

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Independent Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Normally, Mustang Duryea didn't mind an occasional trespasser on her property. She couldn't deny the 47 acres surrounding Boleskine House contained beauty unrivaled - diverse flora and fauna - and a peacefulness which soothed her aching soul.

But, this was ridiculous.

She recalled her own high school days in Montana, when science classes would take field trips to local museums, or the choir would be bussed into Helena for an annual competition. A yellow behemoth might have parked on the road beside Loch Ness and turned loose a horde of students; the clamor nearly deafened her.

If they were supposed to be learning the Latin names of indigenous moss or photographing autumn leaves, they weren't being very quiet about it.

In fact, it sounded like quite a ruckus.

Which Mustang opted not to investigate, given the most recent debacle with scores of foreign agents hunting a "secret weapon".

Fortunately, the commotion faded before she finished her chores in the barn. She'd delayed saddling Sarge, resolved not to cross paths with any of the combatants. All she heard during her circuit of the well-worn trails was a heather-scented breeze rustling the trees.

She thought no more about the noisy invasion until a second, then a third, occurred in the course of ten days. Without phone, computer or television, the young woman lacked access to news reports. Her sole sources of information were her neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, and the delivery drivers who brought her bi-weekly supplies of groceries, oats and straw.

Half the time, she didn't comprehend their version of local gossip through the thick Scottish burr.

Better to read excerpts from the Edinburgh or Inverness newspapers, lining the cardboard boxes in which her staples were packed.

Or, not.

She'd heard rumblings over her six years in Scotland about a movement toward independence. Many Scots wished to break from "Great Britain" and reestablish the self-rule they enjoyed in past centuries. They'd been granted a lame-duck legislative body, with the British Parliament in London free to overrule any decisions made by the Edinburgh assembly. Evidently, if columns of type composed by bureaucratic correspondents were accurate, the Scots were quickly tiring of the bones being thrown them by Westminster.

Especially after the shoddy handling of “illegal immigrants” - British Intelligence’s description of the Arab, Chinese and other spies - who had invaded the Loch Ness region that summer.

Street fights were erupting between British loyalists and members of Highland political parties. Two men had been shot in a pub during one such dispute the previous weekend. Constables were on the alert, and rumors were rife about a battalion of army personnel being mobilized to aid with security in larger cities.

Mustang remembered enough of her world history textbook to smell a war on the horizon. The likelihood she could be the catalyst for such a conflagration curdled her blood.

No way could she simply address career government representatives in the capital and assume they’d heed the words of a 24-year-old American. The powers bequeathed to her by her rocket scientist/occultist grandfather, Jack Parsons, would be useless: she wouldn’t alter the weather, and couldn’t change people’s minds.

This quandary - the potential for thousands of lives lost - made her other impulsive blunders pale in comparison.

She sat that September Friday evening in her cane-backed rocker, a fire on the living room grate. Toying with the chess set beside her on the table, she wondered what Erwin Rommel would do to defuse the brewing tensions.

Or, Mahatma Gandhi.

“The majority of people are not inclined to amend their beliefs based on the reasoning of an opposing party, no matter how well argued,” remarked the World War II German general, pushing his black pawn two spaces forward.

The Father of India, seated in a meditative pose on the green sofa, concurred. “Channeling their wrath toward productive ends - rather than destructive rage - is no easy task.”

“Thanks,” Mustang sighed.

Rommel suggested, “Sometimes, it takes one willing ear, with a bit of influence, to generate a peaceful resolution.”

“I don’t know anyone with that sort of influence.”

“You have the ability to draw him to you, as you did the Chinese spy,” commented the bald, emaciated Gandhi.

True, Mustang acknowledged silently. Weeks prior, she had uttered a command to the wind, and Han Feng stood on her doorstep the next morning. “Who?” she queried of her ethereal advisors.

The pair chorused, “The First Minister, definitely.”

Other than periodic complaints about parliamentary activities by Glenn MacDonough, Mustang couldn't claim to be familiar with how that body operated. The First Minister's identity a mystery, she would not put out a general call to nature; the results could be cataclysmic.

She'd hated doing homework for school. Researching a politician's name would be no less onerous. Still, the hour early by pub standards, she could ride into Dores and visit Cullen's before last call. Some judicious eavesdropping might garner the needed information.

Her companions approved, vanishing as she departed the Georgian mansion. Her jaunt into town on the mellow bay mare Crystal proved a leisurely round trip - posters touting both sides of the independence debate were tacked to storefronts and utility poles, some bearing caricatures of the First Minister and his nickname, "Lackey MacTavish".

Pleased the journey didn't involve human interaction, Mustang slept contentedly that night. The Right Honorable Sloan MacTavish had been summoned, and she had no doubt nature would facilitate his travels from Edinburgh to Boleskine.

She couldn't meet him in a Pink Floyd t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. He wouldn't take her seriously. The cream satin blouse, grey slacks and black flats from her last trip to Monte Carlo occupied a corner of her bedroom closet; after cleaning the horses' stalls, she showered and dressed, brushing auburn tresses over her shoulders.

The motorcade accompanying a crest-embossed maroon limousine up the gravel drive stunned Mustang. Uniformed constables held semi-automatic rifles, creating a perimeter around the house while the chauffeur awaited a signal to open the vehicle's rear door.

What emerged could only be described as the penultimate Scotsman. Sloan MacTavish wore a pleated, red tartan kilt, sporran, frilled shirt, jacket and tie, with knee-high socks and highly polished shoes. Approximately sixty, at her best estimate, his full, salt-and-pepper beard more than compensated for the baldness atop his cranium. Blue eyes smoldered with annoyance beneath arched black brows, hardening deep wrinkles which appeared chiseled into his face.

She must not've been what he expected, either. He glanced around, possibly seeking someone older, or another male to consult.

"Ye are Lady Neville?" he inquired, his accent less abrasive than most, tentatively extending his massive hand.

She grasped it; his strength made her cringe. "Welcome."

Leading him through the foyer to the living room, she suddenly realized the furniture she found so cozy wasn't worthy of such an auspicious guest.

Yet, if the likes of Mark Twain and Saint Francis of Assisi were willing to sit on the sofa, why wouldn't the First Minister?

"I received a strange communique from London late yesterday," began MacTavish. "The Queen's private secretary, Hannah Wilson, conveyed a request that we enlist your assistance with the... present difficulties."

