

The Mustang Chronicles:

Harmonic Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Grunting noises from the underbrush along the shaded trails surrounding Boleskine House reminded Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea - known in the region surrounding Scotland’s Loch Ness as Lady Elizabeth Neville - of wild pigs rutting.

She wasn’t far off in her estimate.

Approaching on Wench, one of her roan mares, Mustang sighted the source of the gasping and groaning: a young couple, probably teenagers, half naked and entangled in the throes of passion.

Jiggling the leather reins, Wench whinnied. The startled pair halted in their rhythmic grinding and scrambled to cover themselves with shirts and jeans twisted together.

A chuckle escaped Mustang’s throat. She didn’t ordinarily mind trespassers on the grounds during daylight hours - and had created booby traps to catch those who felt the need to wander about after sunset, thanks to the power bequeathed her by her grandfather, Jack Parsons - but she preferred her solitude.

“Do you mind explaining yourselves?” she queried from the saddle.

Another two minutes elapsed before the lad, scrawny and pale with a curly black mop, managed a reply. “Our bus ‘ad a puncture,” he croaked with a distinct Liverpoolian accent that annoyed the erstwhile American almost as much as the local Scottish burr. “While we were waitin’ for the service lorry, we decided to explore...”

“Each other?” snickered Mustang.

The girl, rather pretty with long blonde locks, blushed to the roots of her hair.

Mustang pressed, “A school outing?”

“Our choir is part of the national competition in Edinburgh this week. We ‘ad a day for a field trip to the loch...”

Pausing to listen intently, the Mistress of Boleskine detected the clamor of other voices, far off. She turned Wench toward home, advising, “Better get back to your group.”

“Aye, ma’am,” the boy concurred, assisting the timid female through overgrown bushes.

Mustang shouted to their receding forms, “And, next time you decide to do what comes natural, make sure it isn’t in a patch of poison ivy!”

Two horrified faces spun to see her canter into the shadows as her cackle echoed between the trees.

Approaching the barn and corral, the occupant of the Georgian mansion - herself barely an adult at 21 years of age - ignored a twinge of guilt about not healing the errant duo of what would soon be persistent itching in unmentionable areas of their bodies. They needed to learn a very important lesson about controlling their physical urges...

As she needed to learn self-control in regard to her command of the natural elements...

To prevent herself from opening a chasm along the gravel drive upon finding dozens of teens milling aimlessly while an older gentleman banged on the dwelling's steel front door.

"May I help you?" she called, dismounting and leading Wench past the wooden gate into the grassy pen with a whispered promise to groom and feed her in short order.

"Ah, there you are!" A veritable procession of eager youth followed the squat, wrinkled figure with his flowing white mane toward her. "We were hoping someone was about."

"Are you from the stranded bus?" prodded Mustang.

Adjusting the collar of his untucked green shirt, his precise British inflection replied, "Indeed. There's an urgent need to refill our water bottles and use the facilities..."

Calculating mentally, she estimated 45 minutes for those present to cycle through the four bathrooms - three of which were never used. She didn't feel like trying to rustle up enough toilet tissue to meet the demand.

"Sorry, I can't help you," she refused.

"But..."

"The guys can use the bushes" - she recalled riding remote pastures of her father's ranch in Montana and seeing the hired hands relieving themselves at the clearing's edge - "and the gals can hold it until you reach Dores, if you're headed north, or Foyers, if you're southbound."

"How rude!" exclaimed a scantily clad, nearly anorexic brunette.

Mustang countered, "When you've not been invited onto what is private property, I claim the right to be rude." She strode toward the barn, where the other horses awaited their dinner.

Pudgy fingers clamped around her forearm. "Please, ma'am," implored the elder, who reminded her of a classic orchestra conductor from some bygone era. "Could we, at least, use your hose to get some water?"

"Why weren't you carrying an extra supply?" she hissed through grit teeth.

“We were - a ten liter jug - but after the puncture, a few of the lads started with the horse play, and it spilled...”

“Then, tough luck.”

Jerking free, Mustang grabbed the handle on the rolling barn door and tugged it closed after her, leaving three dozen sets of eyes to stare at the building.

Her decision sparked anger among a handful of boys, who took it into their heads to get a little revenge. Opening the corral gate, they surrounded a suddenly panicked Wench, trying to snag her reins.

The horse’s owner heard the squeaking hinges and viewed this intrusion through the tack room window. At that moment, she didn’t consider the consequences of unleashing her rage.

No one harmed her animals.

The earth shifted ominously beneath the crowd’s feet. Clouds converged as a microburst of wind whipped hair across their petrified faces. A downpour soaked them as they scurried along the curved drive, their chaperone - or bus driver, or whatever capacity he filled - bringing up the rear.

This manifestation of her temper dissipated quickly, and she emerged from the barn to reclaim Wench and stroke her damp haunches in a soothing manner before escorting her indoors.

“Nice trick.”

Mustang cringed at the reverberating baritone while pouring oats into an aluminum bucket.

“Someone should’ve taught those idiots better manners,” she sniffed.

“Agreed, and if I offer my profuse apologies, will you allow the choir to use your facilities?”

Metal crumpled beneath her palms. “No...”

“I’ll bid you good day, then.”

Straightening, she glared at his pursed lips and deep set blue eyes. “Anyone with a mobile could’ve done a search and found ample facilities in Dores. Why bother me?”

“We didn’t think it would take three hours for the service crew to get here, and another to change the tire.”

“Bad planning on your part doesn’t constitute an emergency on my part,” Mustang quoted.

“Perhaps I should speak with your parents when they return.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Huh?”

“You could use some training in manners, yourself.”

“Good luck with that. I’m the sole resident of this property...”

“Nonsense. You’re little more than a child. Younger than most of those students...”

A smirked, “Wrong, again,” before she resumed her duties with the horses. “Now, get lost, already. I’ve got work to do.”

“Ah, so you’re just the stable hand. Then, the owners...”

Her jaw hardened. “What must I do...”

The lightning strike and instantaneous crack of thunder unnerved this interloper; he withdrew from the barn and aimed for the trees, his gait longer than normal for his limited height as he attempted - in vain - to maintain a semblance of dignity in retreat.

Beneath a multi-colored evening sky, Mustang crossed to the house after the horses had been brushed, fed and contented. From that angle, she glimpsed her bedroom window - raised four inches to take advantage of a fresh October breeze - fully open.

