

The Mustang Chronicles:

Beekeeping Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea - known in the district east of Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands as the widowed Lady Elizabeth Neville, despite her mere 21 years of age - entertained an appreciation of nature long before she encountered St. Francis of Assisi. She’d grown up on a Montana horse ranch, after all, and played hooky most of her school years, preferring the peace of forested trails to the classroom.

An exception to this rule occurred, however, when nature invaded what she considered her “personal space”. Spiders on the bathroom mirror, for instance, or ants eager for a free lunch marching across the kitchen counter, she did not abide.

Bees... well, she’d been stung as a child, running to the house from an inflatable swimming pool over a patch of clover. Fortunately not allergic, she wept while waiting for one of the ranch hands to pluck the stinger from the sole of her left foot - her father being too busy for such nonsense.

If a similar incident had taken place in the years since she’d unwittingly received command over the natural elements from scientist and occultist Jack Parsons, her anger and frustration might have decimated the entire region.

That would’ve been a hell of a mess to rectify.

Her awareness that, if she did allow her anger to hold sway, she was capable of committing acts too horrible to describe, did periodically serve to neutralize impulsive thoughts and actions.

But, not always.

Mustang reflected on these shortcomings from the grassy hillock above Boleskine House, the Georgian mansion she’d occupied since accepting voluntary exile from the States, just to get the FBI and other government agencies off her back. She’d made the mistake of allowing some of her reactions to sensitive situations to be tracked by the National Weather Service, drawing interest from not only domestic but foreign - even supernatural - entities who sought to use her power for their own ends.

She stood beside a pile of warped wood. Parsons’ had performed rituals using the picnic table, and she’d been present during the last, when he’d died at her hand and lightning had shattered the makeshift altar. She could have reduced it to ash with a word, but let it remain a daily reminder of her need for self-control.

Snatching the reins of her mare, Pietra, from where she’d tied them to a low tree branch, the Mistress of Boleskine paused when a bee landed on the

leather. Another black and yellow insect buzzed past her face. Then, she glimpsed a swarm and the hive attached to the oak trunk beyond.

They were dutifully collecting pollen from newly blossomed wildflowers around the clearing's perimeter. Silently, Mustang wished them well and led the roan toward the barn.

Her tolerant missive must've somehow encouraged the bees to notify their friends for, within a week, their numbers had tripled, with hives being constructed closer to the five-bedroom domicile. Each morning she emerged, en route to feed and water her horses, their signature noise grew louder.

"Oh, hell..." she muttered that Thursday, reluctant to utter the directive that would cause their wings to cease fluttering and the lot to drop dead on the ground.

When a dirt-encrusted green pickup bounced along the gravel drive, her bi-weekly order of oats and hay in the bed, it braked near the corral. Seeing the cloud of bees, the youthful driver did not exit the cab.

The blond lad cursed through the cracked window with a thick Scottish burr, making his statement incomprehensible to the American. All she grasped: "I ne'er seen the like!"

"Do you know anyone who could... help?" she shouted through the din.

"Aye, Your Ladyship. Jeremy Lorimer is a beekeeper up Aldourie way. He'd know what t' do wi' this lot."

"Please, ring him for me. Tell him I'll pay anything..."

The vehicle reversed course to the B852 highway; Mustang paused mid-stride. It had been months since she'd traveled via lightning bolt to Cannes to replenish her coffers, and the safe in the locked sitting room held little in the way of funds. If this beekeeper demanded some outrageous sum...

That's for later, she mused. Tending the horses topped her list of priorities, though she wouldn't be able to exercise them on the trails around the 47 acres until this debacle was solved.

Lunching on a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich with a tall glass of milk, the auburn-haired young woman procrastinated about giving the kitchen a thorough cleaning. She lived alone, with no phone, radio, or television, and no servants - though she could have afforded them. This deliberate choice eliminated the chance of any accidental mishaps being witnessed; too many had died already, and she had no intention of purposefully adding to that number.

Mustang planned to spend the afternoon playing chess with Erwin Rommel, but an insistent pounding on steel disrupted her concentration.

Abandoning the inlaid board and carved ivory pieces, she unlatched the deadbolt and pulled the reinforced front door inward.

Tweed flat cap gripped in his fist, the visitor burst across the threshold and slammed the panel. He sank against it, chest heaving.

“May I... help you?” came Mustang’s uncertain greeting as she retreated three paces.

A sharp baritone: “What the divil is goin’ on here?”

“I...”

Moderating his respiration, he straightened, and his hostess took in the sight. Hair the color of dark chocolate hung loose across his sloped forehead. Slightly sunken bluish-brown eyes gaped at her over a nose that would’ve been flawless except for the lump denoting a badly healed fracture. Smooth, sunburnt cheeks framed thin lips and a narrow chin, with small, sculpted ears completing the picture, a pirate-style gold loop dangling from the left lobe.

A baggy grey boilersuit covered a 40-ish wiry torso, tucked into leather boots. Nervously, he smoothed the wrinkled cotton fabric. ““Scuse me, lass,” he apologized, harshness now absent from his voice. “I’m here t’ see yer mum.”

“My mum?” countered Mustang.

““Bout the bees. Ye ha’ an urgent problem...”

“I know. Can you handle it, Mister...”

Calloused fingers brushed his forelock in salute. “Lorimer, missy. Jeremy Lorimer.” Not daring to use the door, he pressed, “Ha’ ye a window aboot?”

She guided him into the living room, and he drew aside heavy draperies. “That’s me van.”

A battered white box truck bore the faded logo of a bee mid-flight, surrounded by “Lorimer Family Natural Honey” in neat script, with Aldourie, Scotland, and a telephone number.

“Is yer mum at home?” he queried again.

Mustang bristled. “If you’re wanting Lady Elizabeth Neville...”

““Tis correct, lass.”

“That’s me.”

Orbs widened above puffiness unusual for one his age. Then, embarrassed, he bowed slightly. “I am that sorry, Yer Ladyship.”

“Don’t be.” She waved him to the green sofa. “I never expected to be a widow living alone in the middle of...”

She wouldn’t spoken “nowhere,” except for not wishing to offend this expert on bees.

Besides, she'd never liked the cover story FBI agent Ben Espinoza had invented for her, just as Jack Parsons had been given the name "Jock White" when the Bureau had confined him to the same location after faking his death in the 1950s.

Lorimer sank on the cushions, admiring the chess set. "As I said, Yer Ladyship, ye ha' a divil o' a problem."

"Can you do something about it?"

