

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Vigilant Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

An essential trait of tightrope walkers: balance.

The only time Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea felt balanced - body, mind and soul - involved galloping across open fields in the saddle. She owned six horses, if such could be deemed possessions. The unique personality each animal exhibited prompted her respect and admiration as sentient beings, and she cared for them as a mindful parent tended her children.

That humid August Tuesday, she exercised the Arabian stallion her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, had purchased for her. His innate wildness suited her on days when she grew bored with her surroundings, the exile in Scotland onerous or a yearning for her father’s ranch in Montana dampening her spirits.

A wind generated by speed cooled the young woman’s aching heart, soaring over downed trees as one, throbbing with the rhythm of life. Hoof beats pounding in her ears redoubled, but not an echo. She glanced around and saw two equally magnificent mounts racing to catch her up.

MacDonough and a friend on their own circuit.

The men didn’t pull abreast until she reined the Arabian two miles later. Her auburn tresses relatively untangled in a ponytail, she chuckled at the project manager’s tousled white fringe and his companion’s long, greyish mane badly in need of a brush.

“Lady Elizabeth,” MacDonough panted, “this is m’ brother, Billy. He’s up from Glasgow for a wee holiday.”

The slim visitor in denim shirt, jeans and snake-skin boots sat the bay gelding well, towering above his squat sibling by six inches. She detected a slight tremor in his left hand, leather straps entwined through his fingers...

Despite the smile between his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, health issues sapped his strength.

“Wanna go again?” His accented baritone lacked Glenn’s harsh Scottish burr, which Mustang struggled to comprehend.

She countered playfully, “Wanna *lose* again?”

“I won’t, with a fair start.”

“You call it.”

His abrupt, “Go!” didn’t strike her as fair at all, but she trusted the Arabian to meet the challenge.

And, he did.

She bested the MacDonoughs by three lengths, sailing cleanly over the fence that bordered Boleskine property, to boot.

“Come, ha’ dinner wi’ us tonight!” Glenn shouted as she continued toward the Georgian mansion that served as her domicile.

“Sure!”

It would be an excuse to ride another of her horses as the sun set.

In the barn, she groomed and fed the stallion, then trudged to the historic residence to shower and change from ratty sneakers, jeans and a drenched Beatles t-shirt into a mottled blue blouse, navy slacks and tan loafers. She whipped her hair into a semblance of order, the braid dangling past her waist.

She hadn’t availed herself of a salon since... before she’d fled the States.

Four years.

And a thousand misadventures - or, what seemed as much.

One thing she appreciated about Glenn MacDonough: his ordinary lifestyle. He worked in construction, demolishing, renovating and erecting structures in Inverness and throughout the Highlands. He came and went without fanfare, shared the latest news with her as he saw fit, and expressed concern about her living alone without any means to contact the outside world.

An attitude she wished her father had adopted.

Mustang tethered Molly to Glenn’s corral fence just past 8:00, crossing gravel to the modest brick dwelling where Glenn’s white pickup sat like a guard beside a sporty red Jaguar convertible.

Her fist raised to knock, Billy MacDonough pulled the door inward before her knuckles contacted the wood. His intimidating presence was softened by mischievous hazel eyes beneath thick salt-and-pepper brows, partially obscured by rimless spectacles, and a ready grin.

“Heard me coming?” she quipped, as he bowed her over the threshold.

In jest: “Felt your presence, Your Ladyship.”

“Ah, none of that, now. None of that!” Glenn instructed from the dining room doorway. “Lady Elizabeth has dispensed us from those obligations.”

“Then, it’s just Elizabeth?” queried Billy.

She hated the name, but for one evening... “Sure.”

“You’re American.”

“Widow o’ a British noble,” his host supplied.

Billy sniffed. “She can speak for herself, little brother.”

“Ach, ye are a right numpty. Offer her a drink before ye subject her t’ a police interrogation.”

Mustang bristled. “Police?”

“Nothing of the sort, dear,” Billy assured her. “Just a game we played as weans, when we both thought we’d follow in our father’s footsteps.”

“Your father was a cop?”

“Oh, aye. A constable in Glasgow for nigh on thirty years.”

“Cool.” She sank on the sofa beside Glenn as Billy filled three glasses with Glenlivet 12-year-old Scotch.

With a hearty, “Cheers!” the men drained their portions in one gulp. Mustang sipped hers, not wishing to dispel the impression of a small degree of culture.

Two refills later, the MacDonoughs were already well trousered, with Billy explaining the term’s use in the city. He’d just begun to ramble how “pale blue” Scotsmen were readily identifiable when traveling - especially on the beach - when the cook signaled dinner was ready, and they staggered to the table, their guest bringing up the rear.

She listened to their banter through a four-course meal, highlighted by vegetable soup, roast beef, chips - what Americans called French fries - Brussels spouts and salad. Chocolate cake awaited them in the parlor, where both men added a generous dram of Scotch to their coffee.

Mustang departed at 10:30, the pair snoring in their chairs after a prolonged and humorous exchange of less-than-dignified tales from their youth - amply sprinkled with expletives. She hadn’t laughed so hard... ever.

She slept well and rose early to feed and water the horses. Pietra trotted through the leafy acreage, frisky in the morning chill. When Glenn intercepted her on his black Andalusian along the fence line, wearing work clothes, she noted his less than alert mein.

“Do I owe ye an apology for our behavior?” he greeted solemnly.

“Not at all.”

“‘Tis just, I’m gi’n Billy a wee splurge, now he’s been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, on top of prostate cancer and deafness.”

“Deafness? He showed no signs...”

“Ach, he’s got hearin’ aids, but the doctor said he’ll be completely deaf wi’ in the year.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He goes for surgery in a fortnight for the cancer, but there’s nothin’ can be done about the other.”

“Parkinson’s?”

“Aye.”

Mustang’s unfamiliarity with this illness left her at a loss. She muttered, “If there’s anything I can do...”

“He likes ye,” Glenn stated. “And I’d be infinitely beholden if ye would see fit t’ accompany us t’ Inverness on Saturday for the fair.”

“Fair?”

“Artists, musicians, actors, that sort.”

She shunned interaction with crowds...

“We’ll fetch ye at noon.”

He spurred his horse to a canter before she could refuse.

She didn’t envy him his hangover, nor being late to the jobsite.

When she dismounted outside the barn, she discovered Billy MacDonough envied her Arabian.