No quarter would be given to anyone who’d invaded her personal space, she determined, her key unlatching the front door’s deadbolt.

What she discovered fell into the category of a total farce. One couple copulated energetically on the living room’s green sofa, upending the chess table as they flailed wildly. The king-sized bed in her room, and the double mattress in the guest room were also occupied by amorous gymnastics.

Even the three unfurnished bedrooms welcomed those desperate enough to sate their lust on the wooden floor.

In a split second, two thoughts shot through Mustang’s consciousness: a recollection of occultist Aleister Crowley using the mansion for rituals and orgies in the early 20th century, and resentment at the blatant disrespect shown by these...

“Don’t!”

General Erwin Rommel, a periodic visitor from the ethereal plane, did not speak soon enough.

Six sets of ashes swirled along the dim corridor and out the window through which the teens had illegally entered the residence.

“How will you explain these deaths to their music director?” asked Rommel.

“As far as he’s concerned, they wandered off. He’ll file a missing person report in town, catch a hefty bit of flak from their parents and the school administrators, and the police will come up empty.”

“You’ve no qualms about the case never being solved?”

She moved toward the kitchen, her stomach growling after a long stretch without nourishment. “In the States, they have what is called a stand-your-ground

law. In the process of defending your property, you can use whatever means necessary to protect yourself. That is just what I did.”

“They posed no threat to you!”

“Are you so certain? If I’d summoned the constables to have them arrested for breaking in, who’s to say they wouldn’t have attacked me while attempting to escape?”

“That’s no excuse...”

The refrigerator opened; she extracted a loaf of bread, jug of milk and selection of Swiss, cheddar and Monterey Jack. Unhooking a skillet from the stainless steel rack above the stove, she prepared three grilled cheese sandwiches, munching them while contemplating the need to launder bedsheets and disinfect other areas of the vast domicile before retiring.

Her efforts to give Sarge, the sorrel gelding, a bit of exercise the next morning proved lackluster, at best. She never urged him beyond a trot, a restless night plagued by images of yowling teenagers.

Circling near the highway, she heard an ominous rumbling. An industrial grade tow truck was raising the choir’s yellow school bus off its rear wheels.

So much fuss for a flat tire? she mused.

Dismounting, she traversed the macadam to the technician handling the machinery. “What happened?” she inquired.

Translating his thick burr a chore, she distinguished, “From what I understand, the front right tire suffered a puncture, and by the time they were ready to move on, the fuel line ruptured.”

Or, perhaps, was deliberately sabotaged? speculated Mustang.

“How did you find out?” she pressed.

“We have a contract with Glenn MacDonough’s firm. He rang us yesterday...”

Ah, so when she wouldn’t grant the group’s request for assistance, they’d hiked to her neighbor’s, project manager for an Inverness construction company.

“Do you know where the students spent the night?”

“No clue, lassie.” He released the lever, locking the winch in place. “Glenn did mention hiring alternative transport to get them to their destination.”

“Then, no one stayed with the bus?”

The ball cap shook in the negative, his focus on ensuring the chains preventing the vehicle from shifting were secure.

“Thanks.”

Swinging into the saddle, Mustang guided Sarge toward the trail. She sensed an incongruity to the situation, but she could ply the details from Glenn MacDonough all in good time.

Or sooner.

The flash of white among autumn-tinted trees wasn't a bird, just a man on horseback. MacDonough's hair stuck out in this light, as well as the red flannel shirt. He rode erect, British-style, far different from her American posture.

Rounding the bend and ducking a low oak branch, Mustang came face-to-face with not her neighbor, but the student's chaperone, who'd dared to repeat his infraction of trespassing, saddling and riding Molly, another of the roans.

If only she carried a riding crop, she lamented inwardly. She would've put him in his place.

Words would have to suffice.

"How dare you take such liberties!" she barked.

Nimble sliding to the ground, he raised his hands in supplication. "Forgive me, Lady Elizabeth..."

Oh, hell, Mustang puffed. MacDonough must've told this man the name she'd chosen to protect the truth.

He continued in that clipped accent, "We stopped in Inverness, after gaining assistance up the road. When I took the roll as our rooms were being assigned, however, a dozen of my charges had gone missing."

"So, you're searching for them?" she sighed.

"Indeed."

"And the two with poison ivy?"

Confusion momentarily furrowed his brow. "Being treated in hospital."

"Rather than contact the local police to report the incident, you thought it perfectly acceptable to take one of my horses without permission?"

"Only to look for you. I found one of the stalls vacant, so I surmised..."

"You could have waited until I completed my circuit."

"The kids might be injured and in need of immediate attention, or... or..."

She regretted the word as soon as it escaped her lips. "Dead?"

"I'm sure there are wild animals in these parts that wouldn't hesitate..."

Flicking Sarge's neck with the leather reins, Mustang passed this uninvited guest en route to the barn. "Look, Mister..."

"Hopkins. Philip Hopkins. I apologize for not introducing myself at our first meeting."

She ignored the politeness. "Those students of yours, Mister Hopkins, are little better than wild animals themselves. My suggestion is that you take them

back to whatever school they attend and enroll them in a course on common courtesy.”

“They’re just young...”

Her neck whipped toward him. “They’re elitist bullies. They’re used to being pampered and, when they don’t get their way, they torture an innocent horse, or...”

“It’s just the high spirits of youth.”

“High spirits be damned! Your attitude, and that of teachers and parents in what are called civilized countries, is what’s creating a generation of lazy, ignorant clowns, and the world will go to hell because of it!”

When Hopkins reached for her, Sarge shied and bolted.

II

Having practically lived in the saddle since age three, Mustang Duryea had dealt with frightened horses on many occasions. Bending so her chest rested on Sarge’s neck, she avoided being struck by overhanging branches until the gelding felt safe to slow his gait, encouraged by her quiet injunctions.

Using her command of nature to make him stop on a dime would’ve seen her thrown unceremoniously into the dirt.

Hopkins caught her up a minute later. “Are you all right?”

“No thanks to you.”

“Once more, I beg your forgiveness.”

Leaning left, she snatched Molly’s reins. “Get off her this instant, and get lost.”

She left him at the west edge of the hillock where Jack Parsons’ former altar lay in a rotting heap.