"'Twill take time. In most instances, I can smoke the bees t' calm them, trap them wi' a special vacuum, then capture the queen and move the hive t' another location."

Mustang settled on the cane-backed rocking chair. "I sense a 'but' coming..."

"If there's one queen for this swarm, I dinnae ha' the capacity..." Partly unzipping his coveralls, he extracted a handkerchief from the pocket of the purple t-shirt underneath. He dabbed perspiration from his brow. "If there's more than one queen, setting up hives for each will be... expensive."

"Money is no object," she affirmed. "I'd just... rather not see them killed."

"Aye, 'tis an honorable sentiment, Yer Ladyship. So many bees ha' died from pesticides and destruction o' their habitat..."

She extended her right hand across the chess board. "We have a deal?"

Lorimer hesitated before accepting the gesture. "'Tis might be inappropriate t' ask..."

"You wish a retainer?" presumed Mustang, lowering her fingers.

"Oh, nae, ma'am. I trust ye. 'Tis just... the job would be done more efficiently if I could store me equipment onsite..."

"There's space in the barn."

"Thank ye." The edges of his mouth twitched up in a smile that lasted only a fraction of a second. "'Twould be best if I stayed onsite, too."

Impossible, rang inside Mustang's skull.

He must've read disapproval in her youthful features. "I'd provide me own food, and even cook for ye, if ye are agreeable t' the arrangement."

To be frank, she'd never enjoyed cooking. Back home, her mother had cooked - simple meals, mostly palatable - while she preferred tending the horses. She could manage steak, hamburgers, hot dogs, and kept herself alive with cereal and salads...

Before she could restrain herself, she raised her hand; he clasped it firmly.

"In the meantime..." Lorimer drawled, releasing her digits and moving the black king's pawn forward two spaces.

Disconcerted, Mustang shifted in her seat.

“Oh, there’s nothin’ t’ do ‘til evenin’, Yer Ladyship. Once the bees return t’ the hive for the night, I can fetch everythin’ from the van, and be up early on the morrow t’ get started.”

She resigned herself to the situation, though it proved little different than if Erwin Rommel had manifested opposite. Lorimer had a logical mind, perhaps due to his need to outthink rivals that could cause death if riled. He had her in checkmate three times before she invited him to help her prepare dinner.

Her well-stocked larder impressed him. “Me mum cooked for a family in Inverness t’ pay for me schoolin,” he explained. “Me older brother, not wantin’ t’ take over the family business, worked his way t’ Paris, studyin’ t’ become a chef. He travels the globe on a cruise liner, these days.”

Mustang set plates and utensils on the metal-legged kitchenette table. “So, you stayed home...”

“Aye. Me da always said I had a talent wi’ the bees. Never been stung once in me life.”

“Lucky you.”

Selecting a whole chicken, vegetables and spices, Lorimer created a delicious meal, consuming most of it himself. As she soaked up gravy with a slice of bread, Mustang wondered how he maintained that thin physique given his high caloric intake.

She would learn the answer in the morning.

Before then, though, she carried the dishes to the sink, squirting liquid soap into a stream of hot water. Thinking he - like her father - would retire to the living room, she began scrubbing glasses and silverware, stunned when he snatched up the tea towel and a bowl from the drying rack.

“Thanks,” she breathed.

“‘Tis me pleasure.”

“Living at home, you must be used to doing chores beyond just... caring for the bees.”

“Livin’ alone, I ha’ no choice, unless I want t’ live in a pig sty.”

Mustang’s hazel eyes glanced at him. “Didn’t you say...”

“Me mum and da passed on some years since. ‘Tis part o’ life, death.”

“Absolutely,” she concurred.

“What about ye? How did yer husband pass?”

She distracted herself with a grease-encrusted spatula. “He served in the Army...”

“‘Tis that sorry I am,” stated Lorimer. “War serves humanity ill, whatever the reasons concocted by the idiots who try t’ justify ‘em.”

Based on this wisdom and his general demeanor, she guessed the fight that broke his nose, or gave him the prominent scar beside his right eye had taught him the facts of life.

Or, he had discovered the secrets of existence from the bees.

Draining the soapy water, she led him to the foyer, where he gingerly opened the door and peered into the gloom.

“If ye ‘twill show me where I can put the equipment...”

“I have to feed the horses, as it is. C’ mon.”

While she had no issues navigating the route to the barn, Lorimer stumbled repeatedly on the gravel as he hauled a protective suit and headgear, an overgrown vacuum and tubing, and a smoker. Mustang relieved him of the lighter items, rolling the massive, well oiled door on its track and pointing to an empty stall.

“Magnificent animals,” the beekeeper praised beneath the lone overhead bulb.

“Thanks.” Pouring oats into buckets, she inquired, “Do you ride?”

“Nae, ma’am.”

“It’s very peaceful, out on the trails...”

“I find me peace wi’ the wee lot.”

To each his own, she mused.

Back in the mansion, Lorimer’s backpack slung over a narrow shoulder, she escorted him past the bathroom and linen cupboard to the guest room - one of two actually furnished, while the other sleeping quarters stood empty.

“To set the alarm on the clock...” she offered.

“No need, Yer Ladyship. I wake at half-five whether I want t’ or not.”

She chuckled. “Me, too. Something about daily responsibilities...”

“Aye.”

“Good night, Jeremy.”

“Blessin’s.”

Seated on the king-sized mattress in her otherwise stark chamber, Mustang reprimanded herself for allowing another stranger to get close to her, even in this emergency. She was slipping into yellow sweats that served as pajamas when a biting, loud baritone penetrated the wall.

“Damn ye sods t’ ‘ell!”

Rushing along the corridor, she shoved wide the partially open door. Lorimer thrashed beneath the quilt, in the midst of a nightmare.

“Oh, hell...”

II

Moonlight sufficient to reach Jeremy Lorimer without switching on the lamp, Mustang Duryea trapped his wrists to stop the flailing. Soothing whispers offset any notion of danger racing through his brain; she noticed his muscles relaxing.

Bluish-brown orbs shot open and, not recognizing his surroundings, he jerked upright. His entire body trembled with the remnants of his dream. He glimpsed his companion, bathed in shadows, and fell against her, sobbing.

Slim though he appeared, his weight almost knocked her to the floor. To keep her balance, she wrapped her arms around him, sympathetically patting his spine until he regained a semblance of composure.

Finally, he withdrew from the embrace, rummaging in his pajama pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his eyes and nose. "I'm... so sorry, Yer Ladyship."

