

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Highland Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

Not an auspicious start to a journey, being stuck in the Bronx.

The Greyhound bus which had wound its way that Friday from Springfield, Massachusetts through Danbury and Waterford, Connecticut, along Interstate 687 toward John F. Kennedy International Airport on the south edge of Queens stalled when a power black-out paralyzed the entire eastern seaboard. Trapped by immovable highway gridlock, the driver threw open the door and ordered his passengers onto the pavement.

“I won’t be responsible for anyone getting heat stroke or having a heart attack,” the man growled. “You’re on your own.”

Like those in vehicles on all sides, the primary challenge for the stranded was finding a place to stay cool. Every inch of shade in the city was occupied; every window which could be opened in apartment buildings and businesses was thrown wide.

Looting commenced within an hour, thieves concentrating on cool drinks quickly warming in refrigerated cases of convenience stores and supermarkets. Other items disappeared, too: electronics, cash pried from inoperable computer registers, jewelry unprotected by disabled alarms.

So, Mustang had wandered the streets, backpack stuffed with clothes and toiletries slung over her shoulder. The teen searched nearby faces for any sign of kindness and found none. She’d slept huddled in doorways, uncomfortable the first night due to high humidity, soaked by rain the second. She tried to make her way south to the airport, but had to admit on the third day she was quite lost.

White t-shirt grey from sweat, jeans clinging uncomfortably to her legs and a frayed bandanna tying tangled auburn locks in a make-shift pony-tail, she much rather would have turned homeward. Home, though, was Montana, where she’d earned her nickname by taming the wild horses her father’s ranch hands corralled in the hills.

“You’re their kindred spirit,” the crew chief observed when she was only eleven. “You must have the heart of a mustang to relate so well to them.”

She certainly preferred to roam the sprawling 2,000 acres her family had owned for five generations. That’s where truant officers hunted her when she skipped school, which she’d done quite a bit in recent years. She felt she could learn more from nature than from books.

In desperation, her parents had sent her to Springfield, hoping a year living with her maternal grandmother would calm her rebellious spirit and help her focus on practical matters.

That elderly woman died just two weeks into the visit, leaving Mustang to mull over her cryptic last words, a passport and an airline ticket tucked in a manila envelope.

“Help him finish his work,” the cancer-ridden throat had rasped, before exhaling remnants of a last, shallow breath.

A British Airlines ticket - one way from New York City to Inverness, Scotland, via Edinburgh - and official papers displayed the teen’s given name, Elizabeth Duryea. Red ink highlighted the route from Inverness to Loch Ness on a small map, with the words “Boleskine House” printed in block letters.

Mysteries weren’t Mustang’s cup of tea, and she’d have ignored the directive, if the ticket hadn’t meant her freedom. Thousand of miles away, her parents could not intervene.

Or, so she thought, until the power grid crashed.

If she remained in New York, the authorities would give up their search for her after a few weeks. She had little money, however, and feared being surrounded by millions of unfriendly people. Something awaited her in Scotland, and Mustang sensed missing this chance might have enduring repercussions.

The third night, she slept stretched across three warped seats in the deserted Yankee Stadium. A cool breeze finally eased this Indian summer swelter, and lights flickered on as dawn colored the eastern horizon.

A shopkeeper near Bronx University directed her to a city bus which would take her to JFK. Though hundreds of flights had been canceled and diverted during the crisis, her flight was surprisingly still scheduled for an on-time departure that evening.

What fates were guiding her destiny, she wondered, drifting off to sleep as the 747 soared across the Atlantic.

Five time zones and six hours passed; Mustang awoke to a fresh sunrise. She’d missed the storms over the ocean which caused a late arrival at the Edinburgh airport, and would have gladly avoided the need to sprint from the gate to where a small puddle-jumper would provide the last leg of her trip. Turbulence marred this flight, and her relief when emerging from the Inverness terminal showed on her face.

Tour busses left the northern Scottish city every day, transporting the curious to Loch Ness through lush green countryside. Barely able to comprehend directions a constable rattled off in a heavy burr, Mustang managed to locate the pub which doubled as departure point for one such excursion company.

Rolling past the River Ness on the A82 highway, commercial developments bored Mustang. The loch itself catered to tourists, and she hung back from the

crowd as they milled about a stretch of sandy beach, snapping photos of the vast rippling blue waters.

None of the wares displayed in Drumnadrochit village's shop windows - woven tartan cloth, pottery, whiskey and Nessie souvenirs - appealed to her. The chance to visit a museum dedicated to the "monster" was declined. Just when Mustang doubted she would ever reach Boleskine House, the group was ushered onto a ferry boat for a short cruise south along the shoreline.

A sonorous voice droned about the depth of Loch Ness, and the sights on shore. It was also explained, upon their arrival at the ruin of Urquhart Castle, a jaunt to a pottery commune would be available for those willing.