Two horses descended to the barn, confronted by students clustered in a semi-circle, chanting an old English dirge in harmony. Mustang didn’t care if it was a prayer vigil for their classmates; she rode through the center, forcing them to scatter - at the same time uttering curses.

“The lot of you, get off my property!” she bellowed.

They held their ground, the *a capella* arrangement not missing a beat.

Leading Sarge and Molly into their stalls, the Mistress of Boleskine had to acknowledge their musical talent. She’d never auditioned for the choir at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School as a youth in Montana. Among her many limitations, she’d learned - from being prompted as a child by her mother to sing in church - that she couldn’t carry a tune.

Hopkins powerful baritone - projected the same way many teachers gained their students' attention - directed the teens toward the highway. "There's nothing for us here," he declared, hopefully meaning no trace of their absent companions.

The vocalizations faded as they trudged along the gravel drive. Hopkins' footsteps did not.

Mustang felt his presence beneath the tack room lintel without glancing up from wiping fine leather. The tin of saddle soap clattered on the ground, a lump of goo and metal.

"My profuse apologies, Lady Elizabeth," repeated the chaperone. "Our intentions were honorable, when all is said and done."

"All will be forgiven if you just board your bus and be about your business in Edinburgh, and never darken my door again!" came the terse rejoinder.

She didn't see the perfunctory bow of compliance prior to his withdrawal from the utilitarian structure. Through the tack room window, though, she watched him bring up the rear of the motley procession, his longish white mane rustled by a breeze not of her making.

"Are you done?" Rommel challenged as she scraped the ruined cleaning compound off the planks.

She whirled on the manifested German general. "Are *they*?"

"Perhaps. The constabulary, on the other hand..."

She sank on the wooden bench beside the door. "So, he did report the missing couples to the Inverness authorities?"

A curt nod.

"Oh, hell..."

"Don't you wish now you hadn't been so impulsive?"

"Not at all. I described them as wild animals, and they deserved their fate."

"Discounting the fact you were genuinely envious of their passion, which you cannot risk for fear of creating mass destruction?"

"I don't envy a soul, especially not those who can't keep their hands off each other for five minutes at a time."

Rommel chided. "Your little... fiasco put a huge damper on that aspect of this excursion, I can tell you. Those of their number who did sleep last night, slept alone in their beds."

"Good. Maybe they learned some restraint."

Mustang dodged her manifested advisor, only to have him vanish outright. She marched to the house, unlocking the front door, crossing the threshold and making certain the deadbolt was tightly in place before heading for the kitchen.

Glenn MacDonough notified her of the searchers' impending convergence, at least. Dawn barely visible to the east, the young woman had already showered and pulled her naturally auburn - but magically darkened - tresses into a pony tail, thrown on a ragged U2 t-shirt and jeans, intent on a thorough scrubbing of the barn. She emerged through the kitchen door, wiping flecks of jelly toast from her lips, to see a familiar pickup idling on the drive.

"Good morning!" she hailed the stocky project manager, fringes of white hair tucked beneath a company monogrammed ball cap.

"Ach, Lady Elizabeth! There ye be!"

"Out so early?"

"Not just meself, but scores of others."

"To what purpose?" Her stomach flipped, its own answer.

"Two of the youngsters who were stranded on that bus admitted to the bobbies they'd warned their friends not to venture into the woods to... um..."

"Have sex?"

Mustang hid her grin at MacDonough's puritanical blush.

He muttered, "Aye, because o' the poison ivy. A group o' them headed off t' find a safer place t'... t'..."

He shrugged.

"And..." she urged.

"They ha' nae been seen since breachin' your gate. Volunteers ha' been summoned, and cadaver dogs..."

She echoed, "Cadaver dogs?"

"Aye, t' find the remains, if they were attacked by animals. Their lorries are parked on the road, and they ha' already inspected the Gate Lodge, collecting evidence that someone had been inside..."

If the kids trashed that crumbling four-room structure where Jack Parsons' had lived during his own exile, after the FBI had staged his death in a Pasadena explosion half a century earlier, no great loss.

Mustang leaned on the pickup's tailgate. "Glenn, you and I both know there aren't any animals larger than a fox in these parts."

"A fox, if rabid, can do some serious damage t' a body. They're searching the shoreline o' the loch, as well, in case they fell int' the water and drowned."

"All twelve?"

"If they went swimmin' after... their... and got caught in an undertow or riptide..."

"Or eaten by Nessie?" she scoffed.

His tone deepened ominously. "There are other, more dangerous creatures in those waters than that mythical bein'."

"You've seen them?" she countered, intrigued.

"Ach, I fished in the loch as a lad. Since I hooked int' something so huge it bent me pole double and nearly dragged me from me father's skiff, I've not ventured across the waves."

Her neighbor could definitely spin a tale, Mustang conceded. As for the search...

High-pitched barks signaled the teams' approach. She thanked MacDonough for his kindness and retraced her steps to the mansion, murmuring a command that any scent of the teens be erased from the vicinity.

The barn would wait.

Doors locked, windows fastened, she sat in the cane-backed rocker across the chess board from Erwin Rommel, strategizing poorly as she aurally monitored the progress outdoors.

"You're not concentrating," admonished the general.

"Not on the game."

"You're worried?"

"Aggravated."

"You could stop them," he taunted.

"Why, when they won't find anything?"

He moved his king's rook forward two squares. "What if they demand to search the house?"

"Not without a warrant."

"You would lie when they ask if you've seen the youngsters?"

She bristled. "It depends on how they phrase the question."

The game proceeded in silence.

Noon came and went; Mustang fixed herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, staring out the kitchen window at the disorganized meanderings of her 47 acres. If they'd swept the property from west to east, they'd have finished long since.

The dogs, evidently, kept hitting on dead squirrels and rabbit carcasses mutilated by crows.

A pounding on steel finally occurred well past 5:00. A lone, middle-aged constable - who'd evidently fallen, his uniform soiled by moss and horse manure - rendered a faux salute.

"May I help you?" greeted Mustang.

"Lady Elizabeth?"

“Yes.”

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am, but I’ve been directed to apologize for any inconvenience to you or your horses during this...”

“Any luck?”

“None, ma’am. There’s no trace of the students.”

“Too bad.”