Not the first occasion when a guest had prevented her from getting any sleep, Mustang recalled. "Don't worry your head over it," she murmured. "Just tell me: what happened?"

"Old memories, 'tis all."

"Memories?"

"Come back t' haunt me."

She could definitely commiserate. "Would it help to talk about it?"

"Aye... and nae. 'Tis a windin' tale..."

Highlanders were famous for their yarns, mostly fictional, but here sat a man in obvious anguish...

"Go on."

"Are ye sure?"

Disheveled auburn tresses bobbed.

He launched into a narrative - someone difficult to grasp due to his heavy accent - about the earring he wore. "The first of our line, in the days of our Queen Mary, found a bee've just inside a shaft where the locals were minin' for gold. 'E volunteered t' move it, so the men comin' and goin' wouldn't get stung. 'E taught 'imself t' 'arvest the 'oney, sellin' it t' the womenfolk 'ereabout."

This Lorimer forebear's lucrative new career being directly tied to the gold mining, he crafted a ring from a few nuggets for his intended bride. The queen's own priest officiated at the wedding ceremony, blessing the token of the couple's commitment. When the woman died in childbirth, the beekeeper reclaimed the band. It became an earring, worn by every Lorimer heir through the centuries.

“‘Tis a symbol o’ our pledge t’ care for the bees, who made us rich,” concluded her guest.

He didn’t look rich, in Mustang’s estimation. “That can’t be the cause of your dream...”

“Oh, aye. ‘Tis. Family tradition holds that the son o’ the house is gifted the earrin’ on his fifteenth birthday. When me brother declined t’ take over the hives from our da, it fell t’ me. I endured the piercin’ by bitin’ me tongue ‘til it bled, but the worst was t’ come.”

“How so?” Mustang prodded.

“Me mates at school didna understand the importance of me decision. One fine day, after football practice, they dragged me int’ the trees and thrashed me, leavin’ me for dead.”

Despising violence in any form, a tender - albeit well scarred - palm stroked his damp cheek. “You poor thing.”

Spontaneously, Lorimer grasped her hand and planted his lips on the discolored flesh, not detecting the damage in the dimness. “I’m that grateful, milady, for yer kindness. I’ve ne’er known the likes...”

She gently extricated her hand. “What, then?”

“When I woke, ‘twas night. I managed t’ make me way home, where me mum fainted at the sight o’ me. I near fainted, meself, when I saw meself in the mirror. Blood all over me face because o’ the broken nose, eyes near swollen shut from the bruisin’. Me left arm dislocated and hangin’ at an angle...”

“Did your parents take you to hospital?”

“Oh, Lord, nae, Yer Ladyship. The nearest doctor lived in Inverness. Me mum patched me up as best she could, and I healed in due time.”

Which accounted for the disjointed nose: it had not been properly set after the injury.

“Were those boys punished for their...”

“Aye, ‘twere expelled from school, they were. The truly sad part, though: I’d believed them me friends.”

All because of a family heirloom, lamented Mustang.

“Some... sorts don’t believe men should wear... that kind of... jewelry,” she stammered awkwardly. “They think it means...”

“Aye, I learned as much later, from a woman, nae less.”

“Your wife?”

“Ach, nae, Yer Ladyship.” His lips twitched in that momentary smile. “I ha’ nae taken the vows before a minister.” He plumped the pillow and stretched out beneath the quilt. “But, that’s a tale for another day.”

She hovered above him. "You'll leave me hanging?"

"Not at all, ma'am. Not at all, if ye really want..." He propped himself on one elbow.

"Please."

He tugged her arm, forcing her onto the edge of the mattress. "Me mum 'twas Irish. Since I was a wee bairn, I'd spent me summer holidays in County Cavan wi' me Gran. Me cousins and I got along well enough, though they resented me Scottish half."

Lorimer's cousin Essie, a sweet but gullible girl, had a friend who... liked boys a bit too much, he recounted. "T' this day, I'd swear before a magistrate that Ann and Essie made a wager about me..."

"What about you?"

"I'd just finished me last year o' school. Me and the boys were havin' a game o' football on the neighborhood pitch, wi' the girls cheerin' us. Come supper, we were walkin' back t' Gran's. Ann and Essie were gigglin', as girls do, and pokin' each other. Ann stopped, rubbin' her eye and whinin' she had dust in it. She asked me t' take a look, while Essie moved on. I turned Ann toward the sun, but saw nothin'. After she looked around quick t' make sure we were alone, she grabbed me 'round the neck and kissed me, the little tart."

"You'd never been kissed before?"

Lorimer grunted, "I had nae time for such foolishness. Bein' dyslexic, school was tough for me, and I had t' do a lot o' studyin' t' keep up wi' m' class. Carin' for the bees filled the rest o' me time."

Mustang suspected the next chapter of his story. Ann told Lorimer's grandmother what had transpired - though not her role in the ordeal. The lad faced a forced marriage, and fled back to Scotland.

That put him off romance for nearly two decades, until he met a woman at a Christmas faire. He'd been selling natural honey at his booth; she had set up her wares along the same row: honey infused with various spices and herbs.

Her creativity intrigued him, and their relationship commenced with experiments to find the proper mixture for optimum taste.

"We lived together near eleven months after me mum passed," Lorimer yawned. "Me son was born with a failin' heart valve, and died within days. That... crushed me hopes for a pleasant future."

Mustang rose, at a loss for words. "Rest now, Jeremy. We've a lot to do in the morning."

Before she pulled the door closed, she heard him snoring.

She didn't close an eye once she crawled into her own bed. Not one to retain historical dates - even if she had attended school on a regular basis - she realized the import of upholding family tradition for more than 400 years. Lorimer's tainted view of females as a whole, however, jeopardized the bees.

Still, not many youngsters in this era followed in their parents' footsteps, assuming the burden of a business started centuries earlier. Too many opportunities for power and wealth tempted ambitious souls to pursue advanced university degrees and seek six-figure paychecks.

Personally, she would've been content on her father's ranch, breeding and selling the finest horses in the American West.

She heard Lorimer rustling around just after 5:30, true to his word. Her body ached for sleep, but the horses would be wanting their breakfast.

The smell of bacon roused her to full consciousness, blended with the aroma of coffee.

Her guest, a blue terry robe belted around his trim waist, beamed as he fried eggs in an iron skillet on the stove. "Good mornin', Yer Ladyship."

She'd allowed him to use the faux title long enough. "Please, Jeremy. My friends call me Mustang."

"Ach, how disgraceful!" he protested.

Grabbing plates and juice glasses from the cupboard, she noted, "It's what I prefer."