Clad in a baggy black t-shirt, zebra-striped leggings, fluorescent green socks and red sandals, he appeared in better shape than his sibling.

“Would you like some help?” he hinted.

“Thanks.”

They spent an hour tending the stock, while he regaled her with stories of round-the-world travels. She grew breathless from violent muscle convulsions, dropping the pitchfork twice as she tossed fresh straw into the stalls. Chores completed, she offered him a mug of hot chocolate, which he eagerly accepted.

On opposite sides of the kitchen’s metal dinette table, they sipped steaming brew. Mustang relished her ease in his presence; for once, a person with no ulterior motive.

If she wished, she could heal him of his ailments, using the command over nature bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons, her grandfather.

Billy remained blissfully unaware of that potential.

And, if all went well - meaning, if she controlled her impulses - he’d never realize the extent of her capabilities.

“Glenn told me about the fair this weekend,” she ventured.

“Oh, aye. My farewell performance.”

The mug paused half-way to her mouth. “Huh?”

“I presume he also told you why I’m here?”

“You’re... on a holiday.”

He leaned back on the chair, wistful. “Possibly my last chance for a bit of normalcy before...”

“Tell me.”

Billy MacDonough clearly wasn’t the type to wallow in his own misfortune. His animated chronicles of appointments with a series of specialists had her grasping the laminate table edge tightly, so she wouldn’t fall on the floor, roaring.

Not that Mustang trusted doctors. She guessed Billy didn't, either. His quest for a second opinion - especially about the Parkinson's - ended on a serious note.

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

She waited patiently for him to recover his composure. Instead, he launched into a litany of abuse and humiliation that had warped his formative years. His anger escalated until he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

He needed more than just healing of his body. The treatment to which he'd been subjected by his parents and older relatives bordered on sadism, irreparably wounding his mind and soul.

Eventually, his tone grew quiet. "By the time Glenn came along, at least, Dad had stopped drinking, and Mom... well..."

Mustang had no intention of prying. In fact, she felt like she'd heard too much already. That this man could turn such horrors into mirth while entertaining the masses...

"How much older are you than Glenn?" she asked.

"Eight years."

"How'd he get into construction, and you into... into..."

"I quit school at 15 and hired on as an carpenter's apprentice in the Glasgow shipyards. A crazy place, almost like a prison when the gates closed at the start of a day's shift, but I began to see humor in the quirks of ordinary men. The pranks we played... the frank discussions of every facet of life... Some of the guys would play guitars or fiddles on their breaks. I always enjoyed the music, then one of them gave me a harmonica. He taught me a few songs... On weekends, I started hanging in pubs with guys who brought their instruments to jam. They let me sit in and, suddenly, I found myself rambling on between songs and making them laugh..."

"By the time Glenn finished school - he was a much brighter student than me - the shipyards were on the way out. Dad got him a job with an contractor building housing on the outskirts of the city, and he went from there."

"You've got a sister, too," Mustang prodded.

"Aye. You've met Denis, then."

Auburn tresses bobbed when she nodded.

"A good lad. Conscientious to a fault." Billy's hazel orbs twinkled. "He gets me tickets to the games when I'm in Manchester. His mother did right by him."

He fell silent, a wave of pain transforming his weathered features into a tragic mask. He lurched upright, spectacles flying off his nose, and staggered toward the kitchen door.

“Billy, what...” Mustang moaned.

Trembling hands waved her away; he slammed against the jamb and lost consciousness, sliding to the floor.

The Mistress of Boleskine squatted beside him, afraid he’d expired - and she’d be blamed. Responsible for quite a number of deaths since she’d acquired the mysterious powers from her occultist and scientist forebear, who’d previously occupied the property, she didn’t need another corpse on her hands.

Scarred hands, at that. Her palms bore evidence of travel via lightning bolts, serving as a constant reminder of failures to govern her thoughts. Tempted to be anywhere else but in her present location, she could have stepped outdoors and vanished with only the meteorological service being the wiser...

Not when this aging comedian required her assistance.

Her fingertips stroked his forehead; he didn’t have a fever. Without any details about Parkinson’s, she couldn’t identify the symptoms, but she knew cancer, left untreated, ravaged internal organs.

MacDonough’s eyelids fluttered as his entire frame spasmed. His arms flailing, Mustang trapped his wrists and directed the natural elements to ease his anguish...

Orbs as black as night shot open, focused on her. With the strength of iron vices, he clamped his digits atop hers.

A growl from the depths of his throat declared, “Now, I’ve got you!”

## II

Mustang, more than confused, sputtered, “Oh, hell!”

When she couldn’t break free of Billy MacDonough’s grip, she sent a high-voltage charge of electricity through his limbs - and, still, he didn’t release her.

“Yes, yes!” he bellowed in a resonant bass, almost triumphant. “Give it all to me!”

“What *are* you?” she squealed.

“A Skinwalker.”

Part of Mustang’s grade school history classes covered various Indigenous tribes of the American west. The Navajo believed Skinwalkers were shape shifters, mostly taking animal form, who could ensnare humans with their evil.

“How’d you get here, into Billy?” grumbled Mustang.

“He came to the medicine man in a village near the sacred burial grounds, seeking relief from injuries sustained in a motorcycle wreck. The old man was senile and used the wrong chant. That’s when I... took possession of Billy’s soul.”

“What do you want of me?”

“Your power, of course. I shall kill my enemies and wreak havoc across the globe.”

This entity didn’t expect Mustang to laugh outright.

“You mock me?” he raged.

She smirked. “You want, on purpose, to do what I do by accident.”

As the Skinwalker maintained a hold on her, a strange glow emanating from Billy’s frame increased in intensity. Finally, almost like a snake shedding its skin, Billy curled into a fetal position and, still clutching her, his extremely pale - yet very solid - double stood before her.

“Oh, hell!” A connection to nature possibly severed, Mustang resorted to her Wing Chun skills. She aimed her heel at the creature’s knee, knocking it off balance just long enough to wrench free and pummel its torso with blows that propelled it out the door.

She yanked the panel closed and locked it, then knelt beside Billy and checked his neck for a pulse.

Weak, but beating.

She tapped his cheek and, when he didn’t respond, tried a forceful smack. He bolted upright, as if roused from a nightmare.

“By all that’s holy, woman!” he croaked, rubbing the red mark on his flesh.