“The inspector has come to the conclusion they ran off of their own volition - to enjoy each other’s company, if you catch my meaning - and will turn up eventually.”

His fingers touched a damp, sandy forelock as he ambled from the stoop.

Mustang relaxed with hot cocoa, steak and diced potatoes before trekking to the barn.

The presumption the students had taken off struck her as ignorant, at best, unless the police knew they possessed sufficient funds to finance such a jaunt. Not knowing what school they’d attended, or being able to judge by their decidedly casual attire when they’d first appeared, she had no way of judging.

Herself, she seldom looked like more than a common vagrant, preferring jeans and t-shirts to dress clothes. Hopkins had mistaken her for the stable hand, and she preferred it so.

No one needed to know she popped down to the French Riviera now and then, via a lightning bolt, to replenish her cash reserves, shooting craps at any of the popular casinos.

Replacing the oat bucket in the storage bin, she massaged her scarred palms self-consciously.

Horses settled for the night, she strolled along the drive to the Gate Lodge. She shook off memories of finding her grandfather there five years previous, Boleskine House too large for his tastes. Neatness hadn’t been his forte, to be sure, but the current state of the dwelling made it fit for mice alone.

Who had ripped the door from its hinges, she couldn’t be certain: the teenagers or those seeking them. The interior bathed with eerie geometric shapes, decrepit furnishings served as little better than abstract art.

Sofa cushions tossed near the crumbling fireplace confirmed a recent presence, as did the sheets and pillows piled on the narrow twin bed beyond the cobweb-draped archway.

Had it been some random hikers seeking shelter for a night, the security measures she’d directed nature to put in place would have dissuaded them. More of the kids, who’d escaped her wrath?

“When do they ever have time to sing, if they’re constantly preoccupied with getting laid?” she grumbled.

“They’re unable to resist the surge of hormones.”

Mustang stiffened at the statement, not from Rommel or her other manifested visitors. From the British baritone’s proximity, she realized he’d trapped her in the tiny chamber.

She remained facing the bed. “Don’t you ever give up, Mister Hopkins?”

“What I don’t wish to give up is my career as a music teacher. This... blot on my record could well reduce me to playing piano for tips in a Liverpool pub on Saturday nights.”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

“I believe it does.”

“How so?”

She felt his breath on her neck as he closed on her.

“The boys angered you by harassing your horse after you refused to accommodate us and... the reaction of nature was most... unnatural. In the interim, I’ve rung up some colleagues...”

“Oh, hell...” She spun 180 degrees, teeth clenched. “You’ve discovered this stretch along Loch Ness has a history of unnatural phenomena, and you think I’m responsible.” She shoved past him. “Well, you’re wrong. Those records predate me moving here by decades, unless you believe I’m far older than I look.”

He pursued her into the crisp evening, thick digits seizing her windbreaker to halt her flight. “I believe you’re sequestered here to perform experiments so top secret, no government will acknowledge your existence.”

“Bullshit!”

“I have incontrovertible proof of my theory, as well as my assertion that my students interfered with your work, which is why they disappeared without a trace.”

“What, they evaporated?” she guffawed, shaking free of his grip and striding toward her domicile.

He dogged her steps. “You may have invented a means to convert matter into energy, used a laser to tear apart their flesh...”

“Are you trying to impress me with your lack of scientific knowledge?”

She paused, desperately trying to prevent herself from adding Hopkins to her tally of the dead. “You’ve obviously read too many science fiction novels.”

“The science fiction of thirty years ago has become science fact,” he purported.

Advancing toward him, hazel orbs caught the fading sunlight and projected it much like a laser itself; he recoiled.

“Here’s my theory,” she stated. “The kids signed up for your choir class as an easy way to snag a decent grade. Being part of the competition in Edinburgh was a way to escape their other classes for a few days, an ample supply of their parents’ cash in their pockets. The field trip to Loch Ness offered a chance for even more freedom. Given that teenagers aren’t the brightest bulbs in the bunch, they made some bad decisions and will pay for their foolishness in the end.”

“There, you’re mistaken,” Hopkins drawled. “Our school choir is known throughout the British Isles for maintaining the highest standards of conduct and talent.”

“The past two days notwithstanding,” quipped Mustang.

Flustered by the interruption, he exhaled loudly. “If you’ll permit me...”

A bowed, “Be my guest.”

“Applicants must endure five separate auditions in front of a total of twenty judges and, in addition to regular class sessions, rehearsals are held three evenings a week before supper.”

Mustang pretended to applaud this narrative. “Well, someone along the line dropped the ball with this group. That you can’t deny.”

“It’s beyond my understanding why they...”

She clutched the lapels of his rumpled suit coat. “I can tell you from first-hand experience, Mister Hopkins: teenagers have the capacity to be compliant one minute, and devious the next. Given half a chance, they’ll take advantage of what they see as any adult’s self-righteous presumption that their offspring - or their students - will obey them without question. You may trust them, but they aren’t trustworthy in the slightest.”

He studied her grim, youthful features. “Yes, I can believe you have dabbled in such behaviors...”

“To my regret,” she affirmed.

“And, you think my students will regret their... dalliances?”

It slipped out. “They already do.”

Hopkins’ blue eyes bored into her, hands clamped on her shoulders. “You *do* know where they are!”

She averted her gaze. “I... meant the pair who contracted poison ivy...”

“Balderdash!”

A pregnant hush accompanied sucking a lungful of air. Mustang raised her head level with the teacher’s, contralto steady. “What happens next depends entirely on you.”

“Are you threatening me with the same fate...” he raged.
“You have no idea.”

III

Neither did she, frankly.

When killing a human being required little thought or effort, something intrinsically wrong existed in the murderer’s soul. Records indicated convicted serial killers had to plan - even travel - to cross paths with their victims.

All Mustang had to do was formulate a command to nature.

Winding up in trouble - again.

That scant musing allowed Philip Hopkins his own chance to review the interaction. He released the young woman and stuffed his fists in his trouser pockets, though he didn’t lower his eyes from her countenance. “I beg your pardon, Lady Elizabeth,” he said, quietly and sincerely. “In my concern over... many facets of this situation... if I offended you...”

She rebuked him sternly, “Your presence on my property offends me. I’ve told you once to leave and not return. If you repeat your infraction, I will not guarantee your safety.”

“I shall, henceforth, let the constables handle the investigation,” he remarked.