Mustang hoped her shock didn't show externally at this announcement. Nature had gone above and beyond in fulfilling her instructions, tapping Glenn MacDonough's cousin, British Intelligence agent Stanley Wilson's wife or daughter.

"Having been unaware of your presence in country, and of your respected reputation, I must apologize for not calling upon ye sooner."

"I... haven't always been successful keeping a low profile," his hostess admitted. "As for my reputation... opinions vary, depending on who you ask."

MacTavish guffawed, "Indeed, I can say the same."

"I confess to admiring the artists' boldness in expressing their views."

"Using their paints is less... tragic than those who are using guns to make their point. Do ye think ye can bring a halt to these atrocities?"

"My... dealings with people don't usually go well. I'm not much of a public speaker, either. I can only encourage you to bring the opposing sides together to discuss non-violent terms..."

"Which we have tried to do. It isn't so much the Scots fomenting discord, but Westminster. They have implied any resolution toward independence passed by our Parliament will be opposed by theirs."

"Then, have a delegation of Scots negotiate with Westminster officials..."

"They refuse such a dialogue. I was hoping, since the Queen has confidence in ye, ye could be our envoy in their halls. I ne'er had the pleasure of your husband's acquaintance, and losing him in his prime... As a member of the House of Lords..."

His feigned sympathy, when there'd never been a "Lord Neville", disheartened her. She didn't want to go into detail about devising a pseudonym to protect her self-imposed isolation. At any rate, the ruse hadn't worked, because more people knew about her power now than before she left the U.S.

She snickered at the mental vision of her standing in the shadow of Big Ben, overlooking the Thames River. In the House chamber, the ceiling cracked above Britain's noblest heads, anger at their childish obstinance getting the best of her.

Both sides were being obstinant, for that matter.

“Lady Elizabeth?” MacTavish prompted.

Jarred from her reverie, she countered, rising, “Do you ride, sir?”

This sudden deviation didn’t faze the man. “Not as often as I’d like. When I moved from Aberdeen, I sold my horses and put my golf clubs in storage. No time for either, these days.”

“There’s always time for riding,” urged Mustang, preceding him outdoors.

The First Minister chose the magnificent Arabian stallion, aborting Mustang’s attempt to saddle it for him. “A wee lass like yourself shouldn’t strain herself,” he admonished.

“Looks can be deceiving, sir,” she sneered, slipping a bit into Pietra’s mouth.

They spent two hours touring the estate, chatting about Scotland’s aspirations. His genuine passion for independence, and preserving Highland culture and heritage somewhat negated her dejection over those trite, sham condolences.

They dismounted atop the grassy hillock where Jack Parsons’ old ritual altar slowly rotted. “I’ve heard of unusual weather phenomena along Loch Ness’ eastern shore,” noted MacTavish, studying the splintered wood. “Ye were lucky to not be here when the lightning struck.”

“In fact, I was.” She displayed her scarred palms.

“Ye were lucky to survive.”

“Scotland will be lucky to survive if we can’t bring the factions together...”

“The idea of a national festival has been bandied around the conference table, but organizing such a vast enterprise would drain our coffers.”

“Might each village hold their own? In small numbers, reaching common ground might be more tenable.”

MacTavish objected, “Most of the fights have started where small numbers congregate - in the pubs or the parks. A harsh word multiplies and fists fly. Even the bairns have joined the fray, pulling classmate’s hair or kicking the teacher’s shin.”

As much as she hated the prospect: “What if the churches joined the effort?”

“Since rumblings of independence surfaced, ministers have taken sides, their congregations realigned according to parish politics. It’s given a whole new meaning to the phrase, ‘Which leg do ye kick wi’.”

“Sad.”

They retraced the route to the corral, with MacTavish thanking Mustang for a delightful respite from his daily grind. “M’head is clearer, and m’heart lighter.”

“Sir, I...” Intent on hammering out a solution to this problem of her own making, she followed him to the tack room, where he grabbed a rag and tin of saddle soap.

His next breath confirmed he’d done with the nation’s business for the day.

“A bonnie young lass like ye should remarry,” the First Minister rambled. “I’m surprised ye don’t have suitors lined up from here to Inverness, asking for your hand. My grandsons would surely be among them, if they ever saw ye.”

“Marriage isn’t... a high priority for me.”

“Ye need a man to do this heavy work.”

“I’ve been handling horses my entire life. I’m used to it.”

Tossing aside the rag, he probed her right bicep. “Indeed, ye come from hearty stock. Good, strong children will ye bear the man who wins your heart.”

Mustang shrank from his touch. She could make allowances for his age and antiquated ideas. Not, however, for his expression.

She’d seen it too often, combined with comments from Lyndon Bixby White, Thomas Burton and their sort about her “shining like a beacon”, arousing a man’s primitive instincts. Still, had she been a gnarled old hag, or borne a hairy wart on a crooked nose, would he have spent more than five minutes with her?

“May I call upon ye again, Lady Elizabeth?” he requested, escorting her toward the idling Mercedes limousine. “My grandsons would relish a chance to ride your fine horses, as well.”

“Bring the clan any day you choose,” Mustang agreed, swallowing her fear of potential disaster. The main reason she despised diplomacy and politics: both required more deliberate strategies than a chess game. Checkmate could not be achieved in one move; necessity dictated ongoing interaction with this Scot to fashion a campaign which would curtail the pandemonium.

What else could she do?

“I’m dining with members for Ullapool this evening. Would tomorrow be too soon?”

“I’d be honored.”

He bowed over her hand before ducking into the government vehicle.

“Oh, hell,” she lamented, rubbing the moist skin on her slacks.

Motorcycles and sedans shot pebbles in all directions as the procession disappeared among the trees. Mustang closed herself inside the house, too tense to eat the rest of the day.

Disaster loomed on the horizon like the setting sun.

## II

“What is it with men, Sam?” the Mistress of Boleskine grumbled as Mark Twain’s cigar smoke spiraled toward the kitchen ceiling. The famous author’s twitching mustache gave her no comfort. “What *is* it?”

“For a man, nothing is more pleasant than an attractive female. She doesn’t have to open her mouth; if she’s slender or buxom, red haired or blonde - especially if she’s young, like you - they forget everything else.”