"There's a marvelous view o' the glen," the man continued, "and ancient hill forts. Ye will even get a glimpse o' Boleskine House, the one-time residence o' the 'most evil man in the world'."

Abruptly, Mustang's interest in the tour revived.

She didn't feel like browsing the castle's visitor centre, nor the shattered stone fortress overlooking the loch. The ferry soon transported the group a mile over choppy waters to the eastern bank; she ensconced herself in a window seat on the mini-bus, anticipation quickening her pulse.

The vehicle bumped along a single-lane tarmac road. Hazel eyes scanned the countryside. Unfortunately, even when the tour guide pointed out the well kept structure beyond thick trees, they didn't stop. She would have to walk back from the commune, while the regular tourists admired the artistry of local craftsmen.

Mustang didn't realize how exhausted she was until she paused before a well-polished, carved wooden gate an hour later. Boleskine House had been described as built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Archibald Fraser, gaining prominence for its notorious resident, Aleister Crowley, in the early 1900s and, in the 1970s, for its purchase by Led Zepplin guitarist, Jimmy Page.

Now a private residence, Mustang suspected she couldn't hike up the winding drive and knock on the front door, unless her grandmother had actually been acquainted with the owners...

And that octogenarian widow hadn't left Massachusetts, from all accounts, since the 1960s.

Debating her options, Mustang didn't notice the figure who emerged from a squat building a short distance inside the gate. "Be off w' ye," he growled with an American twang unusual for these parts.

The teen whirled toward him, and gasped. Over six feet in height, he wore a red flannel shirt, black trousers and combat boots. His distinguished features

were framed with shaggy, greying hair. He might have been anywhere from 40 to 60 years old, she surmised.

“I said, be off,” he repeated.

Swallowing hard, Mustang sputtered, “May I ask who lives here?”

“None of your business.”

“But...”

“At least once a week, some fool from London or the States comes lookin’ for relics o’ Crowley,” the man rumbled. “He was flat broke when he sold the place, and his creditors took every scrap o’ furniture. Now, if ye don’t mind...” He turned toward the door.

“Who was Aleister Crowley?” asked Mustang.

That caught his attention. The slight Scottish inflection vanished from his husky bass. “You mean...”

“The first time I heard the name was on the tour. It was my grandmother’s dying request that I come here...”

His stern countenance softened a bit. “Your passport, now.”

For an instant, Mustang wondered if he was a police officer, protecting the summer residence of a local politician. She pulled the dark blue booklet from the hip pocket of her jeans and presented it to him.

“It’s not safe there, you know,” he admonished. “A light-fingered pickpocket - and there are many who prowl the loch - could steal it without you feeling a twinge.”

“I... never thought of that,” admitted Mustang. “I’ve never traveled outside the States.”

“If you’re careless, you might not have another chance.” He flipped open the cover and stared at the photo and typed information. “You are Elizabeth C. Duryea?”

Self-consciously, “Yes.”

“What’s the ‘C’ stand for?”

“Candida.”

His square jaw dropped as he closed the passport. “Who gave you that name?”

“From what I was told as a kid, my grandmother suggested it.”

“Come inside.” The gate was unlatched and creaked open on stiff hinges. He secured it behind her and led the way into what proved to be a quaint four - room house.

Without another word, he pointed her to a plain wooden chair in the cramped kitchen. He pulled two ceramic mugs from where they shared a shelf

above the sink with bottles of various chemicals. Filled with steaming coffee from a metal pot on the antiquated stove, he placed one in front of her on the stained table and sat opposite.

Leaning her backpack beside the chair, Mustang toyed with the mug; she didn't like coffee. She felt his eyes studying her between sips; the silence grew awkward.

"Is this your home?" she ventured.

"It's where I live."

"Is it part of Boleskine House?"

"It's called the Gate Lodge. In the old days, the property's caretaker occupied it."

"So, you're not the caretaker?"

"No."

"Then, who are you?"

"I own the property."

"Are you saying the property's been divided, you own this, and someone else owns the main house?" she queried.

"Quite the busy-body, aren't you? I own the entire 47 acres, if you must know, but I don't need five bedrooms, three baths, and all that floor space. Not since I gave up my work."

A memory chimed in Mustang's head. "Help him finish his work," her grandmother had said.

"What's wrong?" he prodded, noticing her far-away gaze.

She returned to the present. "My grandmother sent me here to help you finish your work."

"I know."

This astonished her. "How..."

"Just believe me, I know." He rose and rinsed his mug in the sink. "Let me show you my domain."

For a moment, Mustang thought he intended to show her around the Gate Lodge. He snatched a jacket from a hook, however, marched outside and along the drive toward Boleskine House itself. She rushed to follow.

"When did you buy the property?" she panted, catching up.

"It was bought on my behalf in 1953."

"What, by your parents?"