“That’s for the best,” she agreed, adding in an undertone, “The dolts.”

“You’ll excuse me, then?”

This abrupt tempering of Hopkins’ demeanor befuddled the Mistress of Boleskine. A near-tranquility claimed his gaunt features, as if...

“Oh, hell.” Suspecting something - or someone - had solidified behind her, she twirled toward the Georgian mansion.

Empty air.

The crunch of Hopkins’ shoes on the pebbles indicated his retreat and, turning, she detected what could only be compared with scenes from classic movies where subjects departed the presence of royalty, backing out the door.

“What did you see, man?” she demanded.

He gasped, “Shafts of moonlight enveloped you in a divine glow, like visions accorded the saints...”

Another “Oh, hell...”

She’d lost count of those who described her as a beacon of light for the world, or equivalent nonsense. She had to dispel his... hallucination, before he shared it with the authorities, or the media.

Gentle fingers entwined with his fleshy digits. "You're overwrought," she whispered. "Come inside. I'll make hot cocoa."

"From scratch?"

"It's the only way," she snickered.

He joined her in the kitchen, helping measure sugar and cocoa powder into milk warming on the stove. Then, mugs steaming, they migrated to the living room.

"You play chess?" queried Hopkins.

"Yes."

"Living in seclusion, who are your opponents?"

Flames roaring anew on the fireplace grate, she dropped onto the cane-backed rocking chair. "I live in a secluded location, but who said..."

"Your neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, offered a long list of excuses for your less than hospitable reception of us the other day. He claimed you're the widow of a nobleman, still consumed by your grief, which accounts for your eccentricities." He sipped the tasty brew. "You're not old enough to have ever been married."

"There, you're mistaken, Mister Hopkins. I guess I'm one of those fortunate enough to maintain my youth..."

"And beauty," he interspersed.

Rather than engage in another debate about her personal characteristics, Mustang concerned herself with restoring the chess pieces to their starting positions.

Accustomed to the tactics of Francis of Assisi or Erwin Rommel, Hopkins' opening gambit - moving his queen's rook pawn one space forward - stunned Mustang.

She pretended not to notice the blunder, sliding her king's pawn two squares, to make way for her queen.

"How long have you been a teacher?" she asked randomly, sipping her hot cocoa while he debated his next move.

"This term marks 42 years."

Scrutinizing his weathered mien, she could guess his age as mid-60s to early 70s, with the white, lank mop adding to the effect.

His king's knight advanced on the inlaid table. "What is your profession?"

Not a question she routinely fielded. "I... raise horses."

"For racing?"

"I believe that is a form of abuse."

"Then, why?"

“Because they’re elegant animals, offering unconditional love when they’re treated properly.”

He clucked his tongue. “Humans, not so much, I take it.”

“How so?”

Hesitating at the diagonal motion of her queen, his nose twitched.

“Somehow, I could envision you living simply - and alone - in that little lodge where I found you. Marrying into nobility, and possessing such a vast dwelling, you still fend for yourself: cooking, cleaning... By rights, there should be an assortment of servants, but you don’t want them around, getting in your hair, so to speak. You don’t like people in your space.”

“Very observant,” Mustang praised sarcastically. “Rather than point out the flaws in your reasoning, or offer my opinion of your quirks, tell me what music your choir plans to perform at the Edinburgh competition.”

A disconcertingly nonchalant response. “Oh, our entry has been withdrawn.”

“After all the time and expense...”

“The students were far too upset by their classmates’ disappearance to concentrate on rehearsing the repertoire.”

“So, what? They’ve all gone home?”

“They took the afternoon express.”

Just as Mustang was about to place his king in check, she cleared the pieces with a deft sweep, rising. “Then, why in hell are you still here?”

“To find the missing.”

“You haven’t the resources...”

Stoically, Hopkins bent to collect the carved ivory strewn on the polished wood floor. Then, he replaced each on its designated square, so the game could continue. “You are the only resource I need,” he remarked. “It’s your move.”

Shards of fired ceramic shattered beside his elbow, the last drops of chocolate splattered on the green sofa cushions.

“What the...” exclaimed Hopkins.

His hostess spat, “I think you’d better leave.”

“Not without the truth.”

She sneered, flopping on the seat, “You ever heard the quote, ‘If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you?’”

“You’d be wiser to cooperate, Lady Elizabeth. Unburden your soul, and I’ll vanish like a bad dream.”

“This is already a nightmare.”

“I can’t return to the school without an explanation for the distraught parents who are pestering the headmaster with calls every hour...”

“Make something up.”

He squinted, rolling the black king across his palm. “Don’t you think I’ve tried? They’ll want proof, and I have none to give - whether I tell them the bus crashed into the loch and they drowned, a convicted murderer escaped from prison and shot up the pub where we were eating dinner, or another concocted tale.”

“Ridiculous!” she mocked. “They’ve been reported missing; the police will adjudge them runaways when they don’t turn themselves in, especially if the story made the news...”

“I swore the constables to secrecy.”

Mustang sagged on the rocker, dismayed. “To protect your position?”

“Of course!”

“You really don’t care about those kids, do you?”

Thin lips pursed.

“And you accuse *me* of not liking humans.” On her feet once more, she breezed from the room. “You have one minute to vacate the premises.”

On her heels, he had no intention of capitulating. “You’ve got to give me something!” The tenor of his outburst sent a chill up her spine - fear he might strike her.

She sighed, resigned. “Tell the parents their kids bought a case of whisky in Dores and hitched a ride to the coast. They stole a skiff and rowed out on the water, getting drunk, and a wave capsized the boat. Disoriented and too hammered to swim, none of them made it back to shore.”

“You know this for a fact?” he croaked.

“It’s a plausible option, requiring you to provide no tangible proof.”

His doubt evident, he postulated, “Testimony from the driver?”

“It was dark; he didn’t see who climbed in the bed of his pickup after the girls flagged him down.”

“If the parents press me for a reason?”

She grunted, “You said it yourself: they’re young, impulsive, struggling with raging hormones...”

Hopkins contemplated the scenario. “Yes, the insurance should pay off nicely.”

“Oh, hell...” She shoved him toward the door. “Get out of my sight!”

He stumbled from the structure, rapidly drenched by the steady rain that had begun falling. Mustang did not watch him slosh toward the highway; heartless creeps like him rated no sympathy.