“That can’t be true. Francis?” Mustang focused on the robed saint from Assisi, resting his chin in his hands on the opposite end of the table.

“I was a vowed celibate, Mustang, yet I cannot count how many of my confessions included temptations of a... carnal nature. Our literary friend is quite correct.”

“So, you’re saying I’m cursed to deal with men this way my entire life?” Twain puffed the Havana-made stogie. “Unless you grow homely as you age.”

“Your inner beauty is timeless, augmenting your external features,” added Francis.

“Inner...” she tittered. “I’m a quivering mass of nerves, afraid what stupid statement I might utter next. This country is on the brink of a war, not unlike the chaos which consumed Northern Ireland years ago. If my impulsiveness contributes to the deaths of innocent people...”

Simultaneously, two sets of fingers entwined with hers.

“Calm yourself, Elizabeth,” said Twain. “Think of it as a chess tournament, and you are the white queen. The black knights, bishops and rooks will endeavor to maneuver you into a trap. You will lead them a merry chase, and still reach the king with a message of peace and justice.”

“Amen,” Francis muttered.

She pulled a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator. “I wish I had as much faith in myself as you have in me.”

“Your visitors on the morrow shall be clay, sculpted by your smile, your kiss,” Twain elucidated. “By now, Sloan MacTavish has inflamed his grandsons with anticipation of your favor. He will give you anything, if you succumb to the charms of just one.”

“I don’t like what I’m hearing.” She gulped half a glass of fluid. “No self-respecting woman would...”

“It’s politics, my dear,” breathed Francis. “If you could climb a hill and shout at the masses, persuading them of their stupidity, none of these machinations would be necessary.”

“I can offer them money. Any amount they desire.”

Twain stubbed his cigar on the pie plate which doubled as an ashtray.

“Possessing such a trophy as yourself means more to most men than cash.”

“Then, damn your sex for being so shallow.”

“That’s it, exactly.”

“What?” she prodded.

“Sex.”

“Oh, hell.”

Respite arrived in the form of Jenna MacTavish, raven-haired, 27-year-old sister/cousin to the First Minister’s three dark-maned, ill-mannered grandsons. While they ogled Mustang in her cable-knit sweater and jeans, rather than select their mounts for the afternoon’s outing, Jenna did her best to put their hostess at ease.

“You have to excuse them,” she stated with more a British inflection.

“They’re like mutts sniffing for a bitch in heat.”

Mustang ventured, “That’s an accepted trait of the gender, from what I hear.”

“Gramps included.”

“Eh?”

“Gram died when I was eight. Gramps has devoted himself to public service since. Playing poker into the wee hours this morning, one particular off-color joke leaves me unable to guarantee he hasn’t designs on you, himself.”

“Joke?”

“The one about what’s worn beneath the kilt.”

The younger woman waited for the punch line.

““Nothing’s worn. Everything’s in perfect working order.””

Neither laughed.

“He’s how old?” Mustang puzzled.

“Turned 67 last month. A very vigorous 67.”

“How so?”

“He could swim the length of Loch Ness, if he had a fancy. Been to America a few times for the Iron Man Triathlon.”

“I thought he preferred golf.”

“That’s a leisure pastime. He runs every day, and bikes to work. Jumps in the swimming pool on his lunch hour.”

The pair shifted their attention back to four casually-attired men, preparing six horses in the corral.

“This could get interesting,” murmured Mustang.

Jenna unhooked the gate latch. “Just don’t let Gramps pin you in tight quarters. You wouldn’t stand a chance against his strength.”

Little did her guests know, Mustang ruminated, he might not stand a chance against *her*.

“How can I convince him my goal is to prevent another war of independence?”

“You’ve already done that.” Jenna swung onto Crystal’s back. “Best if you go to Westminster and convince *them*.”

As if to prove his virility, Sloan MacTavish offered Mustang a leg up onto the Arabian. Then, he mounted Sarge, the sorrel gelding. The younger men fought among themselves for rights to the roans, Pietra, Wench and Molly.

Narrow forest trails weren’t designed for riding more than two abreast, so the MacTavish offspring gradually lost ground on their grandfather and his guide. Breaking into a clearing, the First Minister slapped Sarge’s flank, sending him into a full gallop. The Arabian didn’t need any urging to match the pace.

MacTavish remained erect in the saddle, in British style. Mustang hunkered down to decrease wind resistance, soon passing Scotland’s parliamentary leader.

They drew rein two miles inland, the others specks in the distance. Peering at harvested grain fields beneath a verdant ridge, both grinned with pleasure.

Until Mustang stiffened.

“What is it, my dear?” asked MacTavish.

“Do you smell that?”

He raised his nose in the air. “Smoke.”

Nudging their horses slowly forward, they passed a stand of poplar trees, allowing them to view the devastation further along the valley. Three modest farm houses were engulfed, crews struggling to contain the blaze.

Nearing the scene, MacTavish leapt off Sarge to aid firefighters battling an uncooperative hose connection on their water tanker. Displaced families huddled together near a dirt road, wrapped in blankets. Mustang wanted to give them solace; their worldly possessions reduced to ash, she could do nothing.

Except protect the other dwellings. She called upon the flames to be extinguished and, abruptly, the heat dispersed, leaving behind charred beams and melted pipes.

When gunshots rang from above, she rushed the children behind a stone wall. Adults scattered or lay prone. Sloan MacTavish bellowed to the hills, “Bloody fools!”

And took a bullet in the left shoulder.

He slammed to the muddy ground, clutching the wound.

Emergency personnel converged, using thick stacks of gauze to soak up the blood. A squirting crimson fountain, they couldn’t apply pressure adequate to stave off the flow.

The projectile might not have hit his heart, but it did clip the carotid artery, Mustang learned. Consensus among the trained medics: he wouldn’t survive a trip to hospital.

My fault, again, she chided herself. Shoving between two soot-stained bodies, she squatted beside MacTavish, whose lips already showed hints of blue. The whispered, “If I do this, you’d better behave yourself,” probably wouldn’t register in his semi-conscious state; it never hurt to try.

Misshapen metal popped into her hand, and flesh knitted without a scar.

MacTavish lurched upright, wide-eyed and coughing. Those closest recoiled, unaccustomed to miracles.