"No." He stopped short and spun on her. Firm fingers seized her shoulders, and she couldn't help but gaze into his dark orbs. "Your grandmother, who I loved dearly many years ago, knew the one chosen to assist me in completing my work

must have integrity and an open mind. What you will see, and what I will tell you may confound you; I swear, every word is the truth.”

“Okay...” Mustang acknowledged hesitantly.

“And you must promise never to repeat any of it to another living soul.”

“That part should be simple. I don’t confide my own thoughts to others, as a rule, because they seldom understand.”

“I know the feeling.” With a wry chuckle, he released her and lengthened his stride. “This house was bought on my behalf by the United States government. It was supposed to be a retreat in my old age. They didn’t know how right they were.”

The girl eyed his strong profile. “You said it was bought in 1953? You would’ve only been a child...”

“I was 38 at the time.”

Mustang calculated in her head. It wasn’t that she was slow in math; the implications of the truth were tough to accept. “That means...”

“I’m well into my 90s.”

“You sure don’t look it.”

“That’s part of the problem.”

“How so?”

Their discussion was interrupted by the view of the Georgian edifice as they rounded a curve. Mustang saw the perfect domicile for one of her temperament - surrounded by trees and space, undisturbed by the world.

“Wow,” she eventually murmured.

“Wow, indeed.” He pulled a key ring from his windbreaker pocket and unlocked the burnished oak door. “Come inside.”

The entrance hall within was bathed in darkness; dust-coated windows prevented much sunlight from penetrating. The electricity had been disconnected, the man explained, when the last tenant had moved to the city.

“So, you rent out the place?”

“Mostly,” he confirmed. “Back in the ‘70s, I did sell it temporarily to some musician, at the government’s request. He sold it back to me 15 years later.”

“What’s the government got to do with this?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.” He paused in what the British call a drawing room, and yanked a musty sheet off an antique sofa. “Have a seat. Might as well be comfortable.”

The cushions were hard, but Mustang settled herself, while her host paced restlessly.

“You’ve seen the space shuttle launches, haven’t you?” he asked.

“A few.”

“Back in the ‘30s, just before the war, a lot of scientists experimented with developing concentrated, high-powered fuels. I was one of them, at Cal Tech.”

“You were a scientist?”

“I was many things. Sparing you the technical details, we succeeded where others failed. You’ve heard of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory?”

“I suppose.”

“The work we did led to the founding of that organization. They called us the ‘Suicide Squad’, but our solid fuel boosters were the precursor to compounds used in the shuttle tanks which jettison into the ocean after launch.”

Mustang was mildly impressed. “Cool.”

“No, things got rather hot very quickly. By the early ‘50s, the Cold War was in full swing, and the government feared communists would infiltrate JPL, or kidnap members of the research group, to get a leg up in the space race. I was seen as especially vulnerable, given my... outside interests.”

“Outside interests?”

“The popular term for it is the ‘occult’. The uninformed deride the practices as immoral and twisted. But they were nothing of the kind.”

“What were they, then?”

“Ancient rituals, designed to enlighten the participants, and initiate a new age...”

“I’ve heard of New Age beliefs. A couple kids in school...”

“Let me finish,” he snapped. “I was head of the Agape Lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis for a few years. That is, until the Babalon Working triggered a series of extraordinary events.”

“What events?”

“The creation of the Moonchild, for one.”

He expected the question; Mustang didn’t ask. The entire premise rang of the ridiculous.

“If Ron hadn’t run off with my wife and distracted me by swindling me out of a substantial amount of money, I would have succeeded.”

“Ron who?”

“His followers know him as L. Ron Hubbard.”

“The founder of Scientology?”

“So I’ve heard. Believe me, he was nothing but a liar and a sneak. I trusted him with my life, and not a minute passed when he wasn’t exaggerating his personal accomplishments to reinforce the influence he exerted over people.”

In a high school comparative religion class, Mustang had read a similar assessment of the fiction writer. She viewed all religions as mostly phony, though, so the controversy hadn't bothered her.

"What happened then?"

"Government flunkies ordered me into hiding; I refused to comply. So, they forced the issue."

"Forced?"

"They rigged an explosion in my garage laboratory. Told the media I was drunk while mixing fulminate of mercury with other volatile chemicals. When I survived the blast, they had a couple of army goons abduct me from the hospital, substituting another badly charred - and very dead - body. Forensics weren't then what they are now, so no one knew it wasn't really me."

"That's horrible!"

"That's our government. I was flown to Washington D.C. on J. Edgar Hoover's private jet, and sequestered at Walter Reed Hospital until I recovered from my burns. It took nearly a year, and my time was occupied dictating precise accounts of my experiments and findings to two myopic scribes. Finally, they altered my identification documents and flew me here. Saw it as a joke, those idiots did - buying me the very house my mentor Crowley had once owned."

"You knew this Crowley?"

"We never actually met, but we exchanged letters before he died in 1947."