Straightening, Mustang fought a wave of dizziness. Billy caught her by the waist before she pitched against the granite counter and settled her on the nearest chair.

“What happened?” he muttered.

“I’m... not positive, but I think we’ve unleashed hell.”

“Ach, dinnae be so dramatic.”

Two sets of hazel eyes met. “How long ago were you on the Navajo reservation?”

“Sorry?”

“The American Southwest. When did you consult the tribal elders, or participate in a sweat lodge...”

“Oh, God. ‘Tis been more than a decade...”

Mustang swallowed her heart. “You’ve had that thing inside you all these years?”

“What thing?”

“It’s been festering, like an infected wound, waiting... waiting...”

“Ye are daft, woman.” Had the absence of the Skinwalker caused him to revert to a Scottish burr similar to his brother’s? “What utter pish.”

She flicked the devices from his ears, whispering, “It made you ill, so you’d come here...”

“I ha’ the test results in writin’...”

“Then, you *did* hear me!”

“Aye...” His jaw gaped. “This defies all that’s rational!”

“Not if you walked in my shoes, Billy.” She folded her arms on the laminate tabletop and rested her face on them. “Just be glad you’re healthy once more.”

“But, I cannae...”

“When you get back to Glasgow, see your doctors. They won’t find anything wrong with you.”

He sank next to her. “What about unleashin’ hell?”

“That’s... for me to handle.”

“If I’m the cause...”

“*I’m* the cause. Ever since this... this...” - she shook her fists toward the ceiling - “I’ve been hunted like a rare diamond. Try as I have to stay off the radar, I’m a magnet for all the loonies and opportunists on the planet... and even from beyond the physical realms!”

“I dinnae believe...”

“In organized religion? Neither do I.” She mustered a wry grin. “But, there are planes of existence which cannot be fathomed...”

“Ye ha’ plumbed those depths?”

“Deeper than I like to admit.”

Billy scooped up her fingers and kissed them. “If what ye say is true, and m’ health is intact, I shall stand wi’ ye in battle against this dark force...”

Mustang flipped his hand and planted her lips on his flesh. “You are a man of integrity and wisdom, and your gift of humor is needed more than ever these days. I can’t put you in danger.”

“I’ll nae leave ye t’ face the monster alone.”

“Oh, Billy.” She felt a dampness on her nose. “Dear Billy. If you knew *my* history, you’d judge *me* the monster.” She rose and led him to the front door, unlatching the deadbolt. “Go on, revel in your time with Glenn. Don’t tell him about being cured; let the doctors confirm it first.”

His head nearly touching the lintel, he studied her youthful features as if memorizing them. “What about the fair on Saturday?”

“If I survive this, I’ll see you at noon.”

He squeezed her hands, reluctant to abandon her to her fate. “Be safe, dear.”

“I’ll be needing a good laugh, so prepare your best material.”

Steel closed upon him; she slumped against the cool surface, unable to subdue her sobs.

When she wiped her eyes on the t-shirt hem, she found Samuel Clemens observing her.

“Oh, hell!”

“I... may be of use to you.”

She side-stepped him en route to the kitchen. “What, offering advice on how to best the Skinwalker?”

“I... did include indigenous characters in my novels.”

“That doesn’t guarantee you did your research.” Squirting dish soap into a stream of warm water distracted her.

“Perhaps not then, but... more recently...”

“You’ve made it abundantly clear you can’t reveal information gleaned in your... present state.”

“What, then, shall you use as a resource?”

“I have no fuckin’ clue.”

The author known as Mark Twain scoffed, “Ah, you’ve picked up some of your new friend’s bad habits.”

“Bullshit. I heard these words long before I met him. The ranch hands used them with amazing regularity...”

“When your father wasn’t around.”

“He used them, himself, when he thought Mom couldn’t hear.”

“What about your grandfather’s journals?” suggested Clemens.

“You know they’re still in Montana.”

“You could... fetch them.”

“And compound my problems by having every agency monitoring weather anomalies sending alarms about my return to the States?” She dipped her hands in the water, flinching at the anguish coursing up her arms from scarred palms. “Besides, I’m tired of playing fox to the hunters. Maybe I’ll just sit back and watch the Skinwalker do as it likes.”

“And accept culpability?”

“How so, if I’m hunkered down here...”

“With no witnesses to vouch for you?” Clemens retorted.

“You’re saying, I should’ve let Billy MacDonough stay?”

“Not at all. It’s only...”

Splashing the water sent clusters of soap bubbles in all directions. “*What?*”

“It’s a shape-shifter. And, while most Skinwalkers take animal forms, this one sought a human host. It could easily transform into your duplicate...”

“*Sam...*”

“Or, it could take possession of another unwitting individual and wind up in China.”

Mustang sucked air through clenched teeth. “So, it’s imperative I keep it away from others...”

The bushy white mustache twitched affirmatively.

“Damn you.” Snatching a tea towel from the drawer where it hung, she pitched it at him. “If it’s on foot, it hasn’t gone far...”

“I wish you luck.”

“To hell with what you wish, Sam. If anyone dies because of this, *you’ll* be held to account.”

“Fair enough.”

Mustang marched from the mansion, fidgety and frightened - an emotion she’d seldom permitted herself. If the Skinwalker had hijacked her power, what actions could she take?

Or, were her reserves inexhaustible?

The sweltering afternoon didn’t improve her mood. She would’ve saddled one of the horses, but why risk the creature hurting such a noble beast? Hiking through the woods should have cooled her temper, but she could only repeat the mantra about not getting angry, because she did horrible things when riled.

Tempted to set the underbrush ablaze, she suppressed the impulse. When she’d initially traveled to Montana after meeting - and killing - Jack Parsons, she tested her command of the elements in remote areas of her father’s ranch, garnering unwelcome attention from the meteorological services.

Things went steadily downhill from there.

She’d always managed to restore order to the chaos she created; being vulnerable could raise a host of issues she’d once discounted as trivial.

Emerging from the forest, fragments of mulch, tossed into the air, cascaded to the ground despite a directive to guide her to the Skinwalker.

“Oh, hell.”

As Mustang trekked north toward Dores village, logic substituted for the metaphysical. All along the road, shriveled, blackened trees and wildflowers might have been targeted by a flame-thrower.

She followed that trail.