Mustang straightened, slightly disconcerted by the blood staining her sweater. The bullet dissolved into its base elements, mingling with the soil beneath her feet.

Once the First Minister recovered his composure, two firefighters loaded him on a gurney, pleading to transport him to a medical facility for examination.

“I’m fine,” he affirmed. “A bee sting, nothing more. Tend these poor folk, and find the cause of this tragedy.”

The fire chief responded, “Arson, unmistakably, sir.”

“To what end?”

“This settlement is one of many which has formed to prove Scotland can be independent and self-sufficient. We suspect British loyalists...”

MacTavish whirled toward Mustang. “Do ye see why we must petition Westminster?”

She shrugged. Dragging more politicians into the mix would mean more delays in achieving a viable solution.

Trotting toward Boleskine, she wished conflicts could be resolved as easily as checkmating one’s opponent, or conceding to the player with the most chips after a night of poker.

A smile parted her lips,

MacTavish noticed, intrigued. “Ye have an idea?”

“After dinner, how ‘bout some poker?” she suggested.

“A short game. I’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”

He’d be tired for that early morning, she knew, when the clock on the dining room sideboard chimed 11:00 PM.

Over a meal of charbroiled steaks, baked potatoes, corn on the cob, salad and chocolate cake, the MacTavish clan had slammed shot after shot of Jameson Special Reserve whiskey. Jenna kept her brother and cousins from spoiling the mood with their scowls, peeved by their grandfather’s domination of the hostess.

The young men’s chins drooped - as did Jenna’s - over their cards. “Shameful they can’t hold their liquor,” the senior MacTavish drawled, tipsy himself. “Two, please.”

Mustang dealt the cards, taking three to augment a pair of queens she hoped would score her the sizeable pot.

No such luck. MacTavish raised her 100 pounds, she called, and he laid down a straight flush.

He stacked his chips neatly, leaving the cards scattered on the table.

“One more?” Mustang hinted.

“If the boys were awake, yes. Two people isn’t enough of a challenge.”

“True.”

He slid his chair closer to hers. “We could draw randomly from the deck. Low card answers any question put forth.”

“That kind of recklessness might cost you your political career, if the wrong sort overheard.”

“I’ve been waiting to submit my resignation to the party since January. I can’t leave in the midst of these troubles...”

Flipping the ace of spades atop her last blue chip, she smirked. “Beat that.”

He couldn’t with the ten of clubs. “Ask your worst.”

She had no desire to know his secrets - she could guess those. “Why are you called Lackey MacTavish?”

“That’s no secret. My rivals have repeatedly criticized me for knuckling under to Westminster, for being a British lackey. Ask another.”

“Why’d you bring the boys out here today?”

“They’re of a marrying age, and a match between our families would be advantageous. I wanted ye to have the best selection to make your choice.”

“Yet, you kept me away from them.”

“Seeing ye together, I realized they aren’t worthy to shine your boots.”

He tugged the king of hearts free of the pile. She countered with a two of diamonds.

“I wasn’t stung by a bee out there, was I?” he pressed.

She twirled a lock of red hair around her trembling finger. “No.”

“I... sensed death’s icy claw caressing my cheek, and saw... angels, before being jolted awake by a lightning bolt.”

Mustang groaned.

“What, Lady Elizabeth?”

“My trademark.”

He studied her scars. “Ye... saved my life?”

“Make it worth saving.” She collected cake plates and forks, carrying them into the kitchen. He followed with his coffee mug and empty shot glasses.

“You’d best collect your grandchildren and get rolling,” she advised, running water in the sink. “It’s a long drive to Edinburgh.”

He edged nearer as she squirted dish soap into the stream. “My second son lives in Carrbridge, less than an hour east.”

“You’re keeping him up awfully late.”

“He’s a bobby on night patrol. Won’t miss us one whit.”

She dodged his grip, retrieving pots from the stove.

“Do ye object so to an older man’s attention?”

“A scandal now would detract from my usefulness, and your ability to bring the country together.”

“It’s no scandal if no one knows.”

Her best sauce pan clattered on the floor. Hazel orbs burned with fury. “Typical politician!” she stormed. “Holding yourself above the law, and when the media publicizes your antics, you’ll fall like a stone off a cliff.”

“I’m a man, Elizabeth. I’ve been without a wife these twenty years.”

“With your choice of women.”

He sank on a wooden chair at the dinette table. Frustration intensified his Scottish burr. “Aye, I’ve lost count o’ the ladies who’ve offered themselves in exchange for... various and sundry. Me opponents - in the party and out - ha’ paid higher class prostitutes t’ attend fund raisers and dinners, hopin’ t’ compromise the integrity I’ve upheld throughout me career. Jenna mocked me in the car driving here today, because ye could be me granddaughter, as well. The inner spark that lights ye... I can’t sleep for how ‘tis eatin’ at me soul.”

Mustang bit her tongue. That damned glow!

Eyes downcast, countenance forlorn, Sloan MacTavish’s angular frame slumped, despondent. Could it be a ploy to garner her sympathy, part of the

arsenal Mark Twain purported men used to lure the object of their affections between the sheets?

She loaded utensils in the sudsy water. "Sloan, I..."

That declaration of her own integrity was punctuated by a mild yet distinct rumbling. Scrutinizing him from beyond arms' length, she chuckled at the snoring figure.

Whether or not her inner spark ate at his soul, he undeniably slept.

So did his grandchildren.

They'd be aching come daybreak for lack of proper beds.

A First Minister approaching his seventies, however, with grave obligations weighing on his shoulders, couldn't afford not to rest comfortably. Bolstering her own strength with a call to nature, she limped him to the guest bedroom, dumping him on the king-sized mattress and draping a quilt over his torso. She went no further than removing his sneakers and argyle socks.

She kept vigil in the living room until sunrise, in case any of the MacTavishes awoke to unfamiliar surroundings. A synthesized version of the Anvil Chorus triggered a chain reaction, when the younger group scrambled to locate their cell phones.

Groggy and hung over, the four lounged at the dining room table, presuming Mustang would serve them breakfast. She supplied them with aspirin and orange juice, then chased them out into the crisp Monday air.

She checked on the First Minister a short while later. He'd knocked off his covers, and his toes were cold to her touch. When she shook his arm, he uttered a series of undiplomatic expletives.

