clear, if you promise to forget about me.”

“That would nigh be impossible, child. You’re like a beacon of righteousness...”

“Oh, hell...”

She’d have to erase their memories when they were otherwise diverted.

For the moment, she commanded nature to destroy all records of their phony passports and the police warrants, so the remainder of the day would transpire without interference.

“You guys like steak?”

Two young men, normally unwilling to set foot in a kitchen, became Mustang’s collaborators in preparing a tossed salad, baked potatoes, corn on the cob and charring sirloins on the outdoor grill despite freezing temperatures. Every time she neared one of them, they found a reason to rub against her, or caress her arm - much to their father’s consternation.

Aidan made his move first. Mustang sent him to the linen closet for a clean tea towel after he’d spilled orange juice while pulling an onion from the refrigerator. Gone but a few seconds, he called, “I can’t find them!”

Mustang left a bowl of chocolate pudding half-mixed on the granite-topped island, laughing to herself. Aidan had angled himself in such a way that she had to squeeze between him and the shelves and, in doing so, merited being encircled by wiry arms, the nape of her neck attacked by his lips. He reached beneath her t-shirt to fondle her breasts, only to be rewarded when tremors rocked the floorboards.

“What the fuck?” he swore, releasing her.

She flung a tea towel at him and sidled back to the kitchen.

Ryan, at the grill, shouted through the half-open door that the tongs had fallen into the leaves and he needed clean ones. Mustang dug a set from the drawer and carried them out to him; he pinned her against the nearest tree, shoulder holster beneath his peacoat jammed into her ribs, and assaulted her mouth with his.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled; a microburst of wind ruffled his bizarre haircut.

“Don’t burn the meat,” she advised, as he marveled at the natural phenomena.

Not until the meal had been consumed - every last bite - in agitated silence, the brothers occasionally glancing at each other, frowning, their father never looking up from his plate except to load more potatoes or corn onto it, did a resolution to this stand-off present itself.

“Ryan, you and Aidan clear the table and wash the dishes,” she instructed. “I’ll take out the trash.” She squinted at Ronan. “Do you play chess?”

“Aye.”

“Then, set up the board in the living room. I’ll be right in.”

Not happily, the twins went about their duties, thumping each other and muttering insults and curses. Mustang left them to it - they were grown men, they should be able to behave - in favor of a good game.

Game, indeed. No more she stepped into the living room, than Ronan closed the door and jammed the cane-backed rocker beneath the handle.

“You, too?” tittered Mustang.

Dealing with his sons' passionate overtures may have qualified as a joke; Ronan McMahon would not be dissuaded.

"I've not had a woman in over 25 years," he snarled. "Those two may despise me for despoiling their chosen flower, but I'll have my pleasure with you."

Mustang couldn't deny his animal magnetism, but she knew their fate if she allowed him to... He unbuckled the black leather belt around his trim waist and suddenly found himself flung across the room, plaster cracked from where he impacted against the wall beside the fireplace.

In the meantime, shouts from the kitchen could not be ignored. She threw aside the rocker and wrenched open the door, hurrying along the hall to find Ryan and Aidan wrestling on the tile. Pots and pans lay dented where they'd been used as weapons, blood coated every surface.

She didn't need to wade into the fray. Their limbs unexpectedly frozen, they pondered this bizarre outcome to their fight.

"You're going to get up and sit on a chair until you calm down," she dictated. "Then, you're going to clean up this mess!"

Both uttered, "Yes, ma'am."

Ronan, who'd been knocked unconscious, staggered into the kitchen ten minutes later to see his offspring using mops and scrubbers. "What happened?"

"I happened," stated Mustang. "Once again, I've thrown a wrench into the works, disrupting your family dynamic. Best you leave and hop a plane back to the States."

"The police impounded our rental car, and we have no airline tickets."

"Would a limousine to Inverness do? You can catch a train to Edinburgh, and fly out from there."

"How..."

"No more questions. You can collect your boarding passes at the check-in counter."

"Lady Elizabeth, I..."

"Don't, Ronan. Just be on your way."

Aidan and Ryan tossed their sponges into the steel bucket, rinsed chemicals off their hands in the sink, and wiped the moisture on their black turtlenecks before donning sunglasses and peacoats. They followed their father toward the front door.

The latter, fastening his trench coat, hesitated on the threshold, eyes hidden behind opaque round lenses. "I seldom apologize for my actions," he whispered. "And I'm not the least bit sorry for wanting you. Under different circumstances..."

“Under *no* circumstances, Ronan. Not just you, but anyone. If your agent Smithers can wrangle the truth from Ben Espinoza, he - and you - will discover that I’m toxic in the extreme. I *have* killed: both those deserving of death and the innocent. Go, please.”