Though tourist season in the Loch Ness district thrived well into August, the young woman reasoned the Skinwalker would seek a sanctuary far from busy attractions. It had latched on to Billy MacDonough, after all, during a native ceremony with only a medicine man present. When evidence steered her toward the communal craft enclave that drew hippie-types from around the world each summer, she crossed her fingers none of the artists would be under the influence of mind-altering substances and welcome this intruder with open arms.

One Highland sect who definitely would rebuff the Skinwalker's proximity: the fae. A fairy mound - with its signature Hawthorn tree surrounded by a ring of stones - left of the packed dirt lane, had survived its passing, but it was never wise to irritate these stalwarts of Scottish lore.

Mustang heard their chatter, though the automatic language translation faculty within her brain no longer functioned. Still, if she spoke, they would understand *her*.

"I address the Seelie court," she hailed.

On a cold winter's night at Boleskine House, utterly frustrated, she'd resorted to exploring the inner sanctum - a reinforced book-lined room where she could sequester herself if those who sought to misuse her power attacked. She'd settled on a love seat behind the locked door with a random selection on local mythology.

Not that she gave credence to any sort of religious clap-trap, but she had, herself, raised St. Francis of Assisi from his tomb, manifested German general Erwin Rommel and Mohandas Gandhi, even Mark Twain. That other beings dwelt beyond human sight was not a foreign concept for her.

Since leaving the States, she'd encountered brownies - a sort of goblin - even the spirit of Mother Earth.

The text she'd read emphasized that fairies were to be avoided, as none of them really wished good to humans. The Seelie court were less inclined to negativity, while the Unseelie were downright nasty. Not all fae belonged to one court or the other; the product of unions between fae and human were shunned from both communities, for instance.

Not a comprehensive study, for sure, but tidbits of information Mustang could employ to her advantage.

Maybe.

"If the Seelie are here, please make yourself visible," she requested in a confident contralto.

Another aspect of the fae, of which many Highland travelers aren't aware: they can assume any size or shape.

Mustang involuntarily shuddered when she made a startling connection in that moment: just like the Skinwalker.

A wee glow grew from a speck into a male, full grown. “Aye, we are here,” he boomed.

The petitioner bowed slightly. “I need your help.”

“Ach, why should we spend our efforts on the likes o’ ye?”

“For one: I protect your precious deer from poachers on my property.”

“Aye? What proof do ye ha’ o’ such?”

“You don’t need any proof from me. They’ve already confided the facts to you.”

Within a shaggy, colorful, sparkling mane, the fae smiled. “Aye, so ‘tis. Ye are wise in our ways.”

“Not at all,” confessed Mustang. “I’ve been a right fool.”

“Ach, the stranger who passed within the last hour?”

“Paler than pale blue” - to use Billy MacDonough’s description of himself, magnified by the Skinwalker’s opaqueness.

“His evil could destroy our colony, and all fae who thrive on the loch.”

“Not just the fae. Every living thing.”

“Why did ye let such a force loose upon the land?”

Her chin drooped. “It wasn’t... on purpose. A guest in my home was possessed by it, and I inadvertently freed it...”

“Then, ye are nae responsible. Genuine hospitality absolves the laird...”

Mustang wasn’t going to quibble over language. Though “laird” was the Scottish term for a landowner, she didn’t actually *own* Boleskine House. “I’m deeply grateful for your solicitude.”

“What do ye wish o’ us?”

“I’m... not sure.”

Behind this fae intermediary, dozens of the court materialized, scowling. The Mistress of Boleskine had no doubt they feared the Skinwalker as much as she did.

“Our own survival is paramount,” chirped a lithe female.

“I would not ask you to endanger yourselves. If only...” - she deliberated, but her mind seemed an inert void - “If only... it could be distracted, drawn away from the humans and confined, temporarily, where it could do no damage...”

“Temporarily?” echoed the fae leader.

“Until my power is replenished and I can... ensure its termination.”

A youngish-looking fae tittered, “Another corpse upon the pyre.”

So, even these... knew of her failures. "I don't kill from spite," she proclaimed. "Whatever blood stains my soul occurred in defense of others."

"'Tis true, 'tis true," reverberated among the assembly.

"Ye acknowledge the recklessness that has... disrupted the balance of our territory?" queried the elder fae.

"Absolutely," she replied.

He consulted the court in hushed tones, in their own tongue. Though her nerves tingled and her stomach growled - she'd eaten nothing since the mug of hot chocolate shared with Billy MacDonough - she forced herself to breathe rhythmically, gazing straight ahead.

The fairy cohort scattered as their discussion concluded, leaving Mustang alone with their representative. "'Tis a cave nae far from here, surrounded by a bog, where that devil will be held until ye can deal wi' it."

"You have my eternal gratitude," she pledged.

He responded, "An' we shall avail ourselves o' it at the appropriate hour." Then, he warned, "If any o' mine are harmed..."

"Within 24 hours, I hope to have this matter resolved."

They bowed in ceremonial fashion to each other, then the fae dematerialized.

### III

Mustang Duryea resumed her journey, nostrils catching whiffs of decay that, frankly, turned her stomach. At least, when I commit an act of devastation, it's clean and quick, she mused.

Sandaled feet fell into step with her. "I would not say that, Signorina."

Her pace faltered. St. Francis had always spoken to her in Italian or, more accurately, "Umbro," an variant thereof. She'd only been able to understand him because she'd instructed nature to allow her to hear him - and, subsequently, all foreign languages - in English.

"You have wrought substantial mayhem in your short life," he continued, spinning toward her.

"Wait a minute," she interrupted. "Are my ears playing tricks on me?"

"No, Signorina. Your assailant siphoned off a mere fraction of your power. For an ordinary soul, though, that would be sufficient to drive it to the brink of insanity. What you'd left untapped is gradually regenerating..."

She inhaled deeply, matching his gait. "So, I should be able to defeat it, send it back from whence it came?"

“It has... its own demonic resources, apart from what it stole from you.”

“Then, anything could happen...”

“Si, Signorina.”

“Oh, hell.”

That exclamation was repeated thrice in the space of a few seconds when she viewed what the Skinwalker had done to the craft displays. Charred wood carvings, shattered pottery, defaced paintings, leather clawed to shreds...

The purveyors of these goods had the sense to flee when they'd seen him coming, the settlement deserted.

Flickers of light - prism-like glints of the sun's rays, for all intents and purposes - swirled around Mustang briefly; ethereal purring conveyed the news of the Navajo spirit's imprisonment in the magical cave.