"As ye wish."

Between bites of toast, she queried, "So, what will you be doing today?"

"Tryin' t' find one o' the queens."

"And, once you capture her?"

"The bees o' that 'ive will join her."

"Once they're moved, they won't return?"

He drained his orange juice in one gulp. "That's what I dinnae understand, Yer... um, ma'am."

So, he couldn't muster the gumption to call her by name. She'd be patient.

"'Tis quite a conundrum for this many bees, from different hives, t' be in the same place."

Mustang wasn't about to reveal the cause. "But, it can be done without harming them?"

"Aye."

"That's grand."

Lorimer rose. "Will ye forgive me disrespect in leavin' the dishes?"

No one had ever asked her that particular question. “There’s nothing to forgive. I... appreciate your willingness to take on this challenge.”

“Ach, the bees are me friends, ma’am. They know I only do what’s good for ‘em.”

Other than the horses, Mustang didn’t consider animals as friends. She could talk to them, even direct their actions - like when she’d created a cattle stampede on her cousin’s Idaho estate - but...

In that moment, she deliberated what these insects might be thinking about their predicament.

A brief shower preceded Lorimer donning a black t-shirt and jeans, dark chocolate mop dripping down his back. He toted his protective suit into the living room; Mustang held the veil while he encased himself in triple-layers of cloth and yanked a zipper to his neck.

“You remind me of an astronaut,” she quipped.

“Better that, than bein’ mistaken for the blokes who track radiation.”

True, she concurred silently.

He moved like an astronaut, as well, unable to walk with a regular gait due to the suit’s bulk. As she monitored his progress from the living room window, he retrieved his equipment from the barn and set about his work.

Mustang scolded herself for not venturing out to assist him; uttering a command for the bees not to sting her, and to cooperate with their own relocation would have been simple, given her powers.

How would she justify such an... anomaly to Lorimer?

For that matter, when he rushed into the house, casting off his headgear and fiddling with his ears, how could she discount his declaration that the bees had spoken to him?

“Oh, hell...”

“Tens o’ thousands o’ voices, ringin’ inside me skull...” he moaned, flopping on the green sofa.

“Could you... make out what they were saying?”

His tone sharpened as bluish-brown orbs scathed her. “They should nae be *sayin’* anythin’!”

“Right, right.” Hands raised in surrender to his rage and confusion, she left the room.

Migrating to the kitchen, she made a pretense of filling a tumbler with water at the sink. She’d done it again: a stray thought had generated chaos.

A cinch to mute the insects. If they had legitimate grievances, nonetheless, needing to be addressed...

Placing the glass on the counter, she approached the kitchen door. Nervous digits turned the knob; she stepped outside and confronted the swarm seemingly massed for an attack.

“Keep your distance,” she instructed. “I’m here to listen, but only one must speak.”

With a ten-foot barrier preventing her from being stung, she fielded objections to her parameters.

“We are not one, but many!” the bees chorused. “You invited us here, and left us without sustenance...”

“I do not dispute your complaint. Let one from each hive speak in turn, then.”

“What the devil!”

Lorimer’s crisp burr interrupted this exchange.

Momentarily.

The next instant, he lay on the kitchen tile in a dead faint.

Assured the man still breathed, Mustang resumed her interaction with the bees. Six queens took the fore. Each petitioned for their own territory, where they would have full access to flowers and plants without competition from other hives.

“Granted,” the Mistress of Boleskine attested, though she acknowledged internally such arrangements might be difficult to guarantee without superceding human efforts.

“And what you do... with the weather,” buzzed the largest of the queens, “must cease. It disturbs our life cycle.”

Mustang had never considered the impact of her tangible reactions to frustrating situations - microbursts of wind, storms from cloudless skies, earth tremors and more - on the creatures in range of the outbursts. “I will try, but I am weak...”

“A recurrence will rain down our wrath upon you!”

Their design to inflict this type of justice on her not unreasonable, they didn’t fathom their own fate if they implemented such a policy.

Their own death, *en masse*.

Behind her, Lorimer groaned at the pain in his limbs and head from slamming on the floor. He stirred, but dizziness compelled him to remain prone.

“Go, now,” Mustang declared to the swarms. “This man will take you where you wish to go, so you may thrive and be at peace.”

Their simultaneous thanks devolved into a noisy din as she stepped inside and closed the door.

The water came in handy; she knelt beside Lorimer and cradled his head on her lap, offering him the glass. He sipped the liquid tentatively.

“What... happened?” his baritone almost inaudible.

Mustang could only bluff. “You’ve spent so many years among the bees, you thought they were talking to you.”

His tone immediate reverted to the angry level that might’ve decapitated her, had it been a knife. “Ye were talkin’ t’ *them*! They understood ye, and ye understood them!”

“Your imagination, Jeremy.”

He brushed her away and scrambled to his feet. “Nonsense! I know what I heard. I know what I saw.”

He dodged her attempt to grab his hands. Nothing she could do would stem his aggravation.

That ordinarily meant...

But, she refused to vocalize the directive.

Stripping off his bee suit, Lorimer jammed his flat cap atop his head and departed Boleskine House, van keys clutched in his fist. On the front stoop he froze, however, the sight before him beyond perplexing.

Mustang stood beneath the lintel, awed.

The bees waited in almost perfect military formation, their respective queens leading the columns, ready to be transferred to new domains.

When Lorimer’s knees buckled, his host prevented him from cracking his skull on the wrought iron railing.

“Oh, hell...”

III

Mustang exerted considerable effort to maneuver Jeremy Lorimer into Boleskine House and onto the green living room sofa. Lungs heaving, she collapsed on the cane-backed rocker, pondering why she’d let herself foul up the natural order yet again.

If the bees were eager to settle in their new hives, how could that be her fault?

“Yer Ladyship,” the beekeeper gasped, adjusting his posture so his sloped forehead rested in his hands, elbows on his thighs. Lank chocolate-brown hair dangled between his fingers, his blanched cheeks adding to the image of a deathly ill man. “What I just saw... defies reason!”

Toying with the carved white king on the chess table, she deliberated. “Not if you think about it, Jeremy,” she countered. “Have you ever considered bees are very sensitive - and perceptive - creatures? Even though you couldn’t actually speak to them, did you ever notice they instinctively respond to your mood, or the inflection in your voice? It’s similar to dogs. They know when their owner is depressed and cuddle. They intuit danger, recognizing when their owner is upset or frightened. See what I mean?”