He disregarded her declaration as the ramblings of a lonely soul. The steel-reinforced panel closed, the deadbolt popped. He lifted her up and kissed her, embracing her as if his very life depended on it.

And, in ways, it did. The pain of two holstered pistols crushing her ribs, combined with ecstatic tingling of her flesh caused Boleskine House to shift *en masse* on its foundations. Outdoors, drenching rain soaked Ryan and Aidan, while gale-force winds, thunder and lightning threatened a different kind of destruction. Between the pair, a ground fissure created a bottomless chasm into which they nearly tumbled.

When he replaced her on her feet, she slapped him with enough force to bounce his cranium off the wall. “Why didn’t you heed my warning?” she stormed. “Look at this disaster!”

Contrite, but glowing in the wake of the encounter, he vowed, “Whatever it takes, I will see that proper repairs are made...”

“Not every dollar in the bank or the most skilled craftsmen can restore this.” The door stuck due to the warped jamb, she screamed, “Oh, hell!”

Ronan McMahon felt his flesh burning. He cowered in the foyer corner, astounded.

Steel melted before her; she stepped over twisted remnants to be met by the McMahon twins’ gaping jaws.

“Run for your lives, boys,” she hissed. “Fun and games are over.”

## IV

Two soaked, scared rabbits darted between the trees. Ronan emerged from the Georgian mansion, barely retaining his dignity, disheartened by the devastation of which he’d been the instigator.

“By all that’s holy, I beg your forgiveness.”

She twirled toward him. “How much did the FBI offer you to snuff me?”

“Two million.”

“You’ll divide every penny among the families of those you’ve killed, and stop this nonsense! If I’m not empowered to act as judge, jury and executioner, even with my... unique capabilities, it’s not up to you, either!”

“Aye. It shall be done as you wish.”

“Now, off with you.”

Ronan dug the toe of his black leather boot into the gravel like a timid child. “May I not... watch how you accomplish this task?”

“Haven’t you seen enough?”

He conceded, “Aye.”

Long legs strode to where his sons waited, disoriented. Ronan passed them, expecting them to follow - which they did, for a few yards. Then, embarrassed by his show of cowardice, Ryan drew his pistol and aimed at Mustang.

Fortunately, she recognized the suppressor’s pop and transformed the projectile into a boomerang. It returned to its owner and ripped open his midsection. He flew 20 yards and slammed against a willow.

Biblical wailing and gnashing of teeth in hell could have been no more discordant than the moans and cries echoing through the forest in the wake of this calamity, Mustang estimated. Ronan McMahon charged at her, an enraged bull, both his semi-automatics firing simultaneously.

“You murdered my son!” he hollered.

The volume of her contralto matched his. “He would’ve killed me in cold blood, an unarmed woman!”

Bullets ricocheted off an invisible barrier, never touching her.

“Unarmed? Ha!” Ronan spat. “You’re more lethal than a nuclear bomb!”

To herself, Mustang snickered, “You got that right.” Sun descending in the west, she focused her attention on realigning the house and sealing the chasm, though oaks uprooted by winds of anger would gradually decompose into mulch. Discarding his emptied weapons, Ronan employed no stealth in approaching her from behind, wrapping his forearm around her throat and compressing her windpipe.

“Why do men always have a death wish?” she gurgled.

The current of electricity that surged through McMahon would have fried every organ, had Erwin Rommel not appeared and physically shaken her back to reality.

“Remember your reticence to interact with the police,” chided the German general. “A corpse on the drive will do you no favors.”

She sniffed. “I can turn the remains to dust in a heartbeat.”

“And when his sons press for your prosecution?”

“They’re murderers, themselves. They won’t...”

“Their FBI connection would be all too eager...”

Reluctantly, her shoulders slumped. “Oh, hell...”

She extended her scarred palm to where Ronan McMahon twitched like a beached eel on the puddled drive. No more did their fingers entwine, than his anguish dissipated and he righted himself, bewildered. He groped for his sunglasses, shattered lenses once more intact, and adjusted them on his ears.

Her raised hand silenced him as he straightened. "Not a word, Ronan. I'm too exhausted to dispute your logic, and you've already experienced my unhinged reaction to disobedience." She motioned him away.

Brushing gravel off his coat and somberly touching his forelock in mock salute, he withdrew into the woods, where a completely healed Ryan squatted beside Aidan.

The trio marched in step toward the cottage, a limousine engaged to transport them to the city.

"And their flight to the States?" hinted Rommel.

"Manipulating computer records takes minimal effort."