The young woman signed her thanks and plodded in the direction the fae indicated. Francis plucked at her t-shirt sleeve.

“What now?” she puzzled.

“It commands the night forces with impunity. You must wait until sunrise, when its own strength will be depleted.”

“Just sit around and do nothing?”

“There is an oak stump fifty meters from the cave entrance. Keep watch there. Swampy earth between, you'll be beyond its reach, should it breach its shackles.”

“While recharging myself.”

“Si, Signornia.”

“Show me.” She waved the saint of Assisi forward, adding, “I don't suppose you'll stay with me.”

His failure to answer was, itself, the answer.

Ill-equipped could no better have described Mustang's situation as she settled on the round, slanted section of tree with an unobstructed view of a gaping hole in the base of a hill stripped of foliage. She'd tucked no money in her jeans, even if she wanted to buy something to eat. She'd brought no jacket, and Scottish nights could be cold and windy, even in summer.

The commune's artisans had gradually drifted back to their tents as the sun descended in the west; their voices wafted across open fields to her perch, laughing over dinner preparations. Later, a bonfire crackling, guitars strummed as songs with indistinct lyrics rose and faded. A lot of “La, la, la, la,” or “De dum, de dum, de dum,” meant those who were still awake were experiencing a really wild trip.

“Go, join them,” hissed the darkness. “There's nothing for you here.”

Mustang - very accustomed to conversing with herself when her spectral companions were absent, or while grooming the horses - could have replied aloud. She remained silent, listening to small animals foraging for cover to escape owls commencing their nocturnal patrols.

The disembodied bass drawled, "You'd enjoy yourself, forget your plight, be truly human..."

"Last time I let myself be truly human, the ceiling nearly fell on me," she sniggered.

Or, more precisely, on her and the assassin who'd been contracted to snuff her.

"That, I would ha' liked t' see."

The Mistress of Boleskine whirled around so quickly, her neck popped. Behind her, Billy MacDonough sat in his red Jaguar, grinning.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she gasped. "For that matter, how did you find me?"

"I had t' fetch Glenn home after his pickup threw a rod on the way t' the supply store. Dinnae ye know this is part o' his holdings? He collects rent from those... hippies - some of whom ha' nae had a pupil in their eye since spring!"

"He's never mentioned how far his boundaries extend."

"Anyway, we saw ye wanderin' about and figured ye would need a bite o' supper..."

She unfolded herself from a half-lotus position and limped to the car, muscles cramping. A gust of wind set her teeth on edge; she shivered.

MacDonough held up a paper sack bearing the Dores pub logo, filled with fish and chips and a can of soda. "Ye could do wi' a warm coat."

"Hanging in my closet."

"Ye ha' good reason t' be oot here at this ungodly hour?"

"Very good reason."

"Would ye like some company?"

"I'd love it, but it... wouldn't be prudent."

He squinted at her. "'Tis that... little matter we discussed earlier?"

"Exactly."

Nimble fingers pressed the delivery into her fist, and he reached for the shifter. "I'll be off, then."

The food smelled delicious, and she smiled feebly. "Make me laugh before you go," she pleaded.

Straight white teeth shown beneath his mustache. "Laughter is the best way t' drive away the bogles," he reasoned. "But, ye ha' a long vigil ahead and must

nae lose focus - or we all shall suffer for it. On Saturday, I swear: ye will laugh harder than ever in your wee life.”

“From what I can tell, swearing is your trademark!” she quipped.

They chuckled together before he steered the convertible toward the main road.

Too many spices ruined the taste of the fish and chips; Mustang pitched most of the meal into the bushes for the animals. She drained the soda solely to prevent dehydration, dreading the slow passage of the hours.

Accusations peppered her from all sides; weird echoes assailed her ears. Struggling to concentrate, she recalled her freshman year comparative religion course - one of the few classes that actually held her interest. Although a mere paragraph in the chapter on Catholicism, the description of St. John of the Cross’ “dark night of the soul” struck her as very similar to this current dilemma.

The overlapping harangue of random assertions plunged her to a level of despair unrivaled since the days following Jack Parsons’ death. She’d thrust a knife into the occultist’s chest - he’d blindfolded her during a bizarre ritual on the hill above Boleskine House and deceived her - but the authorities dismissed her narrative, because FBI agent Ben Espinoza and his trainees had removed the body from the site.

She thought she’d gone insane.

“Maybe you are...” the Skinwalker growled. “Maybe you’ve lost your mind, and you’re caught in an endless nightmare of death, chaos and destruction...”

As if on cue, a horde of bats took to the skies, so numerous they blocked out the stars.

Mustang had never liked bats. A few had lived in the barn on the Montana ranch, and she hated having to climb into the loft to fetch old tools stored near where the winged mice dangled from the rafters.

“Don’t you even!” she hollered.

If she’d carried a pistol, she’d have fired a few shots to scare away the lot.

Rather than own one, however, she’d made a point to melt such weapons into puddles of metal - especially when they were being pointed at her.

“You’re strapped to a hospital bed in the psychiatric ward, and the bats are coming for you...”

At least two physicians, including Glenn and Billy MacDonough’s nephew Denis Sommers, had resorted to that tactic - unsuccessfully. No straps, bars or locks could confine her...

“Ah! So a mere thought dissolves all restraints!”

She deduced where the Skinwalker was leading her: to a means for its own escape. By probing her fears, it would discover how she bested them...

"The barriers erected by the fae are far stronger than those of earthly devising," she stated.

If they weren't, her command had rendered them impervious to esoteric manipulations.

It hadn't finished taunting her, nonetheless. "Together, we could rule the world... multitudes would bow to us, begging for our favor..."

"It's stressful enough just taking care of my own little corner of the planet. Why would I want to deal with their troubles?"

A depraved edge permeated its snarl. "To see the piteous dolts groveling at our feet..."

"I've seen it. It's not pretty. Makes my skin crawl."

"You lie! You have shunned your power like a plague, using it haphazardly..."

"That's true, but so is the rest. Far too many have tried to insinuate themselves into my good graces, as they say, plying me with flattery to convince me their cause is righteous and worthy of my intervention." She rose from the stump and stretched. "You're no different than they are."

"You're wrong!" An impenetrable cloud swooped from the mouth of the cave and enveloped her. "Oh, foolish mortal! All you are is mine!"