“I only had one dog in me life,” drawled Lorimer. “Me mum gave me a spaniel pup for me sixth birthday. Gawd, I loved that dog. She slept beside me on the pillow, and played fetch.”

“Sounds like a fine pet.”

Baritone flat, he proclaimed. “The bees killed her.”

Mustang stiffened. “Eh?”

“We were sittin’ out o’ an evenin’ - me, Mum and Da. The pup perked up her ears at somethin’ in the woods, and took off runnin’ before I could stop her. A swarm from the hives ambushed her and stung her to death.”

The Mistress of Boleskine swallowed hard. Too many animals and humans suffered multiple stings when they disturbed a beehive; she’d never before heard of bees attacking without provocation.

Lorimer fumbled, “The bees were... were...”

“Jealous?” supplied Mustang.

His head bounced like a rubber ball. “Aye. They hated her, because I loved her.”

A child’s version of a traumatic event, left to fester for years in his subconscious.

It did prove the bees had intelligence and emotions, though.

The young woman squatted beside her visitor, apologetic. “I didn’t mean to... resurrect a painful memory. Will you forgive my... failure, so we can get this job done?”

“Aye, ma’am. Ye live alone, as do I. We get few chances t’ practice good manners, as a result o’ our isolation.”

He encased her hands with his, flipping them over and bending to kiss her palms - only, this time, he detected the scars.

“Dear Gawd, who did this to ye?” his baritone transformed by anguish.

She refrained from flinching, meeting his gaze. “A horrible accident.”

“Acid?”

“No.”

She presented his veil, urging him to get to his feet. He lifted her, while contemplating her tranquil mien as he whispered, "I fear we are both damaged goods... Mustang."

The bees so numerous, and the operation delicate to ensure their well being, Lorimer moved only one hive that afternoon. He'd contacted fellow beekeepers in the Highlands via his mobile, arranging for their dispersion at 10-20 mile intervals.

"I'll give them space t' sustain themselves," he added.

He shuffled into the kitchen well after 7:00, exhausted and famished. With the remaining swarms' cooperation, she cooked steaks on the outdoor grill, serving the beef with baked potatoes and a mixed salad.

Lorimer's full smile revealed straight teeth and lit his whole face.

"Ye ha' me thanks, Mustang. 'Twould ha' been that troublesome t' cook after today's..."

She smirked, "Excitement?"

"Indeed."

Serving chocolate mousse for dessert heightened his pleasure. Ignoring the dishes, they adjourned to the chess board.

Lorimer dozed no more had Mustang made six moves.

She left him sprawled on the sofa, bringing a blanket from the linen cupboard to protect against the overnight chill.

No nightmarish screams interrupted her slumber, and she awoke to the sound of the shower. Pouring herself a bowl of cereal for breakfast, she offered him the same when he half-waddled along the corridor toward the foyer.

"I ate a bite before dressin'," he announced. "I should be able t' finish the job today, if I make good time."

That sharp, matter-of-fact edge puzzled her. Perhaps their mutual seclusion caused her to over-analyze simple statements, and he to be too brusque. A suspicion he wanted to get as far from her as possible gnawed at her the entire day.

The horses discerned her loneliness - frequently. They nuzzled her as she filled their troughs, not just because they hadn't been exercised in days, or were vying for an apple or carrot. They truly cared about her.

Random muscle spasms in her arms, back and legs irritated her. She had to shed this anxiety, finally saddling Sarge and steering him through the trees for a brisk gallop across Glenn MacDonough's fields. Her auburn tresses drawn into a ponytail, green flannel sleeves flapping in the breeze, she felt a profound freedom as they soared over a low rock wall just south of Dores.

Mustang reined her mount abruptly, causing him to slide on the gravel track. Lorimer's van sat in front of the village pub, loud music blaring through open windows - odd for so early in the day.

Curious, she swung to the ground and rounded the well-kept structure, peeping through the display window. A small crowd of onlookers - probably enjoying their lunch - clapped as Jeremy Lorimer drunkenly struggled to dance an Irish jig on the raised bandstand, a classic rock tune playing on the jukebox.

"Oh, hell..."

This... behavior couldn't be a consequence of her deeds, she tried to convince herself. She exerted no influence over the beekeeper, merely expecting him to perform a service, for which he'd be generously and expeditiously paid - that is, if he didn't charge too much. Otherwise, she'd be popping off to a casino on the French Riviera before making good on his invoice.

"Pathetic, ain't it?" a juvenile tenor chuckled at her shoulder.

Mustang turned on the grocer's son, who made deliveries when not in school. "Do you know him?"

He snorted, "Everybody knows Jeremy. He gets in a funk now and then, and gets right royally pissed..."

"Doesn't anyone try to stop him?"

"Ye should know b' now, Your Ladyship: we mind our own business 'round here."

Of course, they did, she sighed - with a gossip every ten meters.

"There's ten pounds in it for you if you help me get him out of there."

"Ach, he's harmless. Let him ha' his fun."

"Not when I'm paying him to do a job."

Grabbing the lad by his sleeve, Mustang dragged him into the pub. First, she settled the tab at the bar - nearly 20 pounds, meaning Lorimer had been there quite awhile. Coming at him from behind, she and her assistant scooped him up by the armpits and whisked him into the mid-day sun.

He held up his hands to shield his eyes from the glare as the pair manipulated him to his van.

"You're not gonna let him drive, are ye, Your Ladyship?" asked the teen.

"No, you're driving. I've got my horse."

"But, how will I get home?"

She wedged her sneaker into the stirrup. "Ring your dad. He can collect you at Boleskine."

Resigned, the teen dug in Lorimer's pocket for his keys, and started the engine. Mustang paralleled their track, meeting them on the gravel drive near the Georgian mansion.

Summarily dumped on the guest room bed, Lorimer might have been dead, his breathing so shallow. Shuffling back through the kitchen, Mustang dug paper currency from the drawer beside the sink and tucked it in the youth's fist.

"Thanks," she said.

"See you next Thursday." With a vague salute, he sidled out the door and joined his father at the pickup, idling near the corral.

From the threshold, she observed four swarms of bees congregated near the trees, waiting.

"I know, I know," she chided. "Please, be patient."

Her own measure of that virtue frazzled, Mustang wanted to seize Lorimer by the neck and shake him until he recovered his senses. She'd crossed paths with alcoholics now and again - Welsh actor Thomas Burton, for one - but had scant insights into dealing with their addiction.

She subdued the inclination toward violence, but she refused to let him sleep off his intoxication - which could take the rest of the afternoon and most of the night. Standing beside the bed, she braced herself for any adverse reaction he might have to her "cure"...