"Why'd they call him the 'most evil man in the world'?"

"The public didn't understand him. They thought he worshiped Satan. In a skewed sort of way, he was only trying to find himself. The very ceremonies he performed in this house were directed toward that end."

"What ceremonies?"

"It would be hard to explain, since you don't have the background in ancient religious practices..."

"Then, tell me, what happened after they exiled you?"

"I battled depression for years, thinking my destiny was to grow old and die in useless solitude. For some unknown reason, though, I didn't - grow old, I mean. Every morning, I looked in the bathroom mirror, and saw the same face as I'd seen the day of the explosion. Two decades passed, and nothing changed. I never fell ill, never grew tired after exerting myself. I suspected the government had used me for some anti-aging experiment, and would send doctors to examine me somewhere down the road. They didn't.

"With an endless amount of time on my hands, I embarked on a series of new experiments, not with chemicals this time, but on the spiritual plane. Your

grandmother had been part of the preliminary research, back in the '40s when she rented rooms in my house. I never had the impetus to finish what I started..." he glanced at her hopefully, "until now."

Ill at ease with his eyes boring into her soul, Mustang squirmed on the sofa. "You've told me a lot about yourself, except your name."

"That was another joke, courtesy of the Feds. You have to remember, high-tech surveillance hadn't been invented fifty years ago, nor did enemy governments have the resources to check passenger manifests at the click of a computer mouse. So, they gave me the name Jack White. The Scots in these parts pronounce their vowels in a bizarre way, so it sounds more like 'Jock'."

"Jock White." Mustang didn't see the humor. "What's your real name?"

"I was born 'Marvel Whiteside Parsons'. The plaque they erected at JPL reads, 'Jack Parsons'."

## II

If the name was meant to resurrect some dormant memory in Mustang, it didn't. She'd never heard her grandmother speak of this man, or of her years as a girl in California. Of course, she'd seen the old woman only twice in her life before her parents sent her to Springfield three weeks ago...

Anyone in their right mind would've disputed Parsons' tale of not aging after the explosion half a century ago. Mustang silently debated whether he was a younger man dealing with mental illness, and she should make her exit as rapidly, albeit politely, as possible.

Her musings kept returning to the fact her grandmother had deliberately arranged this trip. The detailed planning involved, given the woman's fragile health, dispelled Mustang's uncertainty... a fraction.

"Did you ever write or phone my grandmother to tell her where you were?" she asked.

"Conventional methods weren't necessary between us. She knew where I was at all times, just as I knew where she was."

"Was that a result of your experiments?"

"In a way."

"And if I agree to assist you in continuing your work, what would I be required to do?"

A crooked smirk played across his face, whether satisfaction or resignation, Mustang couldn't determine. "We'll talk about that tomorrow," he said. "I can tell

you're tired from your travels, and probably hungry. Let's head back to the Gate Lodge and I'll see what's in the refrigerator."

The only sounds during the return trek to the tiny dwelling were birds preparing for sleep while the setting sun painted the sky brilliant shades of pink, orange and red. Mustang realized how ravenous she was when Parsons set a heaping plate of food on the table. She devoured three fried eggs and ten strips of bacon in less than five minutes. Her stomach content, she curled up beneath a tattered quilt on the living room sofa, and dozed instantly.

A series of strange dreams and hours later, Mustang was roused by Parsons. "Come, we must hurry," he stated.

She countered groggily, "Hurry? Why?"

"We must begin before the sun rises."

That's when she noticed the voluminous, embroidered garment draped over his shoulders, the candle in his hand, and the blackness beyond the window. She also realized she now wore a flowing white robe.

"What the hell..."

"I took the liberty of dressing you. I figured it would save time, and explanations."

Before she could protest further, he grabbed her hand and tugged her from the Gate Lodge into the chill pre-dawn air. He led her along the drive, veering into the woods unexpectedly after a few hundred yards. Mustang stumbled as the ground sloped upward, and her knees ached from the exertion.

They emerged from the trees on a grassy hillock, with the first rays of sunlight illuminating a rough-hewn wooden altar. To Mustang, it looked more like a picnic table without the benches.

The ritual, little of which Mustang comprehended, lasted until noon.

Parsons mumbled phrases in a strange language - not French, Spanish, nor Latin or Mandarin, from what the teen could tell. He burned incense, drew symbols on the top of the altar with chalk and in the dirt with a pointed stick. Arms raised, he seemed to address the sun itself, which acknowledged the worship by reddening his cheeks and nose with a serious burn.

A light breeze stirred Mustang's skirts. The longer Parsons chanted, the stronger the wind grew. She would've thought it the precursor of a storm, had there been clouds in the sky.

As she pondered how long she could stand upright against the blast, the ceremony ended. Parsons lowered his arms, bowed to the east, and nearly collapsed. His true age showed unmistakably in the lines etched on his face.