Mustang couldn't help but sneer at this desperate ploy. Unlike witches and wizards depicted on television or film, or in ancient myths, who required special incantations or gestures to achieve their chosen ends, she didn't even need her vocal cords when push came to shove, much less her arms, or a wand.

The Skinwalker's ignorance amused her. She didn't resist the pressure being applied to her limbs, nor would she succumb with a cry of "Uncle!"

Indistinguishable appendages adjusted their position, in vain. Droning escalated to a blood-curdling yowl that might have burst the eardrums of any ordinary human.

"Let her go!"

Mustang cringed. "Oh, hell!"

Billy MacDonough's mandate distracted the Skinwalker, and she knew what would come next.

If it couldn't pierce her defenses, it would reclaim the Glaswegian as its host.

"Enough!" she shrieked.

Both were stunned immobile by the vehemence of her contralto.

“Billy, go home!” she barked.

“Only once ye are safe.”

That gallantry wasn’t dead might have been a credit to Scottish manhood, but such displays were decidedly inopportune.

The young woman detected the Skinwalker pulsing in Billy’s direction and summoned an icy wind to freeze the tangible molecules melded to its intangible essence. It hovered in mid-air for half a minute before shattering into crystals and evaporating into the cosmos.

She whirled on the comedian, emotions churning. “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

He shrugged.

“You didn’t go back to Glenn’s, did you?”

“Nae when your life was in peril.”

“My life was never in peril. Yours, on the contrary...”

“I heard how it tried t’... t’... besmirch your honor, your morals, your compassionate nature...”

“You *heard* all that?” she stammered.

“Oh, aye.”

Possibly because the Skinwalker had inhabited MacDonough’s body for nearly a decade, he’d become attuned to its interior diatribe, she presumed.

“Well, thank you, but I had the situation under control.” Even in the moonlight, she discerned his skeptical expression. “I would’ve... strung it along ‘til daylight, but the outcome is the same. It’s gone, once and for all.”

“Ye are positive?”

Playfully, she mimicked his burr. “Oh, aye. ‘Twas dead easy.”

“Better dead easy than dead.”

He extended his hand; she clasped it and they navigated uneven ground to the Jaguar, parked near the communal bonfire’s dying embers. She climbed in the passenger seat as he held the door open, and he drove her to Glenn’s cozy domicile, the sun peeking over the eastern horizon.

“I’d rather go home, Billy.”

“Ye need a nightcap t’ help ye sleep.”

She guffawed, “It’s already morning!”

“In m’ younger days, I’d perform until well past midnight, then hit the pubs until the shops opened. What the clock says dinnae matter.”

“But, my horses...”

“Ye ha’ saved me from a fate worse than death and, as a reward, I’ll send Glenn o’er t’ feed and water the lot.”

Best to permit him this show of gratitude and be done. Not that she needed the double shot of Glenlivet he poured for her, but it did relax her after the night's rigors.

She awoke in her own bed on Friday morning, having slept a full 24 hours. The aroma of coffee both roused and petrified her.

Who was in her house?

Still wearing the t-shirt and jeans in which she'd spent a tiresome vigil, a shower loomed in her immediate future, but she grabbed the yellow terry robe and tied it at the waist, shuffling barefoot to the kitchen.

Billy sat at the dinette table, sipping from a holiday-decorated mug. "Good mornin'!"

"Is it good?"

"Ye are up and aboot, so aye, 'tis good."

"Have you been here the whole time..."

"Oh, aye. Glenn showed me where ye keep the oats for the horses, so I kept them fed." He smirked guiltily. "I even took the Arabian for a wee canter."

Which is what he'd truly wanted, Mustang realized.

"He's a fine mount," she noted.

"Oh, aye. If I had m' own stables, I'd buy him from ye, nae matter your askin' price."

"He's not for sale."

"Ach, I know, but I can dream, eh?" He rose and fetched a cup from the cupboard, filling it from the pot. "Feeling better today?"

She accepted the infusion of caffeine. "Much. Thanks."

"I'm that glad."

"I'm sure you have preparations to make for your performance tomorrow, and I have to" - she spread her arms to indicate her slovenly appearance - "get cleaned up."

He drained his mug and placed it in the sink; he'd washed the dirty dishes she had ignored through the week, arranging them in the rack to dry. Rather than face her, he gazed out the window at trees rustled by a gentle breeze. "If I'd married as a young man, ye could be m' granddaughter, that's how old I am. This holiday has been... a grand adventure I'll ne'er forget. And" - he turned, hazel eyes moist - "if I'm cured o' m' ailments, as ye said, I'll ha' many a-year t' remember."

He made his exit with a dignity borne of determination. As he strode toward the shortcut that led to his brother's, Mustang flinched at the sight of fae peering at her from among a herd of deer grazing near the barn.

"Oh, hell!"

## IV

Billy MacDonough paused on the trail, noticing Mustang's trepidation. "Will ye be all right, dear?" he called.

"Aye." She steeled herself to the inevitable. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Once he'd vanished among the trees, the resident summoned her visitors closer. Their leader took the point, with the cohort spread in a diamond formation.

"Good morning!" she greeted from the threshold with a slight bow.

The fae emulated the motion in perfect unison.

"You've come to collect the favor owed?"

A pleasant, "Aye."

Mustang exhaled. If their intentions weren't honorable, she would've perceived a prankish glint in his eye, or sarcasm in his tone.

"I apologize for my..." Fingers holding the robe's lapels, she jiggled her wrists.

"Your attire befits this providential moment."

"How so?" she queried, befuddled. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Thank ye, nae. We would like your hair."

She bristled. "Excuse me?"

"Gi'n what happened, we ha' decided an additional layer o' protection is warranted for our mound. We ha' all the elements for the enclosure but one."

"My hair."

"Aye."

Her lips quavered. Didn't I just think about a haircut the other day? she mused. "And how will it be used, if I may be so bold?"

"We will plait a rope charged wi' energies capable o' stifling the curiosity o' those who would cross it."

"Less danger for them, less hassle for you."

"Aye."

Mustang stroked faded terrycloth. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"May we feed your horses?"

She heard excited giggling among the younger fae. "Be my guest."

Closing the kitchen door, she leaned on the granite counter, her knuckles white around the polished edge. The difficulty of dealing with other humans taxed her stamina, as it was, but going head to head with beings reputed for their... unpredictability frazzled her.