"It's gone nine o'clock, Sloan," she informed him.

Blue eyes shot open. "I forgot to set my alarm..."

"There was no alarm to set."

"Elizabeth!" He rolled to his right. "What happened?"

"You passed out. A low tolerance for whiskey must run in the family."

"Such ridicule is unwarranted, woman! Ye have ruined me!"

That accusation lit a different spark in Mustang's gut. "I've done nothing."

"Only kept sixteen truculent MPs waiting, when I'd planned to sway them to our cause..."

"Don't blame me because you chose to act like a schoolboy with a crush."

MacTavish rotated his head, and his neck cracked audibly; Mustang shuddered. His other joints' apparent limited range of motion agitated him, and he reached for her. "Give me a hand, then."

She never expected he'd tug her onto the bed and practically smother her with ardent kisses.

### III

Unlike her reaction to Thomas Burton's intoxicated advances - shattering fixtures and fracturing walls - or Jim Neville's closeness in a Des Moines garden, Mustang's temper flared.

Before an innate electrical charge could shock Sloan MacTavish into retreat, his grandchildren intervened.

"Gramps!" Jenna shrieked from the doorway.

Her brother snarled, "Dirty old bastard!"

Had he been sixteen, the First Minister couldn't have righted himself any faster. Smoothing his shirt and trousers, his face shown red before his heirs' frowns.

"We're late for work!" they admonished, along with less appealing remonstrances.

He rebuffed them. "Go on wi' ye. I'll be there in two shakes."

They didn't move. He'd have to make his apologies publicly, which politicians despised.

Contritely, he assisted Mustang off the mattress. "I... pray my conduct won't stop you from imploring the House of Lords at Westminster to give us what we seek."

He still believed her imaginary husband gave her an "in" with the London crowd. Disinclined to confess the truth in the presence of hostile bystanders, she thrust his shoes at him and left the room.

Daniel MacTavish, the oldest grandson - if Mustang recalled their introduction - pursued her into the foyer. "Are you so offended, I don't have a chance in hell to win your heart?"

She spun in her tracks. "Would you want to risk courting me, knowing your grandfather has... has..."

"It *would* make family holidays awkward."

"And I'll not be passed from one MacTavish to another like hand-me-down jeans!"

The clan filed out like errant toddlers caught in the forbidden cookie jar. Jenna snorted, "I tried. I really did."

The Mistress of Boleskine managed a weak grin. "I know. I appreciate it, really."

The First Minister loomed above her seconds later, his composure seemingly intact. “If it’s any consolation, my wife thought me quite a cad when we first met.”

“In four decades, you haven’t changed?”

“Pretty lasses bring out the beast in me.”

“Tame that beast, Sloan. Speaking from experience, you’ll end up an absolute wreck if you don’t.”

He squinted at her. “What experience could you...”

“The same experience which may give me insight to stop the violence.”

Meaning, consulting Mahatma Gandhi over the chess board that evening.

The dhoti-clad elder took a break from the contest to warm himself by the fire. “There were native-born Indians who sided with the British against us,” he recounted. “Then, of course, the Muslims and the Hindus were at odds with each other. It’s a matter of appealing to the basic desires of every human being: freedom from oppression, freedom of religion, freedom to live as one chooses.”

“One man’s oppression is another’s security blanket,” commented Mustang.

“Crude phrasing, but accurate. Those who opt not to take responsibility for themselves, their families, their country, care little if their neighbors endure discrimination or injustice.”

“How did you change their minds?”

“By showing them how all Indians suffered under British rule.”

Mustang speculated, “Can the same be said for Scotland?”

“The same can be said of any nation lacking self-determination.”

“Getting that message across might be difficult.”

“You have the technology I lacked.”

“Not... here.”

“The BBC has crews covering civil unrest throughout the country. Diverting a satellite feed is within the scope of your... talents, isn’t it?”

“I’ve... never tried.”

“You must also bring the leaders of the Scottish political parties together, on air, in support of the initiative.”

“I... can’t. Not after what Sloan MacTavish...”

Gandhi deftly moved his rook four squares left. “Sam Clemens misled you. Men dealing with adversity have the will to forget their... primitive impulses and concentrate on the greater good. MacTavish won’t forget his feelings for you; neither will he succumb to them with so much at stake.”

“That’s what I thought this morning!”

“The stakes are greater with the passing of the day.”

“How so?”

“Reports of a bomb targeting Edinburgh’s Parliament are meriting worldwide coverage.”

“Oh, hell.” Mustang tipped her king in resignation.

For a second night, she didn’t close an eye.

Besides Sloan MacTavish, she had no idea if Scotland had a two-party system, like the U.S., what those parties were called, nor who ran them. Scraps of newspaper from recent deliveries might provide some information. The rest...

Ringing the First Minister from a public call box at the Dores Inn, her voice cracked when he snapped, “Hello?”

“You... weren’t hurt in yesterday’s explosion?” she stammered.

“Thanks to ye, I was in Inverness, waiting for my flight.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or sincere.

“Were many people hurt?”

“One is too many.”

“I agree.”

“When do ye leave for Westminster?”

“I’m not. I... there’s another way.”

“I don’t see...”

“Give me a list of party leaders, and the districts they represent.”

He ticked off the names, adding, “What do ye intend...”

“Trust me.”

Her receiver was half-way to the hook when he uttered, in a gentle baritone, “With all my heart.”

The words registered as gibberish to her ears.

Matching cities on the map encased in a tourist information display, she sank onto a brightly painted bench. The men and women were scattered the length and breadth of Scotland; corralling them in one place would be as easy as rounding up wild horses in the spring.

Unless they were already in one place: Parliament.

She plucked the Edinburgh daily from a trash bin on the street corner. In the explosion’s wake, members of that august body were packing their belongings to prepare for smoke damage restoration.

One obstacle surmounted. The next would be getting them to agree about even the most puerile topic on screen.

Violence, death and property damage weren't puerile topics. Anyone who spoke in favor of such tactics shouldn't hold public office - or so Mustang believed.

Not technically savvy, the young woman debated how nature might duplicate the equipment to broadcast live images to households across Scotland. Beyond the electricity - or battery packs - used to power such devices, she hadn't a clue.