“Take me home,” he whispered when Mustang offered her hand to steady him.

The pair made slow progress across the estate. Back at the Gate Lodge, Mustang deposited Parsons on a kitchen chair and hastily brewed a fresh pot of coffee. He held the mug in trembling hands while he gulped. She peeled off the bulky robe before cooking a stack of pancakes.

“You don’t have much in the way of food in the house,” she chided, bringing the platter to the table.

“I don’t eat much in the way of food,” he responded.

“Well, that’s where you and I differ. I can’t go without eating. Is there a grocery store somewhere close?”

“The nearest is across the loch, and you’d need a boat to reach it, or a Jeep.”

Dejected, Mustang sank on the chair opposite, watching him pick at the food. Her stomach grumbled, and he shoved the plate toward her.

Good manners abandoned, she cleared every bite in short order. “I’m heartened by your healthy appetite,” remarked Parsons.

She wiped a drip of maple syrup from her chin. “Your lack of one bothers me. After standing on that hill for nearly six hours, you need to eat something, and drink plenty of water.”

“Over the years, I think my metabolism has slowed to such a rate, my body doesn’t need the same nourishment as other people.”

After a moment’s consideration, Mustang giggled.

“What?” queried Parsons.

“Sorry. It almost sounds like something a vampire would say.”

“Only in a cheap novel.”

They laughed together.

Mustang refilled Parsons’ coffee mug, and he seemed to recover his youthful bearing as the minutes passed. She took the risk of voicing her questions.

“What exactly were you doing out there this morning?”

He countered, “You probably won’t understand...”

“I still want to know.”

“It was a variation on invocations we used back in the ‘40s, called the Babalon Working, coupled with sections from the Abra-melin rituals.”

Parsons’ was right; Mustang didn’t understand. Still, teenagers were supposed to know everything, and not reveal when they didn’t. “Really? I didn’t recognize the language...”

The successful bluff prompted him to elaborate. "It was a dialect of my own devising, equal parts Enochian and Hebrew."

"You couldn't use English?"

"The point of the rite - the robes, the remote setting and the language - is to remove the participants from ordinary, daily activities. It helps refocus the mind on the anticipated outcome."

"Which was?"

"To be honest, the process started with the Babalon Working, half a century ago. The intention was to manifest the Scarlet Woman, a title used by Crowley to designate his main priestess, basically. Once that occurred, the next step would give birth to the Moonchild and the Age of Horus..."

"Which is what you're trying to do now?"

"No. The Babalon Working brought about the desired ends. After that, things got a bit... fragmented."

"How so?"

"I ran into financial trouble, the group we'd established fell apart and, for all intents and purposes, I died."

"What about the Moonchild, then?"

"It took longer than I expected, but the ethereal planes don't work on the same time frame as human beings."

"Meaning, this being you created is out there, somewhere?" The idea raised goosebumps on Mustang's arms. "And the ritual you were doing today will call it forth?"

"I don't need to call it; the reason for its existence will become clear soon enough. No, this rite, and those of the next few days, are more a thanksgiving to the powers which enabled me to fulfill the quest every magickian has shared since ancient days."

"Why have me stand up there with you?"

Parsons smiled wryly. "To mark the completed cycle. Your grandmother stood with me in the beginning; it is right her offspring be with me at the end." The scenario made sense to Mustang, in a way. To wake each morning at the crack of dawn, and hike out to the hill on an empty stomach didn't appeal to her, though. "Unless you want me keeling over in the middle of your chanting, I'm going to need to lay in a supply of food."

"The best I can offer in the way of transportation is a horse..." Parsons volunteered.

Hazel orbs lit up the room. "A horse? Where?"

“It’s not mine, actually. One of my neighbors uses part of a pasture near the western property line to graze his animals. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you borrow one to ride to the village.”

“That sounds fantastic!”

“You know how to ride?”

“I was riding horses before I could walk, and taming wild ones before I was ten. How do you think I earned the nickname Mustang?”

“Mustang?” Parsons repeated. “I didn’t know...”

The teen realized the subject hadn’t been raised; he only knew her name from what he’d read on her passport a day earlier.

“The only thing I can’t supply is a saddle...”

“I’m fine bareback.”

“Then, be off w’ ye. Take the drive toward the house, and bear right on the gravel track. Shouldn’t take you more than fifteen minutes to reach the field.”

Consumed by enthusiasm, Mustang reached across the table and squeezed Parsons’ hand. “Thanks.”

His chance to speak vanished as she bolted out the door.

She reappeared abruptly, chest heaving. “I’ll need a rope, to use as a bridle.”

Parsons rose and rummaged in a drawer beside the sink. He pulled out a coil of clothes line. “Will this do?”

She nodded. “I hate to ask, but I’ll need money, too.”

Grinning, he opened a cabinet over the stove and unscrewed the lid of a glass jar. She heard coins jingling; when he turned, however, he laid a British fifty pound note in her outstretched hand.