They had performed a service for her, and she must pay her debt - though ridding the Highlands of the Skinwalker might have been more than payment due.

She gulped a mouthful of now-cold sludge and hurried to the bathroom.

One aspect of these excessively long auburn locks she would not miss: combing out the tangles. She hadn't brushed her hair since... Tuesday?

Hell, she'd lost track of time. Staying up all night, then sleeping for an entire day...

Hot water pulsing from the showerhead soothed her aching muscles - tension she'd initially settled in Boleskine to reduce. Back in Montana, she'd dealt with murderers and con-men, the misguided and airheaded, but here... whole other dimensions impinged upon her privacy.

"Or, maybe," she spoke, rinsing shampoo from her dripping mop, "it's a natural progression that these... types have sensed my presence and the power, and are lining up to have a go at me."

Frankly, she was surprised none of her frequent companions waited on the other side of the shower curtain - they well could have, she realized. She wrapped her head in a towel, turban-style, and pulled on the robe, dumping an armful of dirty clothes in the laundry basket on her way down the hall.

Samuel Clemens lingered beneath the living room lintel.

"Well?" she prodded.

His bushy white mustache bobbed as he remarked, "You want me to corroborate your theory?"

"I rather expected you to reject it."

"Quite the reverse. It is a valid statement. Once your... activities breached the veil separating the planes, you were bound to..."

"So, it's *my* fault..."

"We've advised you on many occasions about exercising greater self-control."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

He tossed her the brush from where she'd left it on the inlaid chess board Monday evening - the last time she'd showered after tending the horses.

A quarter-hour later, she emerged from Boleskine House to see her horses cavorting in the corral. Damp tresses caught the sunlight and sparkled, raising a chorus of "Awww" from the fae.

She'd rummaged through the kitchen junk drawer for a pair of scissors, unsure if the fae had brought their own.

Hopefully, not sheep shears or equally unwieldy implements.

Did the fae, for that matter, cut their own hair - when they assumed the guise of humans? She could have spent the rest of that Friday trading questions with the gathering, but they had a higher priority.

Two of the younger fairies carried the wooden bench from the barn, placing it on a level span of gravel drive. Mustang was escorted from the front stoop to this seat as the fae formed a circle around her. In almost a ritualistic fashion, the barber - who flashed a gleaming, engraved straight razor - severed portions of hair in a series, each cradled by willing hands as they rotated clockwise.

Not one strand fell to the ground.

Mustang could only be impressed by their diligence.

A wee fae offered her a mirror at the conclusion of the formalities; the shoulder-length trim, albeit uneven, would serve since she seldom did more than tie the mass in a ponytail.

She wished the fae well as they filed into the forest; they chattered profusely about her kindness and generosity. Their leader remained to confirm the deal's satisfactory completion with the requisite bow.

A breakfast of cereal and orange juice fortified her for a day in the saddle. Decidedly cool temperatures for August, and low humidity, made circuits of Boleskine's property in the saddle a joy. She didn't head indoors for lunch until mid-afternoon, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, chips and milk interrupted by the arrival of Billy MacDonough's red Jaguar.

She intercepted him before he mounted the front steps. "Back so soon?"

Hazel orbs widened at the sight of her altered mane. "Did ye get caught in low branches an' ha' t' be cut loose?"

"Oh, hell!" she grumbled under the breath. "No, I..."

"Or 'twas the fae?"

Her chin rose. "Aye." Her head tilted. "You can see them, too?"

"Now an' agin. 'Tis more a wee tremor when they're aboot, causin' mischief."

"Which is why you wondered if I'd be okay as you left?"

"Aye."

"We had some... business..."

He smiled. "I'll nae ask the nature o' it. But I *will* ask if ye will let me... fix what they fouled."

"Huh?"

"Make a proper job o' it."

She snickered. "Are you a barber besides an apprentice carpenter, musician and comedian?"

"I used t' tackle Glenn's unruly mop when we were weans, and our sister's. Nae one ever accused them o' doin' it themselves."

What did she have to lose? And, though he didn't imply as much, she guessed he wouldn't want to be seen in public with such a scruffy individual.

Since childhood, Mustang had dreaded beauty salons, dragged along by her mother, Maggie, as a unofficial contestant in an imaginary competition between the women and their daughters. She never craved the latest trend, seen in campy magazine photos or in posters taped to the walls.

Worst of all: the curlers and sitting beneath the dryer on the day of her cousin's wedding in Helena. She'd been tapped as flower girl, the dress a hideous lavender, shoes two sizes too large.

Settled on a kitchen chair, a tea towel draped around slender shoulders, Billy gently combed her dampened mop and snipped the ends. He hummed a pleasant but unfamiliar tune; she pondered whether that event so long ago had skewed her view of family gatherings and, most specifically, relationships and marriage.

Glancing at the floor, she bit her lip. Quite a pile of auburn scraps lay on the tile - she definitely didn't want a short bob!

Billy felt her stiffen. "Calm yourself, dear. The fae made quite a jumble of his task, but 'twill grow out eventually."

Accompanying her to the bathroom, he nodded his own shaggy grey mane when she beamed her approval of the reflection.

"I'll be dead proud to see you laughing in the front row tomorrow," he whispered.

She sobered. "It's not... dressy or anything?"

He guffawed. "M' shows? 'Tis more a matter o' who wears the most outlandish outfits!"

"Then, jeans and a t-shirt..."

"Brilliant!" He retreated from the bathroom. "Hold on a minute!"

Self-conscious about her new look, Mustang pulled the layers together at the nape of her neck and secured them with a rubber band. Billy reappeared as she meandered along the hall, pulling a broom and dustpan from the utility closet. He unfolded a small bundle - a charcoal colored tank top bearing his photo.

"'Tis from m' last tour - what I thought would be m' last..." he explained.

"Thanks!"

He checked his Rolex wrist watch. "I ha' t' get back t' Glenn's. He's made haggis for dinner."

Mustang quivered.

“I know. I dinnae like it, m’self. Those who object to m’... humor and public comments accuse me o’ nae bein’ a true Scot...” He planted his lips on her forehead. “After the show, we’ll splurge on cheeseburgers and nachos...”

“In the Highlands?” she squeaked.

“A couple from the States drives their caravan t’ fairs throughout England and Scotland, catering t’ those who dinnae like local fare. They make quite a killing in the four months they’re here, then spend the winter in Florida.”