Not a pot of hot coffee, nor an "eye-opening" concoction drawn from ancient lore. Lorimer's lids blinked when a weird change of air pressure engulfed him, blurred images not coming into focus until his liquor-tainted brain registered he floated on the ceiling, contact with the polished wood floor imminent.

"What the devil!" he croaked.

From below, Mustang hissed, "The devil is in the details, Jeremy, and I want the details of why you abandoned your post to get soused."

He thrashed wildly, searching for harness and ropes holding him in the air. Coming up empty, his stomach rebelled, and he wretched...

He'd be cleaning it up, too, his host determined, once she was satisfied he was ready to resume his duties.

"Well?" she prompted.

The foul taste in his mouth did not preempt his biting retort. "For Gawd's sake, woman, get me down before I..."

She recoiled so splattering chunks wouldn't spray her jeans.

"You'll be up there permanently, if you don't spill the beans."

"As soon as me feet touch the ground!"

The penalty adequate, she judged, he gradually descended. The ordeal so terrifying, he scrambled to the bathroom and finished emptying his stomach in the toilet.

She had a mop and bucket ready when he emerged, drawn and pale.

“‘Tis humiliatin’,” he grumbled, spreading soapy water on the boards, then wringing the sponge.

“No one forced you to imbibe six double whiskeys,” she scolded. “What gives?”

Resting his chin on the tip of the mop handle, he stared at her. “As I was unloadin’ the queen near Fort Augustus, I could nae help thinkin’ aboot how much I’ve missed in life, bein’ damaged the same way as ye. I tried to quash the notion but, drivin’ up t’ fetch the next swarm, I continued north, stoppin’ at the pub.”

“Oh, hell...” murmured the young woman. “You’re not damaged, Jeremy. You’re... different. You’ve been entrusted with protecting a valuable asset to the environment, and most people have no clue. I understand it, though, because I’m...”

“Different, too?”

She nodded solemnly, wisps of auburn loosed from their bonds floating across her face.

The mop clattered to the floor as nimble fingers brushed the strays from her cheeks, draping them behind her ear. “I would say, exceptional. Ye ‘ave touched me ‘eart... Mustang.”

She did not - dared not - reciprocate those feelings. Quite a number of men had paid her similar compliments, compared her to a beacon shining in the darkness - and she often envisioned herself a porch light attracting mosquitoes and other flying insects.

Had Lorimer been privy to her secret, he would’ve fled, screaming, into the wilderness, praying for the bees to ambush him, as they had his spaniel pup.

Even that manner of death was preferable to what she might inadvertently do to him.

“You can move another swarm before dinner,” she stated. “After tomorrow, we’ll not see each other again.”

Pleading bluish-brown eyes bored into her soul. She longed for his embrace - lying to herself futile - two broken individuals seeking solace in a world that prized discord and division over unity.

Mustang’s jaw clenched. “Once you’ve finished here, get outside.”

“Aye, ma’am.” All sharpness, all vigor gone from Lorimer’s burr.

Sarge needed grooming in the barn after their gallop; the woman mustered enough energy to tend to the roan gelding and saddle Wench for a leisurely trot along the estate's trails. From the hillock above the mansion, she watched Lorimer load his van with the fourth of the six queens. This hive would be relocated east.

The beekeeper didn't return by nightfall and Mustang, her appetite suppressed by the day's frustrations, fell into bed without dinner, or shedding her clothes. She didn't give credence to the prospect his temporary sobriety had lapsed as the alcohol he'd ingested coursed through his system, and he might have run off the macadam and struck a tree.

Persistent tapping on the window roused her in the wee hours. She yanked the cord to open the curtains, startled by hundreds of bees using their stingers to signal her.

She raised one pane, the screen preventing the swarm's incursion. "Speak," she instructed the queen.

The damage to Lorimer's van had wrecked the hive boxes in which the beekeeper had placed them, so they flew back to their point of origin.

Groping for her sneakers, Mustang burst from the dwelling, navigating to the barn. She hastily saddled Molly and steered her toward the drive, where the bees circled. "Show me!" she called to them.

Skittish at the presence of this danger, Molly shied when Mustang flicked the reins against her neck. A nudge with her heels confirmed the directive; mount and rider raced over open fields beneath the waxing moon, bees guiding the way.

If Jeremy Lorimer was dead, she could not have withstood the torment. Arriving on the scene, she paused Molly in the underbrush, so as not to interfere with constables milling around the empty van.

"Where is he?" she questioned the queen, receiving no answer.

If some passing car had stopped, and transported Lorimer to hospital - in Inverness? she wondered - reaching him would be impossible until morning. A breakdown truck approached the van; if the vehicle was impounded, the bees' anger at another delay might not be assuaged.

She could repair it with not so much as a flick of her wrist, though the officials would think themselves mad. Rather, she held off until the sergeant dismissed the squad, and the van was hitched to the lorry, the driver climbing into the cab and paying his charge no mind as he headed west empty-handed.

Still, even if the van functioned properly, who would take the wheel? She'd never obtained a driver's license in Montana, and definitely wouldn't risk the roads of Scotland, where everything was reversed.

A rustling among the trees to her right froze her. She did not fear arrest - no jail cell could hold her - but what would happen to Molly, if the police handcuffed her and threw her in the rear of a compact sedan?

Hands raised to signify lack of any threatening weapon, she shuddered when the left was clasped and tenderly kissed. She pivoted to Jeremy Lorimer, a lone shaft of moonlight illuminating the trickle of blood from his temple, past his right ear and down his neck.

She leapt into his arms, her mouth assaulting his lips, cheeks and forehead repeatedly from sheer relief.

He didn't object to the affectionate display, laughing with delight. He eventually set her on the damp soil holding her close. "How did ye find me?" he inquired.

"The bees."

He cupped her chin in his palm and brought it level with his. "'Tis nae time for jokes."

"No joke, I swear. They came to fetch me after... after..." The words caught in her throat. "I was afraid you were dead."

"Nae such luck." A strange response to her concern. "An elk ran across the road, and I tried t' avoid hittin' it..."

"Hitting the tree, instead."

"Aye."

She traced the trail of blood with her finger. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Bumped me noggin on the dash, 'tis all."

They separated, how to proceed quite the conundrum.

"I'm that sorry the van is out o' commission," Lorimer declared.

She corrected him, "It's fixed."

"Here? Now?" That sharp baritone; nostrils flared. "How?"

Before she could reply, another masculine voice interrupted, "What's all this?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Oh, hell..."