Tucking the folded paper in her hip pocket, she sprinted across the threshold.

The jaunt to the horse pasture took longer than a mere fifteen minutes. The wind, which had died away at the end of the hilltop ritual, had whipped up once more. Mustang’s pony tail bounced in all directions, as did tree branches, smacking her as she trod the rutted path.

If nothing else, she decided, it would be an interesting ride to the village. A pleasant one, too. The dappled grey mare nibbling a clump of heather perked up her head when Mustang whistled. Climbing a plank fence, the girl waited for the magnificent animal to approach. A wet nose nuzzled her face while she stroked the dark mane. Assured no complications would arise, the thin rope slid around the horse’s neck and expertly shaped itself into a bridle and reins. Mustang swung

onto the muscled back and steered her mount south, the loch visible over the tops of the trees.

The afternoon sun bathing her in a strange light, villagers stared at the rider trotting along Foyers' main road, like some spectre from the distant past. Mustang alighted in front of a small store, looping the rope around a light post, and strode inside as if on a routine errand.

Emerging with three bags of meat, fruits, vegetables and assorted staples, she realized the return trip would be a challenge. Lacking a saddle, or saddle bags, she had no way to carry her purchases without spilling them. A crowd of curious tourists gathered to watch Mustang devise a solution - cutting a length of the reins and securing the bags in front of where she would sit. In parting, she waved cheerily before urging the mare into a canter.

Logically, Mustang dismounted at Boleskine House's front gate, leading the horse onto the property in order to unload at the Gate Lodge. Parsons heard the hooves on the drive and opened the door just as she whisked past, bags in hand.

"You made good time," he commented.

"Awfully windy, but no big deal."

"Let me unpack those things, and you restore the horse to the pasture before it gets dark."

She surrendered her burden. Not until the mantle clock above the living room fireplace struck 8:00 did she reappear in the kitchen, hair disheveled from the ever-rising wind.

Parsons greeted, "A good horse?"

"An excellent horse. The perfect temperament. Her owner must treat her well."

"He's a real lover of horse-flesh, that one. Treats them better than some people treat their children. A few of his best have raced at Ascot and other tracks around the isles."

"Hmmm," Mustang considered. "Maybe I'll talk with him about a job, if I end up staying."

"Like it or not," Parsons mumbled, "you'll be staying."

A hearty meal and dreamless night's sleep fortified the teen for the early morning trek to the grassy site. Once more clad in the flowing white robe, she stood to the side, listening closely to the words Parsons chanted, and observing his actions. The ritual may have commenced in an identical fashion to the day before, then it built upon the previous effort.

Parsons added designs to those he'd already drawn on the ground and the wooden altar. Instead of facing east, he raised his arms to the south, prepared and lit a bonfire in a pit surrounded by stones.

The sun had passed its apex and was descending toward the west as the pair retraced their steps to the Gate Lodge. Both were starving, and Parsons admitted he was glad of the sandwiches Mustang offered, piled high with meat, cheese, lettuce and tomatoes.

Her kindness seemed ill-rewarded the third day, when Parsons drew her to the altar, wrapped a blindfold around the top half of her head, and turned her west. The last thing she glimpsed before the cloth obliterated her vision were the symbols around her feet. Had her grandmother really intended she be part of these bizarre rites?

Rain fell in sheets as Parsons' droning continued. Drenched and cold, Mustang hoped she would not fall ill, but a blazing fire was roaring in the Gate Lodge's living room soon after they came indoors, where both huddled close to warm themselves.

"Sorry about that," Parsons apologized over mugs of hot cocoa. "It's been so long since I've done a working, I'd forgotten how... demonstrative the elements can be."

"Is that what you're doing, calling upon the elements?"

"Partly."

"What's the other part?"

"I told you: thanksgiving for the success of earlier rituals."

Skeptical, Mustang said nothing. They ate dinner and retired at sunset, to repeat the whole ordeal at dawn.

With the earth trembling beneath their feet.

Mustang and Parsons turned north, and had trouble remaining vertical in the wake of the jolting tremors. The girl, beneath her blindfold, couldn't help but be awed by the manifestations - whatever Parsons was doing, he was doing it right, and with great power. To control nature was not a simple endeavor.

In anticipation of the fifth rite, Parsons took time over the evening meal of chicken soup and tossed salad to outline the procedures. "This will be the most important," he began. "Timing will be key. You will be blindfolded - which, if I haven't explained it, signifies your innocence and willingness to learn - and be holding a dagger."

"A dagger?" she countered.

He discounted her concern. "It is a common implement in magickal rites. At the precise moment I finish the last chant, with every ounce of your strength, you will thrust the blade down into the center of the sigils drawn on the altar."

"Won't the knife ruin the wood?"

"Perhaps. It is the force of your will, merging with the design, that is essential."