His fate would involve the loss of his post, and all memory of their acquaintance or his ventures onto Boleskine grounds.

The surviving choir members would nurse only vague recollections of the bus trip to Loch Ness and the puncture which stranded them.

In no way would Mustang be implicated in the case.

After rinsing her mug in the kitchen sink, she navigated to the master bedroom and fell onto the king-sized mattress, fully clothed and utterly exhausted.

As a pastel dawn peeked through the window - she'd neglected to close the draperies - a resolution to pass a normal day carried her through a breakfast of cereal and orange juice, then out to the barn.

Brisk October air enlivened the horses, as well. In the corral, they enjoyed their morning oats and drank amply from the trough. Mustang used a rake and shovel to clear old straw from each stall, then rags, a mop and bucket to scour the floors and fixtures.

Drenched with perspiration by 10:00, she stifled a laugh when the horses snorted and sneezed at the mixed scent of pine, lemon and bleach in their space.

It would dissipate soon enough, especially with heather on the breeze wafting through the interior.

Pietra was saddled for an overdue outing. Lunch followed: fried egg sandwiches and tomato soup - along with unbidden memories of Montana. Thankfully, Crystal needed to be exercised, so the afternoon passed pleasantly enough.

One task Mustang had avoided: disinfecting the vacant bedrooms where the teens had made improper use of the floor. She pledged to complete that chore prior to fixing dinner.

The guest room still needed laundered sheets restored to the mattress; she'd abandoned them atop the dryer three days ago.

Not that she expected anyone to use the bed but, since her arrival in Scotland, people had a way of finding her, or needing her assistance in an emergency - including a place to sleep.

She'd always despised housework. On her parents' ranch, she usually managed to sneak out on weekends to help with the horses, or ride the pastures on Heartbeat, her Pinto, leaving Maggie to handle dusting and vacuuming. In the course of smoothing the sheets, she noticed a coating on the night stand and wardrobe, prompting her to fetch a cloth and wipe the surfaces.

The area rug appeared grimy, as well - had the kids tracked in mud on their shoes? she pondered. Rolling it and hoisting it over her shoulder, she carried it out

to the clothes line, slinging it across an iron pole and taking a few whacks with a sturdy broom. A cloud of dirt swirled toward her; she coughed.

With the other rooms unfurnished, she hoped to be done in half the time. Depositing the bucket in the first, she found an odd humor in the impressions on the boards: the lovers had been sweating so profusely in the heat of their passion, their hand prints were clearly visible among trails of dried moisture.

The butts of whoever had been on the bottom were also clearly defined.

Fortunately, the damage wasn't irreversible, and a few swipes with the sponge mop eradicated them.

In the second chamber, the pair had evidently raided the hall linen closet, spreading four of her best bath towels beneath them. Disgusted, she fetched a pitchfork from the barn, scooped up the soiled items and pitched them out the kitchen door, consigned to the trash.

Pouring gallons of filthy water down the toilet, she refilled the metal container for the final assault. Elbowing open the door, she dropped everything in her grasp.

Against the far wall, a camouflage backpack indicted her for her crime.

Water puddled around her feet, she composed herself and soaked up the moisture with frayed terrycloth. Her jeans and flannel shirt had been splashed, too, and she detoured to her room to change before approaching the bag.

Sitting cross-legged in the corner, she tugged the straps toward her and gingerly unzipped the main compartment.

Then, she deduced why its owner had brought it along on this misadventure. Two liter bottles of vodka rested among candy wrappers and a bag of crisps. They'd not only planned to have sex, but get drunk - as she'd hypothesized to Hopkins.

The smaller pocket contained a mobile phone, condoms, a wallet and a plastic sandwich bag filled with assorted pills.

"Oh, hell..." she groaned.

Unfamiliar with the operation of mobiles, five minutes elapsed before she located the on/off switch. Even without inputting the access code, a series of text messages flashed on the screen - from concerned parents, teachers and friends.

Mustang knew the signals necessary to transmit such missives could be tracked. Tempted to melt the components, she scrambled to her feet and headed outdoors before reconsidering.

The constables might be dolts, but they weren't entirely incompetent. The backpack could be dumped near the highway, again distancing her from the mishap.

She'd handle that after a hearty meal.

Or, not.

Toting the backpack to the kitchen, she'd propped it against the cupboards when a thumping on the front door startled her.

IV

"What now?" sputtered Mustang, quickly washing her hands in the sink and holding the tea towel as she traversed the foyer to unlatch the deadbolt and jerk the steel panel inward.

She felt her eyes widen at the black-suited official on the stoop. Above average height, his disheveled ebony mane hung loose over a heavy brow. Fiery blue-grey eyes, bulbous nose, and square jowls weren't his most significant attributes. A deep scar ran from the left corner of his mouth across his cheek, with other reminders of some erstwhile fight creating a bizarre pattern on his flesh. A bull neck topped broad shoulders, with white cotton fabric strained by the barrel chest beneath, tapering to a narrow waist and slender legs.

Philip Hopkins stood down one step, shoulders slumped within a bloodstained and shredded shirt, left arm in a sling, chin lowered.

Swallowing hard, she managed, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Lady Elizabeth?" rumbled a basso profundo that confounded her, not only due to its lack of a Scottish burr, but its refinement.

"Yes."

"I'm Detective Inspector Robert Oliver from Inverness."

Recalling regional etiquette, Mustang muttered, "How do you do?"

"I wish the circumstances for this call were of a more social nature myself, Your Ladyship," Oliver noted. "But, we have a problem..."

"Oh?"

"This man wandered into the Dores Pub last night, the victim of a severe beating and robbery. He doesn't remember his name, or what he's doing in these parts."

"Really?"

Hopkins, with a pained expression, raised his head to reveal a horribly swollen right eye and taped nose.

"How awful!" Mustang had been trying to feign calm, but the teacher's injuries truly jarred her.

"He was discharged from hospital into our custody, with x-rays showing six cracked ribs, a fractured left arm and a concussion," explained Oliver.

“That... accounts for the amnesia.”

“So the doctors diagnosed.”

“You brought him here why?” puzzled the Mistress of Boleskine.

“Because, throughout this ordeal, the only words he’s uttered are, ‘She knows,’ or ‘She glows.’ We can’t make out which, because when his assailants throttled him, they damaged his larynx.”