IV

A sheep farmer had tramped down from his house to investigate the flashing lights and, hearing the couple talking, detoured on his way back to bed. "Just dunna do anythin' sinful," the stooped elder admonished, retracing his path to the cozy edifice.

Mustang Duryea and Jeremy Lorimer convulsed with mirth as he vanished, leaning against each other for mutual support.

“C’mon,” the beekeeper urged. “I’ll drive ye t’ Boleskine.”

“No can do.” She reminded him about Molly, who would not tolerate riding in an enclosed space. “Besides, the bees need to be tended.”

“Their hive boxes...”

Her head tilted sideways.

The corners of his mouth flashed that brief grin as he hugged her for a split second, whispering, “Ye are an absolute miracle.”

As if on orders, the swarm filed into the rear of the vehicle when the metal panels flew open. Lorimer secured the compartment and, with a wave, trundled along the road as dawn peeked over the horizon.

In the saddle, Mustang acknowledged her fatigue. She urged the roan mare to a trot, arriving at the barn well past sunrise.

The young woman forced herself to fulfill her duties, providing water and oats for each stall in the barn; changing the straw could be postponed until she caught a few hours’ sleep.

“I rely too much on adrenaline,” she grumbled, trudging into the kitchen. “I need to take better care of myself.”

“To avoid predicaments such as this?” German general Erwin Rommel met her near the living room, his uniform pristine, hair cut in military fashion. He twirled a black rook in his hand.

“More or less.”

“I predict, once the bees are gone, you’ll resolve to not cause such a travesty in future?”

He’d nailed her repeated failures to the wall. Each time she uttered an imprudent statement, or even entertained the thought, she suffered tremendous regret and yearned to improve her self-control.

With yet another fiasco inevitable.

“I’m in no condition to discuss my shortcomings, General,” she snarled.

“Are you ever? Or, has a tendency to accept your imperfections negated any progress toward success?”

Stymied, she deserted him and locked herself in her bedroom.

Not that she slept. These spirits she’d resurrected had dogged her since coming to Boleskine House shortly after graduating from Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School and eluding FBI and other agencies eager to extract Jack Parsons’ anti-gravity formula from his hand-written journals in her possession...

The image of Montana State Police detective Jim Neville being shot multiple times at a convenience store in southern California revived waves of misery and crushing pressure on her ribs. She hoisted herself off the quilt, resisting the desire to wreak vengeance on the warped bastards who had no qualms about ruining innocent people's lives in the quest for supremacy.

Bees outside the window served as a reminder of her fate, should she succumb to this latest temptation.

She waved them off. At the first indication of aggression, their existence would be snuffed out like a candle.

"How heartless you are!" an Italian-accented figure chided from beneath the lintel.

Locks meant nothing to ethereal beings, she snickered soundlessly.

"How can I help it, when the truth of life and death tortures my soul?"

Francis Bernardone, the lauded saint of Assisi, mocked her. "Ah, so speaks the god!"

Mimicking his scorn, she faced the window and spread her arms like an avenging angel. "Can you command the elements to do your bidding? Have you power to give life and take it, or destroy this very planet?"

"Who be ye talkin' t'?"

Sucking air, Mustang spun on Jeremy Lorimer, in the exact spot Francis had stood moments earlier. Her mind racing, she considered faking a faint and deeming it a bad dream... "I..."

"'Twas hopin' for some breakfast, but ye seem... out o' sorts."

Could she feign rehearsing for a stageplay?

Ludicrous.

She blurted, "I'm upset, afraid, angry, and I've never been able to control my emotions so I don't hurt those I care about most, or allow them to be hurt in the process of protecting me from myself."

There, she'd said it - an honest summation of her quandary.

That might cost Lorimer his life.

At the realization, she crashed to her knees, in tears, auburn waves cascading over her shoulders.

To Lorimer, she resembled a holy card his mother had tucked in the frame of a larger image of the Last Supper, a penitent seeking forgiveness before a crucifix. He joined her on the wood, drawing her to his chest.

His warmth eased her tension. Their eyes met; the scar near his temple and the badly healed broken nose reinforced Rommel's mention of her own imperfections. She had sworn never to love - anyone - since that night Thomas

Burton had drunkenly kissed her, nearly bringing her cousin's roof down on their heads.

Without self-control, her isolation could not be violated, even by occasional workmen completing needed services.

"I ha' two more trips wi' the bees," he commented. "Then, I'll fetch ye, and we'll ha' a right holiday..."

"To what purpose, Jeremy?" she sniffed.

He caressed her moist skin affectionately before surrendering the handkerchief from his pocket so she could wipe her nose.

"When a person is broken, they must heal. This place... 'tis nae good for ye. I fear 'twill drive ye t' the brink..."

"And, if I admitted I've already gone far beyond that?"

"Ach, ye are too young t' know, milady."

Pulling herself upright, she refused to look at him. "I... must stay here. The horses..."

He gripped her shoulders firmly from behind. "Could be sold."

"I'm a danger... to myself, and others..."

"Ye mean, suicide?" Not releasing her, he nonetheless inched away.

She burred, "No. Never."

"Then, what?"

"Please, go. Finish with the bees. Maybe, when you bring your invoice, I'll be able to make more sense..."

"Aye, milady. Ye need rest." He bent and kissed her on the neck, a tingling running the length of her flesh. She didn't move until she heard the steel door latch, falling on the bed in dismay.

If she fled - to a casino in Cannes, perhaps - and he found her gone from Boleskine, would that be a viable resolution to this incident?

"No way in hell," she answered herself aloud.

Extracting herself from friendships or more serious affairs never ended well. She'd once trusted that those who flitted through her life would thrive, even if she wiped their knowledge of her from their minds. Discovering her miscalculation in that regard, she - deliberately or accidentally - engineered the deaths of some who would've used her ill had she left them alive.

"He's a good man, a kind man!" she yowled. "Why can't we..."

A quiet tenor advised, "Why can't you, indeed? It would be the test needed to see if you can exercise a mastery of your power."

The dhoti-clad form of Mohandas Gandhi sat beside her on the mattress, peering through thick wire-rimmed spectacles. “You worry too much, Mustang-ji. You have command over nature, but you are not yet in harmony with it.”

Rolling on her left side, she surveyed at the Father of India. “Harmony?” she echoed. “The only time I feel at harmony with anything is when I’m with the horses.”

“That is a positive step, to be sure, just as Jeremy Lorimer is at harmony when with the bees.”

She perked up slightly. “Could we find that harmony with each other?”