Did the limits of her own knowledge limit her command of the elements? she mused. Fire's ability to sustain itself by burning fuel and feeding on oxygen - a lesson from grade school science class - never occurred to her on a conscious level when igniting trees in the early days sampling her power. Dousing those same flames with spontaneous rainfall, *sans* clouds, involved condensation of humidity in the atmosphere, like squeezing a saturated sponge.

Lighting a street in Boise while her cousin Rachel watched involved basic understanding of electrical current - flipping a switch on a live wire. Healing flesh or reconfiguring clothing both integrated the movement of atoms and cells...

Which, with concerted effort, might enable her to achieve this feat.

She'd have to test the theory first. Returning to the Dores Inn, she detoured from the lobby into the pub, practically deserted. At the bar, she ordered grape soda. Sipping the chilled liquid through a straw, the barman didn't hear her mutter, "Go live, now."

The inn's security camera, mounted in the far corner, zoomed on her image, feeding it through an orbiting satellite to the flat screen television suspended from the ceiling, preempting a soccer match.

"Hey!" other patrons complained.

No matter which channel the manager tried, and even when he disconnected the cable wires, the picture didn't change. Satisfied, she ended the test, laying a hundred pound note on the bar.

"Get the set fixed," she mumbled.

The barman could only stare.

Strolling toward Boleskine House, Mustang surmised the Scottish Parliament had cameras in the building - especially since a cable network and internet website were dedicated to broadcasting weekly sessions.

Combining a signal from home and the First Minister's office, in a sort of split-screen format, would give the presentation a professional aspect, capturing viewers' interest.

Mustang moved the bathroom mirror; its surface would double as camera lens. With the living room mantle and crackling logs in the background, she recalled the “Fireside Chats” of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The sun dipped in the west; Scots headed home from their day’s labor. They’d be switching on the evening news before dinner.

Most likely, the Scottish MPs would pause in their cleaning to do likewise.

She initiated a direct connection. “Sloan, are you there?”

“Aye. Who’s speaking?”

“Check your telly.”

He gulped, “It’s not on... yet, I can see ye. Elizabeth?”

“Assemble the party leaders. We’re addressing the nation in ten minutes.”

“Pardon?”

“Tell them it’s a plea to stop the violence. If any of them refuse to take part, tell them their heads will explode.”

“Eh?”

“Long story. Unpleasant consequences. Hurry.”

By blanking out the mirror, she knew the connection had been severed. She shivered unexpectedly, tempted to make a giant mug of hot cocoa.

Then, her stomach grumbled. She hadn’t eaten since finishing off the chocolate cake for breakfast.

She shed her dusty jeans and gold sweatshirt for a light blue, lace cuffed blouse and navy slacks. Untangling her auburn tresses almost broke the brush, then she used her toothbrush to ensure no cake crumbs were wedged between her molars.

Reestablishing contact with MacTavish’s office exposed her to contentious babbling by expensively suited officials. Had they been speaking Polish, Mustang would’ve been able to comprehend them; their native dialect eluded her, beyond mention of the six chairs positioned in a semi-circle around the Minister’s desk.

“Enough!” Mustang shouted.

Astonished faces froze in mid-sentence.

“Plant your cans on the nearest horizontal surface and act like you care about your homeland.”

They might’ve been complying with a divine edict, so obediently did they settle themselves.

“Each of you, in turn, must urge every Scot, regardless of political leanings, to cease any destructive demonstrations for or against independence. Catching the culprits who shot Mr. MacTavish, or bombed Parliament, isn’t...” She halted, too late.

All heads had swiveled toward the First Minister, who rubbed his left shoulder, fighting to resurrect a memory.

“We’ll go into that after you’ve done your duty,” Mustang continued. “You know better than I how to do this, especially you who’ve held office most of your lives. We go in three, two, one...”

The red light on the security camera blinked rapidly, and every household in possession of a television noted the preemption of regular programming. As with any public appeal, those who most needed to hear the message probably spurned the interruption.

If such were the case, the effort might be in vain. For that reason, Mustang said little herself once the MPs were introduced.

MacTavish concluded the transmission with this fact: “The influx of British troops will not be reversed until we proud Scots prove to Westminster we can responsibly and maturely handle our differences and determine our future, without resorting to tantrums like wee bairns. It won’t happen tomorrow, or within the month. It may be years. By our patience and conviction, we will give our descendants the greatest gift possible: a Scotland governed *by Scots for Scots*.”

News anchors agape at their desks attributed to thirty seconds of silence when the hijacked satellites resumed normal operations. Church bells tolling in support of the initiative were a delightful plus, echoing around Loch Ness and throughout the Highlands.

Mustang sat on the corral fence, reveling in the variety of tones.

Five extravagant floral arrangements were delivered on Wednesday, from each party head. Sloan MacTavish brought his tribute Friday afternoon - a dozen long-stemmed red roses accented with baby’s breath and ferns.

Having heard the limousine approach on the drive, Mustang answered the knock hesitantly. “I... didn’t think I’d be seeing you,” she greeted as he crossed the threshold.

“Our national heroine deserves this modest token of the country’s esteem,” he said in an authoritative baritone.

“I’m not...”

He laid the bouquet on the living room coffee table. “In the past 72 hours, not a whiff of violence has occurred within our borders. We have ye to thank for that.”

“I engineered a broadcast...”

“That eight minutes of cooperation between otherwise adversarial individuals enlightened all of us. A new road lies ahead for the Scottish Parliament.”

“And, you’re celebrating?” she queried, indicating the tuxedo jacket and bow tie adding greater formality to his red tartan kilt.

“There’s an equinox festival and ball in Inverness tonight. I’d be honored if ye would...”

She cut him short. “No.” As an afterthought, “Thank you.”

Contemplating glowing coals on the fireplace grate, MacTavish might have been mustering the courage to continue the conversation, though he didn’t speak.

“Would you like a drink?” Mustang offered, to dispel the awkward silence.

“I... can nae stay.” He marched to the front door, laying his hand on the knob. He kept his eyes averted, as if the words were being ripped against his will from the depths of his soul. “If ye bid me stay, I would gladly settle in with pipe and slippers, and show ye the love of which your other suitors are incapable.”

“Other what?”

“Suitors. One with a penchant for Cuban cigars.”

Twain!

“He’s... an old friend,” supplied Mustang, detecting the stale odor.

“He could find himself in legal straits, dealing in contraband.”