“I... still don’t...”

“My colleagues were able to identify him, given that he’d reported a group of missing students earlier this week at our main headquarters. His name is Philip Hopkins, director of a choir whose bus broke down not far from here while they were on their way to view the loch.”

Mustang tired of standing in the doorway. “Come in, please. Maybe...”

Oliver escorted Hopkins beneath the lintel and diverted into the living room, where they sank on the green sofa. Their hostess made a show of stirring dying embers on the fireplace grate with an ash-stained poker, adding two logs before she settled in the cane-backed rocker. The chess game she and Hopkins had been playing still on the board, she subdued her irritation.

“Now, please, go on,” she urged.

“We checked with your neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, who’d let Mister Hopkins use his phone and arranged for the bus to be towed. He told us you’d also encountered the students...”

Oh, hell, Mustang grouched. She’d forgotten about the project manager’s role and hadn’t ordered his memory be wiped.

“Yes, I was riding near the road when they wandered into my path, asking to use the bathroom. I’m very particular about my privacy, and don’t allow strangers...”

Oliver pulled a small notebook from his inside pocket, scribbling on one sheet. “Ah, I see.”

His demeanor sparked an idea in Mustang’s head. This might be her “out”...

“I did find something unusual yesterday...” she announced, no lie.

“What would that be?”

She rose, composure forced as she retrieved the backpack. When she presented it to the inspector, Hopkins twitched, moaning, “She knows!”

Left eyebrow arched, Oliver glanced at him, then at Mustang. “Where on the property...”

“Stuffed in a split oak tree about a hundred meters from the road.”

Yanking a linen handkerchief from his trousers, trained digits examined the bag and its contents. Mustang felt her heart skip a beat, cognizant her fingerprints were on the fabric, before realizing - since she claimed to have “found” it - that fact wouldn’t incriminate her.

Another fluttering in her chest: if the police ran those prints through their computer, she’d be exposed...

Her wordlessly moving mouth did not disturb Oliver, who never sensed she’d instructed nature to remove any signs of her contact with the backpack.

Completing his inventory, Oliver favored Mustang with a sorrowful scowl. “The student who carried this, had he not gone missing, would have been arrested and prosecuted for underage possession of alcohol, and distributing illegal drugs.”

His hostess resumed her seat, “Sad.”

“It does, at any rate, serve as a clue to what happened, if they were all planning to engage in similar activities.”

“How so?”

“Since they haven’t been found - dead or alive - the conjecture is they wandered away from the bus, got drunk or high, and decided to go for a swim in the loch.”

“Eaten by the monster?” she gulped.

“No. Drowned, pure and simple.”

“But, wouldn’t their bodies wash up on shore?”

“The lake is quite deep in spots, and if they sank or got tangled in the weeds...”

So close to the theory she’d proposed to Hopkins, a concerted effort to muffle her laughter meant biting her tongue until she tasted blood.

“Then, no further searches...” she ventured.

“We haven’t the manpower.” He straightened, drawing Hopkins up with him.

Mustang accompanied them into the foyer. “What will happen to Mister... what did you say his name is?”

“Hopkins. Philip Hopkins,” supplied Oliver.

“What will happen to him?”

“He’ll be confined to a mental institution until he recovers his memory, or become a permanent patient if he doesn’t.”

The steel swung open, evening casting shadows on the drive.

“Thank you for your assistance, Lady Elizabeth,” Oliver acknowledged. “If I have any other questions, may I call again?”

Mustang recognized the intensity radiating from his eyes had nothing to do with his duties. She faked a smile. "You'd be most welcome."

But, he'd be busy for the foreseeable future. En route to Inverness, Hopkins suffered a seizure of some type, thrashing violently in the rear of the police vehicle, cracking his skull on the window.

The reports to be filed on the incident, the coroner's inquest to determine Hopkins' cause of death, and arranging for the transport of the deceased to Liverpool for cremation spanned more than a week.

She read about the tragedy in newspapers used to wrap her groceries after their bi-weekly delivery. An imposing presence hovering over her shoulder while she perused the tiny print at the kitchen counter made her flinch.

"I had no part in it, General," she offered.

The German-accented baritone countered, "Directly, perhaps not. Indirectly, you are responsible."

"Eh?"

"After your last dispute, you sent him off into the downpour, defenseless. A van of drunken hunters, their trip ruined by the weather, saw him on the highway and decided to have some fun."

"The same could've happened to anyone walking alone in the dark." She crumpled the oversized sheet. "Besides, I thought he had a car."

"He did, but when you erased his memory, he forgot it was parked near the gate."

"Oh, hell..."

"That's thirteen deaths in less than a fortnight."

"All of them deserving." Shuffling to the sink, she squirted dish soap into a warm stream from the faucet to clean the breakfast dishes. "If I hadn't done it, those morons would've killed themselves with the booze and pills."

"Perhaps."

"And Philip was nothing better than a career-minded tyrant."

"Based on your vast knowledge of the human condition?"

She smirked, a glass slipping from her hand and shattering on the marble. "Oh, hell..."

When she restored the trash basket to its place, Rommel was gone.

Before leading the horses from the corral to the barn as the sun set, Mustang relaxed on a chaise lounge near the kettle grill she'd had Glenn MacDonough purchase during the renovations, so she could enjoy the taste of steaks or hamburgers cooking over an open flame. She must've dozed off, because

she didn't hear tires on the gravel drive, or footsteps approaching from the front of the house.

"You look comfortable." That cultured bass.

She leapt off the nylon webbing, smoothing her untucked flannel shirt.

"Geez, where'd you come from?"

"Work, actually."

"You're here on business?"

He loosened his gold-dotted maroon tie and settled on the end of the lounge. "No. I... wanted to see you."

"I'm... honored, I guess."

"It's Friday, and there's a delightful group of musicians who like to play at the Dores Pub..."

White knuckles gripped the metal framework. "I... don't..."

"Why not?"

"I'm... not good around people."

"Who is, these days? It's impossible to trust anyone."

That insight unknotted her stomach. She opted to confide a bit more. "I tend to get angry, and I do horrible things when I'm angry."

Robert Oliver clenched his fist, a massive size. "I've punched holes in a few walls in my day, I confess. I find arm wrestling a good way to vent my frustrations..."