“The key to the health of any relationship is being whole unto yourself. As Jeremy said, you are both broken and require healing.”

“Must we heal alone?”

“When prioritizing one’s own healing, it is difficult to attend to the other’s needs,” remarked Gandhi.

“So, you’re saying: it’s hopeless.”

“No, just that it may take months, years... and you never seem to want to allow yourself that time. You want it instantly. Like a cigarette smoker going cold turkey.”

Hearing this from the same mouth that spoke boldly to British authorities made Mustang laugh outright as Gandhi dissipated. The accuracy of his observation, however, could not be discounted.

Jack Parsons, after the FBI faked his death by detonating fulminate of mercury in a Pasadema garage, spent five decades at Boleskine and, from their brief acquaintance and reading his journals, he’d not matured into wholeness. He’d put great stock in bizarre rituals and gibberish language, as had his predecessor on the property, Aleister Crowley. Neither could have been described as well-balanced individuals.

Could it be this place, the energies tainted by orgies, drugs, and sacrilegious rites? Had the FBI intended the latest resident to channel that energy?

A human guinea pig in an oversized cage?

Mustang’s anger flared once more. She would leave Boleskine - with Lorimer, if he would have her - and take up residence in Switzerland where snow filtered out tourist’s inherent negativity, or a tropical island in the Pacific, reveling in the native culture...

Rain pelted the glass in steadily increasing intensity; lightning flashed and thunder rumbled.

Not her doing.

The young woman detected the sloshing of puddles and gravel crunched under tires. The utility van slid to a halt - adjustments to the brakes warranted - and Lorimer splashed his way toward the mansion, drenched.

Umbrellas hadn't been high on Mustang's priority list at any point in her life. She'd celebrated storms since childhood, standing outside the ranch house and letting the droplets cleanse her: body, mind and soul. Subsequent colds, or a bout with pneumonia, irritated her mother, though that housewife never bothered to prohibit her daughter from taking such risks.

Nor did her father.

Rather than reopen that chapter of her youth, the Mistress of Boleskine threw wide the steel door and charged into the downpour. Lorimer caught her as she sprinted toward him, swinging her airborne in circles.

They held each other as rivulets of water streamed down their faces and inside their clothes.

"I'm afraid the last swarm will ha' t' wait," he shouted over a clap of thunder.

She giggled, "There's no hurry."

Had nature reacted to her emotions, not even the Scottish meteorologists would have noticed the blip on their radar screens. Just being together and sharing unabashed joy sated them both, to the point they sank on the stoop, hands clasped, silently watching puddles become streams, flowing between mounds of gravel on the drive.

Watching the world being created must've been like this, Mustang reasoned.

Clouds dispersed as suddenly as they'd congealed, as was common in the Highlands. Reluctant to drip through the foyer and hall to the bathroom, the couple skirted the dwelling and entered via the kitchen. Kicking off her sneakers, Mustang brought a stack of large towels from the linen cupboard, so they could dry themselves.

"You shower first," she told Lorimer as she wrapped tan terry cloth around his neck. "I can throw our clothes in the washer, and have them ready before dinner."

"Formal attire required?" he chuckled. "White towel and bathrobe?"

"Sure." She ran her fingers through his soaked dark chocolate mane. "Healing may take a long time..."

"For both o' us," he concurred.

"Will you be patient with me?"

"If ye will be so wi' me."

A light kiss before he excused himself with a precise bow. “Yer Ladyship...”

Her clumsy curtsy made her flush. “Milord.”

The storm’s second round eliminated the possibility of grilling hamburgers outdoors. Invigorating for Mustang: rain for which she was not responsible. She retrieved the mop from the pantry to soak up moisture on the tiles when a bolt of lightning struck far too close to the house, splitting an ancient oak in twain.

Through the window, she assessed the scene - half the broad trunk remained standing, while the rest had toppled away from the house. Her pulse slowed, and she shuffled toward the bathroom to update Lorimer on the near miss.

No response to her knock. She presumed the pulsating shower head muffled the sound. Near to pounding on the third attempt, her muscles tightened.

The knob unlocked, she pushed inward, steam pouring through the gap. “Jeremy?” she bellowed.

Nothing.

The frosted glass door revealed the silhouette of a body; she would not venture nearer, honoring his privacy. That is, until her peripheral vision drew her eyes toward the ceiling, where scorch marks adorned a split in the plaster.

“Oh, hell...”

Maggie Duryea had often warned her daughter not to be in the bathtub during severe weather, while ignoring the girl’s truancy and periodic disappearances. For that woman’s lone concern to be proven accurate... just as Mustang glimpsed a light at the end of this long, gloomy tunnel in which she’d been confined since plunging a knife into Jack Parsons’ heart...

“Get hold of yourself,” she scolded herself. “You must be strong...”

I can’t! she whimpered inwardly. I can’t!

Then, prepare to have every jerk on the planet on your doorstep, once the authorities find out...

“I can bring him back!” she postulated. “He’s only been dead a few minutes!”

Would you want him that way? Even more damaged than before?

She faced herself in the steam-coated mirror.

“Let him rest in peace.”

Invisible forces deactivated the faucet, stopping the flow through the shower head. A towel slung over the ceramic wall rack levitated, draping itself over Lorimer’s nakedness. Mustang recalled old episodes of *Bewitched* as his body floated toward the guest room.

She ordered a pause as the wall sconces glinted off his gold earring. Gingerly removing it from his left lobe, the keepsake would be a perpetual reminder of his cherished soul.

A pair of blue sweats fit him ill, being six inches taller than her. When the constables located the van plunged over a cliff along Loch Ness, they wouldn't care about his clothes.

Nor would she be implicated in what, in the States, amounted to a felony charge of interference with a corpse, despite a plethora of mysterious evidence pointing to foul play resulting in the police commissioner summoning a private detective from London.

Another sleepless night; Mustang spurred Pietra along the shoulder of the B852, the van rolling behind her, as if by remote control. The last swarm of bees accompanied her, too, their anger rising.

She addressed the queen after the van trundled down the embankment and wedged beneath a jagged outcropping. "You are free to make your home on my property. No one shall hinder your routine - not even me."

If she'd allowed the impulse to consume her in that moment, she would've tumbled to her death in Lorimer's wake. Pietra bit a mouthful of her t-shirt and yanked her away from the edge with determined nickering.

No doubt about it: horses had intelligence and emotions, as did bees.

As Mustang rode through the gloom to Boleskine House, she speculated whether animals would take better care of each other and the world, if only the humans were gone.