"What about manipulating their memories?"

"That, too, is simple. Once they land in Boston, the McMahons will forget ever traveling to Scotland. Glenn MacDonough will forget meeting them and having his life threatened. FBI agent Smithers' notes have already disintegrated, and he'll forget speaking to Ben Espinoza."

"What about Herr Espinoza?"

Mustang slunk toward the dwelling as dusk engulfed the clearing.

"Honestly? I'd like very much if he suffered a debilitating..."

Rommel's mitt over her mouth prevented her from speaking the command. "All in due time, my dear."

The Mistress of Boleskine loped through the hole that had, minutes earlier, been an impregnable barrier to the world. While Rommel, technically, didn't need doors to go from room to room, he did likewise. They stood together in the foyer as molecules meshed once more into steel.

"How I could have used your abilities to repair disabled tanks during the war," the general muttered, awed.

"Trapped in Georg Schiller's body, as I was when we were together then, I could not use..."

"Had you been able, history would have been irrevocably altered."

"True."

"So, all is for the best."

They settled at the chess board.

"Is it? Is it, really?" she mused, moving the white king's pawn two squares forward.

She lost the game to Rommel in twelve moves, stomping off to bed in a huff.

Not that she slept. Though they conversed in hushed tones, Mustang could hear every word Rommel and Clemens exchanged, her nerves pulsing with indignation.

“She yearns so badly to be a woman in the fullest sense of the term,” postulated the author who’d made a name for himself as Mark Twain.

Rommel grumbled. “Have you not noticed how a major rift in the timeline would be caused if that is allowed to occur?”

“Of course, I have. So, a few million people would die. They would soon be replaced at the current rate the population is increasing.”

“What about the accomplishments by those deceased that would never come to fruition? Medical innovations, environmental restoration...”

“Hang it all, Rommel, don’t be such a killjoy. The girl has passions that, pent up, will wreak more havoc than if she expressed them properly.”

“You cannot be certain of such an outcome, Sam. A mere kiss nearly destroyed this very house only hours ago.”

“A forced expression of affection, not something she initiated.”

“It is not for the female to initiate sex. That is the man’s prerogative.”

“What a load of horse apples! This isn’t the dark ages, or even the 1930s, when women were required to stay in the kitchen and keep their opinions to themselves.”

Rommel’s boots created a steady rhythm on the floorboards. “Then, which of the McMahons would best serve her... appetites?”

“You would bring them back for such an experiment?”

“It’s possible.”

“She’s already wiped their memories,” stated Clemens.

“The command has been uttered, but the timing...”

Clad in red sweats that doubled as pajamas, fists clenching and unclenching, she scolded them from the doorway. “Just who the hell do you think you are, picking apart my life like some lab rat’s? You think if you brought any of those three back here, I’d give him a second look?”

“You wanted them to take a fancy to you,” reasoned Clemens, “which is why you didn’t switch the tight shirt for something more your... style.”

“I didn’t want them pulling their guns on me!”

Rommel waved her to the cane-backed rocker. “Be honest, child. When they touched you... did you feel...”

“Fear, General. Absolute, total terror. Knowing the roof could crash down on our heads...”

“But, what if it didn’t?” queried Clemens.

“That’s not a option. Every time the possibility has arisen, the collateral damage...”

Rommel assured her, “You can prevent it, if you wish.”

“How?”

“Consciously imagine you and the object of your affections encased in an impenetrable bubble, trapping your emotional emanations inside it. Then, the world will be safe.”

“That’s... nonsense.”

Clemens rose from the green sofa at the sound of the kitchen door creaking.

“Oh, hell!” gushed Mustang. “I forgot to lock it again!”

She scurried along the hall and rounded the corner. Ronan McMahon halted near the island, cigar emanating acrid smoke, eyes hidden behind those damned sunglasses, pistols drawn.

“What is it now?” she squawked.

“Unless I bring Smithers proof of your death, we don’t get paid.”

“What, my head in a box, like in some old movie? Or, must you cut out my heart?”

Behind her, Rommel and Clemens observed the scene, though invisible to McMahon.

“What’s more important: money, or living the rest of your life in peace?”

Ronan responded, “Without the one, the other is not possible.”

“What if I give you the money?”

“You haven’t...”

“I can get it in a day, whenever I choose.”

He lowered both barrels. “This isn’t another ploy...”

She yanked the cigar from between his teeth, pitched it at the sink and seized his gloved hand. “Come with me.”

Dragging him to a side corridor, they stopped before a locked oak panel. She didn’t use a key to shift the tumblers, shoving him inside.

He scanned the book-lined chamber, running trembling fingers through his wavy white mop. “What is this?”