Mustang chortled to herself. Only she would be privy to the knowledge Samuel Clemens had acquired his cigars long before an embargo was placed on imports from the communist island nation. “You would stoop to blackmail?”

MacTavish’s bravado vanished. His chin sagged. “I would stoop to groveling if it merited me a single smile.”

Here we go again! the young woman moaned inwardly. Still, how could he fathom the adverse effects her emotional upheaval would cause? “I’ll not go down in history as the woman who triggered the First Minister’s fatal heart attack.”

“I’m as fit as any man half my age.”

“Physically. Nine times out of ten, it’s a psychological shock which overloads the nervous system...”

“I’m willing to take the risk.”

## IV

“Mr. Clemens!” Mustang hissed.

A ring of pungent tobacco smoke drifted from the kitchen with that unique twang. “To a man, pursuing a woman is like climbing Mount Everest. Until he possesses what was thought unattainable, he doesn’t quit.”

“But, Gandhiji...”

“That wise gentleman did not err. A man may be temporarily sidetracked by practical matters of great import. When his work is done, he corrects to his original course.”

“Oh, hell.”

“The only redeeming factor, in this instance,” Twain proclaimed, “is that a man swiftly moves on to his next conquest after satisfying his ego.”

“Gee, thanks.”

MacTavish pivoted on his polished loafers. “Who are ye talking to?”

“I...” Mustang sighed, twining her fingers between the First Minister’s long, thick digits. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Startled by the gesture, MacTavish permitted himself to be hustled from the house into the cool autumn air. They admired the horses, grazing in the corral. He proposed, “Would ye not rather ride?”

“If you’re in the mood for a race...”

He declined, citing his kilt as a hindrance. “Ye should breed that fine Arabian.”

“My neighbor, who acquired him for me, has said the same. It’s more a business transaction, though. Lawyers dictating terms, contracts to sign in triplicate...”

“His foals could qualify for the Derby.” MacTavish stroked the thoroughbred’s neck wistfully. “I sent one of mine to the Irish Derby, after my wife passed.”

“Too bad she wasn’t there to see.”

“Ach, she hated the horses. That’s why I kept mum about the plan during her illness. It’s not like I got rich from the winning, either. Came in second to last.”

“That kind of racing is cruel,” commented Mustang. “So many noble animals have died or had to be put down from injuries...”

“Aye. ‘Tis regrettable.”

She led him toward the hill, beneath a canopy of vividly colored trees. Thus shaded, his visage appeared more youthful, offset by his baldness. Photos of her paternal grandfather, who died before she was born, came to mind.

Unlike her four historic advisors, she’d never manifested Noel Duryea to seek his counsel. Nor her maternal grandmother, whose untimely death had instigated this oft-tumultuous adventure.

Jack Parsons’ bones rested in an Inverness churchyard; she relied on a series of tattered journals for his slant on the truth.

A dysfunctional upbringing in Montana had left her wary of family ties. And, plagued with an untrained tongue.

“Sloan,” she murmured.

“Aye, lass.”

“I’m sorry for letting slip about you being shot.”

“My colleagues were flustered by the news, but their concern facilitated a willingness to set aside their animosity.” He cradled her hand in his. “I’m not quite sure why I’m alive. The fire chief rang me yesterday, inquiring if I’d been checked by my personal physician after losing so much blood.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I’ve ne’er felt better.”

Best to be frank. “Having me in your life will destroy that sentiment.”

“Ne’er!”

“I’m worse than an F5 hurricane, devastating everyone in my path. And, if I get angry, the horrible things I do...”

“There is no call for ye to feign humility. Ye are brilliant and beautiful...”

“So are roses, and they have thorns.”

“Yet, they are the most desired flower in the world.”

An apt analogy. Who hadn’t, over the course of years, desired her power?

“The head often overrules the heart,” noted MacTavish, emerging into the sunlit clearing. “Stifling your heart’s yearnings leaves a lingering ache and abiding misery.”

“It’s you who’ll be miserable, if I don’t...”

“Just because your late husband...”

The exchange was solving nothing, Mustang decided. His awareness of the risk to his health absolved her, to a degree, of any repercussions.

Tracing a crag down MacTavish’s cheek, she silently cursed Jack Parsons. How much simpler her existence would be if she could love this man - any man - without worrying whether buildings would collapse or a hole wrought by an emotion-induced earthquake would swallow them.

MacTavish dabbed a tear from her eye. “Do I displease ye so? My Danny would surely switch places with me, if ye...”

“I’m displeased with myself,” Mustang countered. “This is why I’ve isolated myself and shunned visitors...”

“Ah, lass, dinnae waste yourself on the horses.”

She’d anticipated the kiss, less rough than when they’d grappled on the guest room bed. Efforts to numb her reaction were futile. Practiced lips far surpassed the fumbblings of younger men, and every inch of her skin tingled.

The ground did more than tingle. MacTavish's embrace around Mustang's waist hardened to a protective grip as trees were uprooted and plumes of hot gas shot from cracks in subsurface rocks.

"God's holy trousers..." he gasped. "We're going to die..."

Mustang wrested her face from where he shielded it with his chest. Unyielding hands lowered his head so their eyes met. "Now do you understand?" she shouted.

"I... think I do."

"Be off with you, then. And step lively."

Sloan MacTavish, First Minister of the Scottish Parliament, dallied long enough to brush his mouth across hers - a catastrophic blunder.

She instinctively grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt, holding him immobile. He didn't resist, enraptured by the current pulsating in his veins.

The sky darkened, clouds forming from nowhere. Rain poured in wind-whipped sheets upon the hillside, drenching the couple. Lightning split an ancient oak, thunder rumbled, and still the earth trembled beneath their feet.

The difference between MacTavish and Thomas Burton, perhaps the only man who could boast equal experience: the Welsh actor had always initiated contact in a drunken stupor, his aggressiveness compelling her to swiftly break free and reduce any collateral damage.

At this moment, she never wanted to let MacTavish go.

They pitched sideways, caught by a sudden gust. So soft their impact, they might've landed on a stack of pillows, not rising for fifteen minutes, when their strength had been totally spent.

As Mustang slowed her respiration, the storm eased, tremors ceased and fissures mended. Mud coated them, head to toe; they didn't care.