"So, when you go to the pub, you have a few beers and challenge the others?"

"Oh, no. They're the ones who get pissed on pints of stout and wager their friends they can best me."

"You have quite the reputation, then?"

"Who doesn't want to bring an arrogant cop down a couple pegs?" he chuckled.

The vision of Jim Neville, with his own style of arrogance, riddled by bullets from firearms wielded by misguided FBI agents, jolted her.

Up in an instant, Oliver clutched her at the waist to prevent her collapse. "Are you all right?"

She gazed at his marred countenance. A tentative finger traced the scars. "How did this..."

"About six years ago, a man decided to beat his wife within an inch of her life. The tenants in the flat across the hall rang the station, and when we arrived, he transferred his aggression to us. He was holding a broken wine bottle, and I didn't sidestep the attack in time."

“You caught the blow full in the face?”

He nodded.

“They... add character,” she murmured.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Most of the guys say I should’ve gone into movies - I could play monsters with no make-up.”

“How cruel.”

As she withdrew her hand, he enveloped it in his paw, raising her palm to his mouth. The mutilated tissue distracted him. “You have your own tales, I suppose.”

“A lot of people do,” Mustang demurred.

“I won’t press. When you’re ready, you’ll tell me.”

“Thanks.” She signaled him to share the chaise lounge. “Why *did* you come?”

He smiled awkwardly. “Because I figured out what Mister Hopkins had been babbling about before he died.”

The young woman froze.

“You *do* glow. Initially, I thought it an illusion caused by the firelight in your living room. When I came around the corner of the house just now, I noticed it, too. Hopkins must’ve seen a comparable effect, maybe during the search of your property. It’s like a spotlight aimed at you, or your aura is so pure...”

“Pure, hell!” she snorted.

“You don’t believe some people inherently draw others to them like a magnet, because of their kindness?”

Such generalizations didn’t apply to her. “Detective... Inspector... what should I call you?”

“My friends call me Ollie.”

No accounting for nicknames - her own being a prime example - she mused. “Ollie, I’m not a kind person. I’m not a good person. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, and had to clean up a lot of messes. If I dare let my emotions have sway, the damage is incalculable. The best thing you can do is stay far away from me.”

“I’m not afraid.”

She counseled, “People *die* around me, Ollie.”

“Come to the pub. You’ll relax, and everything will look brighter in the morning.”

She saw his blue-grey orbs sparkle - a man with an ulterior motive.

Everything might look brighter in the morning, but it would be an exasperating night.

“Give me a minute,” she acquiesced.

He waited for her beside his blue Ford Anglia, grinning approval when she appeared with her ebony tresses cascading over the blue collared shirt, wearing relaxed fit jeans, tooled leather boots and a wide belt with an oval silver buckle.

“What’s that engraving?”

“An eagle, or a hawk. A friend gave it to me.”

Jim Neville.

She’d pulled it from her drawer as a reminder not to let this police officer get too close.

Oliver held the passenger door as she slid onto the bucket seat. Once closed, she observed his singular retreat: a slight rightward tilt before twisting left and skirting the bonnet.

Within ten minutes, they sat in the noisy establishment, the aroma of beef and fried potatoes commingled with perspiration.

Mustang sipped the scotch and soda he ordered without consulting her, used to a shot of Jameson on the rare occasions she imbibed liquor. The musicians - violin, guitar, accordion, drums and clarinet - clearly hadn’t rehearsed, but provided a decent backdrop for those wishing to dance in the cramped space between stained round wooden tables.

After his third pint of lager, Oliver’s long, thick fingers commenced rhythmically caressing her hand; she lowered it to her lap. Disheartened by this lack of amorous progress, he focused on a burly shaved-headed bloke harassing the sandy haired barmaid.

Mustang discovered just how the inspector instigated his arm wrestling matches. Excusing himself, he rose and, once again, leaned right before swiveling in the opposite direction. With lengthy strides, he crossed the warped floor, collaring the miscreant with a sharp reprimand. The intoxicated thug took a swing at him and, rather than deck the fool, Oliver proposed a test of strength. The loser would take his leave and be banned for a month.

His initial victory on the books, other toughs tried their luck against this champion, slamming as much as 50 pounds on the table - despite such betting being illicit.

No one came close to besting him, until he glanced toward where Mustang should have been sitting, to see the space deserted.

He abandoned the contest for the chill midnight. His date stood in the parking lot, watching an aircraft trail cut across the starry sky.

“Had enough?” he prodded.

“More than enough.”

“You really don’t like... socializing.”

“I don’t like the games.”

A surprisingly gentle grip angled her toward him. “You think I’m playing a game with you?”

“I know you are.” She wrenched away and started along the road toward Boleskine, knowing he’d follow. “There’s a definite charm about you, Ollie, and you’ve no idea how much I miss that. Any relationship between us, though, will end in disaster.”

He caught her up and embraced her, his kiss unyielding and invigorating.

The waves of Loch Ness doubled in size, crashing on shore and rousing sleeping wildlife.

Oliver pulled away at the cacophony. He stared down at Mustang but, before he could renew his advances, a bald-cranium trio who’d lost considerable funds in the arm wrestling contest burst through the pub’s door, hailing him with a vulgar insult directed toward those of his profession.

The shot rang out as he rotated left - after slanting right as if to kiss her again - a projectile penetrating his torso and landing him on the macadam.

“Oh, hell!” Mustang shrieked, squatting beside him.

His hand, already soaked with blood, reached for her, then dropped, lifeless.

“Didn’t I warn you?” she mourned, stroking his mangled cheek.

Curious onlookers rushed from the pub; the assailants struggled to open the doors of their rusted pickup. No one attempted to apprehend them, knowing they possessed a weapon.

Mustang didn’t let that deter her from righteous vengeance.

When the constables arrived to tend their fallen comrade, they spent hours unraveling the seemingly mindless babbling of six witnesses who swore the culprits dropped dead spontaneously without being touched.

A dreary trek along the dark highway, Mustang didn’t fear some gang would attack her as they had Philip Hopkins. She fell into bed well past 2 a.m., her lips still tingling from Oliver’s kiss.

Suspended from the wardrobe door, the belt buckle reflected hazy moonlight, confirming she could never dare love any man.

She fell asleep on a pillow soaked with tears.