“Some people might call it a panic room. It’s reinforced on all sides, just in case...”

“And, why bring me here?”

A safe popped open on the far wall. "Count the stash."

It had been awhile since she'd visited the casinos on the French Riviera, but over 100,000 Euros remained bundled in 5,000 Euro increments, piled neatly in the cubicle.

"My God!" Ronan gasped.

"There's plenty more, if you just knock off this shit."

He replaced the stacks symmetrically and turned toward her, removing his sunglasses. "I... don't care about the money."

Hazel orbs smoldered, but not with hatred as he shed his trenchcoat, unbuckled the shoulder holster and slung both over a winged-back chair.

"General, you'd better be right about this," Mustang murmured under her breath.

Whereas, in the past, she had tensed each time a man caressed her, she envisioned a protective globe surrounding the spot where Ronan eased her onto the carpet - the love seat being too small for such an endeavor. She gave rein to her feelings, reveling in this togetherness.

Until...

As they approached climax, the sphere cracked.

She couldn't terminate the coupling, so consumed by delight. She managed to channel a portion of her energy to holding the shield intact but, no more than they collapsed, entwined, fragments of the shell audibly crashed around them.

"What the devil?" Ronan barked, raising himself on one elbow.

Ceiling tiles rained down fiberglass chunks, quickly reversed by Mustang's unspoken instruction.

"You are a miracle incarnate." He leaned forward and kissed her anew. "I shall always remember..."

"But, you won't, Ronan. I can't let you. It would not only be risky for you, but also for me, if you spoke my name in the wrong quarters..."

"I don't really know your name, do I?" he ventured. "It's not Lady Elizabeth Neville."

"Correct. And, best I don't reveal it. My wish for you is a long and peaceful life... Somehow, I don't think that's feasible."

"My sons and I are charged with a duty..."

Rolling on her side, she rearranged her sweats and rose, leaving him to put his own clothes in order. She unlocked the door and escorted him to the kitchen, where he made his exit as he had entered, the waning moon casting a soft light on the gravel drive leading to the road.

Preparing herself a mug of hot chocolate from scratch, she settled at the metal dinette table, warming her hands on the ceramic surface. “Well, General, you were wrong.”

Rommel appeared on the chair across the board. “Technically, yes. It’s a work in progress. Defining the strength of the protective casing has a direct correlation to the depth of your passion...”

“So, you’re reducing the only way I can safely make love with a man to a mathematical equation?” she snapped.

“The laws of physics...”

“Physics be damned!”

“I won our bet, at any rate.”

“Meaning, if you’d lost, I’d be dead.”

“Not... necessarily.”

“If I’d been unable to stop their bullets, would you have stopped them from killing me?”

The German general lowered his chin. “It’s not within our purview to...”

Jumping from her seat, she lofted the half-empty cup at the wall. It splintered into pieces and splattered brown liquid in all directions.

“I thought as much,” she roared. “Talk about being played for a fool!”

She sequestered herself in her room, hunkered down on the king-sized mattress, knowing full well these men she’d manifested from their graves could penetrate any defenses. She debated sending Clemens and Rommel - along with St. Francis and Gandhi - back to the ethereal realms, so they couldn’t bother her anymore.

Who would she match wits with at chess, then? she pondered. If people in the vicinity believed her eccentric, they’d soon be labeling her a certifiable lunatic.

She still had the horses to keep her sane. Caring for them gave her days purpose: exercising them, grooming them, cleaning their stalls, feeding them and filling their water troughs...

Thoughts of her pinto, Heartbeat, flooded her mind. Even lacking the powers Jack Parsons imparted to her, she’d kept the foal alive when his heart ceased functioning after a tough birth. Perhaps the one kind act her father performed for her over an 18 year span: gifting her that horse to raise.

Glenn MacDonough had purchased the five horses living at Boleskine on her behalf - a good friend, that. He shared her love of the animals, and sensed the temperament that would match her own. She couldn’t have been happier the day he delivered the stock in his own trailer.

Lowering herself onto the pillows, she licked her lips, still tasting Ronan McMahon. She never intended to be with a man in that way, yet it happened periodically, resulting in disaster. She could not deny savoring the thrill - even as her nerves resisted arousal - but she renewed her resolution to remain in isolation, avoiding contact with other human beings, to prevent further tragedies.

Samuel Clemens sat on the edge of the bed as she drifted off to sleep. "I'm sorry, my dear," he remarked. "In future, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Damn straight," she mumbled.

Rommel, too, offered his apology. "If I cannot be of help, I'll stay out of it from now on."

"That's just grand."

Moments later, they heard her snoring.