Mustang vaguely grasped the concept. Every religion employed variations of the same ideal: clergy bringing the spiritual onto the physical plane. The laity, for the most part, were excluded, vicarious witnesses to their supposed salvation. For Parsons, the matter was first-person, hands-on.

Not a bird twittered the next morning, no breeze stirred the leaves. Stars twinkling overhead faded gradually as the sun appeared. Parsons had laundered the robes, removing flecks of mud from the rains and quakes, and the two shown like beacons on the hillside.

The four elements had been summoned, and tangibly responded to Parsons' call. Mustang wasn't certain what the point of this final rite might be, other than to wrap up any loose ends in the "thanksgiving" - kind of like an Academy Award winner rushing to finish his speech before the music cuts him off.

Accustomed now to the blindfold, she didn't flinch when he nudged her against the altar's edge and curled her fingers around the dagger's hilt. Instead of standing behind her or to her right, as he'd done other days, Parsons walked in a circle clockwise and she had difficulty tracking his voice. Suddenly, he changed direction, moving counter-clockwise.

Then, it was as if he stood directly in front of her. She knew this to be impossible, unless he was standing on the altar...

All silent except for his chanting, Mustang grew mildly disoriented. Parsons' rich bass rose to fever pitch for the final "Amen;" she raised the knife and plunged it into the wood.

But, not wood. The steel impacted a mass, soft and sinewy, and Mustang heard a relieved moan. She waited, feeling her hands grow moist with a sticky substance. A frightening realization spurred her to release the hilt and tear off the blindfold.

Jack Parsons lay on the altar, dead, the dagger protruding from his torso.

### III

Lightning and thunder, earth tremors and violent winds, a spontaneous fire in the pit and torrential rains engulfed the teen on the hill. She didn't react to these phenomena, able only to stare at the lifeless body sprawled inches from her.

Mustang had never killed even a fly in her entire life, and through this man's contemptuous ruse, she would be found guilty of murder and sentenced to prison...

Not if she ran.

She knew she couldn't run. She had no money...

Parsons had money, which he wouldn't need anymore. The glass jar in the cupboard...

Her knees weakened, and she sank on the wet ground. No, she thought, I've got to tell the authorities and let them administer...

A girl in soggy jeans and white t-shirt rode into Foyers that afternoon, blood washed from her hands by the ongoing downpour, a mud-caked robe discarded in the horse pasture before mounting the dappled grey mare. She inquired at the village post office where she might find the police.

"Police?" was the reply, Scottish burr thick and nearly incomprehensible. "A constable drives down from Inverness once a week t' ensure the tourists are behavin', but other than that..."

"What about a mayor, or town manager?" Mustang persisted.

"We ha' three councilors..."

"Who are they, and how can I find them?"

The man eyed Mustang suspiciously. "Why the urgency, lassie?"

"A man's dead."

"Dead?"

"Murdered."

"Murdered? By whom?"

She swallowed hard. "By me."

The postal clerk retreated a few steps. His assistant already had phone in hand.

"Where did it happen?" called that young woman, relaying a question posed through the handset.

The admission tapped more of Mustang's strength than she expected. She slumped on the counter. "Boleskine House," she slurred.

"Who was killed?"

"Jack Parsons."

“Who?”

Some moments passed before Mustang recalled the aged Californian rocket scientist had been assigned an alias upon migrating to Scotland. “Jock White.”

Both the clerk and his assistant froze.

Puzzled, Mustang raised her eyes. “What?”

“Jock White’s been dead these many years,” the man related.

“There, you’re wrong. He was damned old, but he wasn’t dead - ‘til now.”

The assistant returned the phone to its cradle. “They’re sending an inspector down right away. Should be here by tonight.”

“What do we do wi’ her?”

“The chief constable said t’ hold her somewhere safe.”

So it happened, Elizabeth Candida Duryea was confined in a tiny stock room, the door closed and bolted. At least, her jailers were considerate, if not friendly. They brought her an order of fish and chips to tide her over until the police took her into custody.

Inspector Nigel MacLeod arrived after the skies cleared and the moon rose.

The postal clerk directed the paunchy, balding detective to the locked cubicle, visibly perturbed by the late hour. “M’ wife’s waiting dinner, so if ye don’t mind making quick work o’ this...”

“I was in the middle o’ tea wi’ m’ in-laws when I got the call,” retorted MacLeod. “Murder is never convenient, and I ha’ a long list of questions to ask this... wee lass?”

His first glimpse of Mustang startled him. The few murder investigations with which he’d been involved brought cowering, furtive suspects into the interrogation room, or older women seeking revenge for their husband’s philandering.

“Can’t ye take the questioning elsewhere?” the clerk insisted. “I’ve got t’ lock up.”

“All right, all right, keep your shirt on.”

Mustang was handcuffed and marched from the building. MacLeod opened the rear door of his Land Rover and nodded her inside; she balked.