"You'll never make it to your festival," the Mistress of Boleskine chuckled, en route to the house.

MacTavish beamed. "I dinnae give a damn. I'm trying to process that... that..."

"Answer me one question."

"Anything."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Beyond description. Why?"

She unlocked the deadbolt. "Because, once we get inside, any repeat of... well, we'd be buried under a ton of shingles."

"I've ne'er known the like, my dearest. 'Tis as if nature itself were..."

"Precisely."

She loaned MacTavish an oversized robe and, while he showered, she restored his clothing to pristine condition. Her shirt, jeans, socks, sneakers and undergarments were tossed in the laundry, where she was changing when she heard an agonized cry.

“I’ve killed another one,” came the unbidden admonition.

Sloan MacTavish stood hunched over the bathroom sink, every muscle constricted in pain. Labored breaths indicated a heart attack in progress - as she’d predicted.

“Do.. something,” he bumbled.

“If you want to live, you can only do so without me. Promise.”

He jerked a nod.

She implemented the healing without laying a hand upon him. A deep inhalation calmed his fears, and his body relaxed.

Lowering himself onto the closed toilet, he smirked. “Hell of a way to get me out of your hair, lass.”

“It’s... not intentional, I swear.” She retreated, sobbing.

He chased her along the corridor, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. “I was kidding, Elizabeth. As much as the memory of this day will delight - and confound - me for years to come, for us to be together, ye would have to move to Edinburgh, or I here. We belong where we are.”

“Thank you, Sloan. Few men would be so... wise.”

“I suspect you’ve dealt with them in your own... special way.”

“Some of them have died.”

“Thanks for not counting me among that lot.”

By the time he dressed and bid her farewell, the sun had set across Loch Ness. She recommended he not exert himself at the ball; he slid into the maroon limousine with a cheery wave.

Trimming the rose stems and arranging them in a crystal vase, she studied the thorns. They might’ve been piercing her heart. She wanted to simultaneously hug the blossoms and crush them, so desperately did she long to be rid of her affinity with nature.

Placing the vase among the other flowers, she forced herself to concentrate on chores. Carrying a basket of clothes to hang outdoors, she decided to rewash the load upon finding dirt ground into the fabric.

The horses wanted exercise, brushing and affection - why couldn’t people be like animals?

Every morning for the next week, Mustang rode into Dores at dawn to buy a copy of the Edinburgh newspaper. In small doses, she hadn’t realized the style of

writing differed so extensively from American journalism. It took hours to wade through the odd tidbits and advertising.

She caught up on more current events than she had since her arrival in Scotland, especially since no column space was devoted to independence-related violence.

One success to offset her many failures.

Much as she would've liked to forget Sloan MacTavish, he managed to have his photo somewhere in each edition. She pacified herself with the knowledge he'd not reneged on his promise. Once the roses wilted, no trace of him remained at Boleskine.

She avoided the hill where she'd battled foreign spies and stood before an altar of Jack Parsons' creation. Somehow, the smell of MacTavish's wet woolen kilt subverted the scent of heather, knotting her stomach.

A larger knot formed when Daniel MacTavish knocked the following Saturday. It had been raining since midnight, and Mustang was in no mood for stalled cars or lost tourists. Sloan's grandson - an immature version of the First Minister, complete with receding hairline - shook off his umbrella and entered the foyer sedately, a lawyer delivering a summons.

Or, was his cousin the lawyer? Mustang pondered.

"Jenna threatened to expose me for cheating at poker if I didn't come," he replied to her cautious greeting.

"Your family quarrels aren't..."

He steamed, "Oh, don't play innocent, Lady Elizabeth. You've been the reason for incessant rounds of arguments this past fortnight. For Gramps to make such a fool of himself..."

"Humans can make fools of themselves at any age. Some drink to excess, some break bones playing sports. Others..." Hazel orbs rolled toward the ceiling.

"His own secretary had waited twelve years for him to propose!"

"Then, she was a fool, too." she signaled him into the living room, flopping onto the cane-backed rocker. "How many women have you..."

Daniel bristled. "None of your business."

"Why be ashamed of being a man? I have it on good authority it's... normal. Not so much, cheating at poker."

"If I didn't, Gramps would be unbeatable." He swallowed nervously. "Would've been unbeatable."

A carved black knight snapped in half on the chess board. "I've killed another one."

"Jenna wanted you to hear from family, not the media."

“How?”

“Ever since the equinox festival, he’s been... unusually jovial and energetic. We thought he might’ve gotten a good report from his doctor. He dug out his old golf clubs, and joined three other MPs on the links this morning, ignoring the heavy rains. Told his partner the weather reminded him of the best day of his life.”

Mustang bit back a smile.

Chin bowed, Daniel didn’t notice. “On the fifteenth tee, lightning struck his club. An ambulance rushed him to hospital, but he died before they could revive him.”

“Oh, hell.”

“Why did you choose him over me?” he wailed. “I could’ve given you the world...”

“I don’t want the world, and I didn’t choose him. My... situation doesn’t allow me to choose...”

“You’re a wealthy widow with the body of a goddess. What do you mean, you can’t choose?”

“If you wish to call me a goddess, so be it.” She took a poker to the dying logs in the fireplace. “Like a goddess, circumstances require me to remain aloof, or wreak havoc.”

“Is this the havoc you’ve wreaked on our clan?”

“No, Danny. No. I warned Sloan of the danger; he must’ve been crossbred with a mule to be that stubborn.”

Fury abated, he exhaled loudly. “‘Tis a trait we all share.”

“I’m that sorry for the loss.” She sat beside him on the sofa. “Scottish independence might’ve become a reality, had he lived.”

As for her own independence: she would have to strictly guard it, vociferously avoiding even polite association with the locals.

She ushered Daniel MacTavish to the door. She expected him to attempt a hug, being first to extend her hand.

He clasped it with a grunt. “Had things progressed differently, I might’ve had to call you Grandma.”

“Not in a million years.”

“Isn’t clan MacTavish socially worthy of the Nevilles?”

“Clan MacTavish doesn’t need an untamed tiger threatening their peace.”

Once his Smart car bounced past the trees, she traversed the gravel drive to the barn. The love of a good horse might be her sole source of affection going forward.

Molly nickered playfully as she munched her oats.

No complications with these fabulous animals.  
Mustang could be content with that.