“Inventive.”

“Aye.” He moved toward the front door. “I promise, I’ll nae bother ye agin today.”

Broom over her shoulder, she waved, “You’re no bother.”

Clumps of hair consigned to the trash, Mustang gave the entire mansion a thorough sweep - including three unfurnished bedrooms, rife with spider webs. Four loads of laundry washed, dried and folded, she sank on the cane-backed rocker in the living room with a large glass of milk and sleeve of Oreos.

Why cookies were called biscuits in Scotland, and the American version of biscuits were called scones, she could not fathom. They tasted the same, which was all that counted.

A half-finished chess match failed to capture her attention; she shifted the pieces to their starting positions, tempting her periodic opponents by sliding her king’s pawn two spaces forward.

“You’re too tired to play a worthy game,” claimed Samuel Clemens, cigar belching smoke.

“Hell, I slept for a whole day. I won’t go to bed until midnight, or later.”

His queen’s pawn moved. “Unwise. Tomorrow you’ll be busy...”

“Tomorrow, I’ll *enjoy* myself. No worries, no chaos... just browsing beautiful artwork and crafts, dancing to lively music, laughing...”

“You *should* laugh more...” conceded the American author.

She suspected his motives. “Are you hinting I should keep Billy around, permanently?”

“Not at all. Not at all. Regular contact with ordinary people, though, would open you to... the comical side of life.”

“My regular contacts with ordinary people have nearly destroyed cities, and created piles of corpses, as you’re damned well aware!”

“That could change, with a smidgen of effort.” His bishop took her rook. “Your dealings with Billy are quite the most positive...”

“Accidentally positive.” Her queen crossed six squares diagonally. “Check!”

Clemens studied the configuration..

Mustang reasoned, "If the Skinwalker hadn't factored into this, I would've risked healing Billy's cancer and Parkinson's - even his hearing loss - and brought the media down on him. As it is..."

"He can't exactly tell his doctors he was possessed by an evil spirit."

"Yeah, they'd lock him in the funny farm for that one."

"Then, what will you suggest he do?"

"Nothing. His medical records have already been altered to show him in excellent health for a man his age. If the doctors question their previous diagnoses, they'll discover they were reading the wrong file."

"When did you do this?" Clemens inquired.

"During the haircut."

"You're an imp."

"I may not have proper self-control, but I *am* practical."

He announced, "Checkmate!" and stubbed out his cigar in a metal ashtray on the end table. "That's progress, anyway."

The spectre dissipated with a wish of, "Sweet dreams."

Overnight into Saturday passed far more quickly than her vigil outside the cave two days' prior. Mustang made her bed, hung up her towels from the shower, and tidied the house before feeding and watering the horses. She ate buttered toast mid-morning - just enough to prevent her stomach from growling as they ambled around the park where the fair would be taking place.

One thing she didn't expect, strolling between Billy and Glenn MacDonough: the Glaswegian received significant attention from passersby, greeting him, requesting autographs and photos. She and his younger brother veered toward a row of vendors, plying their trade with looms, paint brushes, and a blacksmith's forge.

Earrings made from sea glass fascinated the Mistress of Boleskine, except her lobes had never been pierced. Pendants of twisted silver and gold appealed to her, but she feared the delicate chains would break as she galloped her horses through the fields.

As she perused a selection of Celtic-designed rings, Billy sidled up behind her. He'd resorted to a broad-brimmed straw hat, pulled low over his forehead, to conceal his identity - for a couple hours, at least.

"I'm sorry about that," he muttered.

She countered, "No apologies necessary. I'm thrilled those fans credit you with brightening their lives, even restoring their health by making them laugh... Phenomenal tributes."

“Thanks.” He freed a band etched with delicate Triskelions from a case and slipped it on her middle left finger. “This is for the bond between you, me and Glenn: an unbreakable link.”

Mustang would have refused the gift; Billy’s firm baritone would brook no argument.

He was right, after all: her connection with Glenn had brought Billy into her orbit, and the men were as close to being friends as her power allowed.

Taking the open-air main stage at 3:00, Billy performed for an audience seated on blankets, folding camp chairs and standing along the top of a hillock. He’d shed his spectacles, changed from a black t-shirt and trousers into a collared shirt that looked like it had been pummeled with multi-colored paintballs and green tartan leggings.

He’d been right about the attire of those in attendance - the array of eye-popping colors would have brightened even the cloudiest day. And, how they roared... waves of mirth washed over her, but the best part was how he reacted to his own stories, even collapsing on the boards at one point, chest heaving from hysterics.

The 90-minute set extended to over three hours. Despite loud-hailer announcements about other entertainers, no one moved. A standing ovation when he wound his last tale to an end, it was almost 8:00 before he rejoined his companions for the promised supper.

On the drive along Loch Ness’ eastern shore, Mustang dozed on Billy’s shoulder in the back seat of Glenn’s Mercedes sedan. They arrived at Boleskine well past midnight, and she groggily surrendered her keys to her escort, who unbolted the steel-reinforced door and ushered her to her bedroom.

Billy kissed the ring, then her brow, and bid her all the best.

Glenn’s pickup trundled up the gravel drive the following Monday afternoon. Mustang had just dismounted from her roan Wench, and shuffled over as the window descended.

“How are ye, milady?”

“Grand, just grand.”

“Billy sends his love. He’s off t’ Australia and New Zealand on a new tour.”

“The doctors gave him a clean bill of health?”

“Oh, aye. They even begged him not t’ sue for mixin’ up his paperwork. He feels quite the young buck again, thanks t’ ye.”

“Me?”

“Aye. He tol’ me that bein’ around ye refreshed his faith in human kindness, and your laughter reinvigorated his soul.”

“I’m... glad.”

“He promised t’ send ye a special remembrance from Adelaide.”

The postman wouldn’t know where to deliver the package; she never received mail. “I’ll keep an eye out for it,” she replied.

Pebbles shot from his rear tires as he steered toward the road. Mustang continued into the mansion, ready for dinner.

She rotated the ring on her finger. The balance of the three spirals struck her: Glenn’s contentment with his construction work and routine schedule, Billy’s enthusiasm for touring and bringing his own particular brand of humor to the globe, and hers...

For once, she had no regrets about violating her vow to avoid people, having actually done something positive with her power. That might be as close as she’d ever get - aside from riding her horses - to true balance.