“Get in, Miss, or it won’t go easy for ye,” he snapped.

“I... get car-sick riding in the back.”

The inspector guffawed. He slammed the door and waved her onto the passenger seat. “I drive all this way t’ collect a murderer, and end up wi’ a whiny, pimple-faced bairn.”

“I’m not pimple-faced,” spat Mustang, sliding awkwardly onto the vinyl upholstery.

Behind the wheel, MacLeod started the engine but didn't shift into gear. "Where did ye say this murder took place?"

"Boleskine House."

"And how did ye accomplish this feat?"

Mustang recounted the tale.

He didn't appear to believe the narration. "We ha' Jock White on public record as dying in 1972 o' a heart attack after falling off a horse. He's buried in Inverness."

"Your records are wrong," the teen stated emphatically. "Parsons - er, White's death was staged the first time in 1952. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if the... people responsible for that incident repeated the hoax, to keep the locals from getting suspicious about his unusual longevity."

"Ye use incredibly big words for one so young. Ye are sayin' White didn't want it known he was still alive?"

"Not White himself... others with whom he was associated."

"What, the mob?" chuckled MacLeod.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Well, once we verify the story, and confirm the alleged victim's identity, ye won't ha' much choice but to tell us everything ye know."

The vehicle lurched forward, cruising along deserted village streets, lamps glowing invitingly in curtained windows, and past the grey mare.

Mustang whipped around in the seat. "My horse!"

The brakes squealed. "What horse?"

"The horse I rode to town..."

"From Boleskine?"

"Actually, a neighbor uses Boleskine property for grazing. It's his horse..." MacLeod glared at her. "And ye had permission to ride it?"

"Well... er, no..."

"So, a charge o' horse theft will start things off."

"Parsons - White said I could borrow the horse!"

"'Tis Parsons or White?"

"Depends on who you ask, I guess."

"What other aliases did this man ye killed use?"

"I... don't know." Flustered and confused, Mustang gave up, her jaw sagging.

The Land Rover covered the distance north on B852 to the Gate Lodge three times faster than the horse. MacLeod climbed out and unlatched the wooden gate, not bothering to close it after pulling forward.

“Where’s the body?” he queried.

“Up the drive a ways, then we’ll have to walk.”

Aghast, the inspector braked. “What, are ye one o’ those nuts who romps naked in the woods, worshipin’ trees?”

“We weren’t naked,” Mustang grumbled. “We were wearing robes.”

“And where’s the robe ye were wearin’?”

“Hanging on the horse pasture fence.”

“Once I figure out what’s going on, I’ll have the forensics team retrieve it and test for blood residue.”

“Who’s using big words now?” scoffed Mustang. “Stop here.”

Gravel sprayed in all directions when the tires ceased their motion. MacLeod alighted, oversized flashlight in hand, then helped Mustang onto the ground.

“Which way?”

She pointed left. A brilliant beam shot from the battery-powered bulb, and the man from Inverness trod carefully along the path.

“Stay close to me,” he warned. “If ye try to escape, I’ll have bloodhounds after ye in less than two hours.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t know the property well enough, even in daytime, to find my way to freedom.”

“Bonnie lass, to know your limitations.”

“Why don’t you shut up?”

The hilltop clearing glowed beneath the moon, the wooden altar an unmistakable landmark. The nearer they came, though, the worse grew Mustang’s fear.

Parsons’ corpse had vanished.

“So…” wondered MacLeod.

Traces of the rituals had been eradicated by the rains, including any droplets of blood. Even the dagger was gone.

Mustang didn’t know what to think. She collapsed against her companion, moaning, “I’m having a damned nightmare.”

“If ye really did kill someone up here, are ye sure he was dead when ye left him?”

“I heard him take his last breath, as if he was relieved to be dead after so many years…”

“Where’s the body, then? Where’s the murder weapon?”

“I… don’t…”

“Do ye have any proof the outrageous story ye told is the least bit true?” MacLeod prodded.

“I...” Mustang’s eyes scanned the hill for any sign, any footprint, any indication... and caught sight of the stone-encircled fire pit. She shuffled toward it. “There... was a fire...”

“In the middle of a storm?”

“And an earthquake...”

The inspector had reached the end of his patience. He seized her arm roughly. “I’m taking ye in, not under arrest, but for a psychiatric evaluation. Ye are delusional.”

She shook from his grasp and backed into the shadow of the trees. “I tell you, I killed him! I didn’t know it would happen, but I did it!”

At that instant, a bolt of lightning rent the night sky and struck within inches of the altar, singeing the wood. MacLeod spun in time to see the afterglow image of a blindfolded Mustang wedging the dagger between Parsons’ ribs.

Amazed, he staggered and tripped over ash-encrusted stones. His face in the mud, he reached out to push himself up, and his fingers closed around the hilt of a rusty knife.

He examined it by the light of his torch, sitting on the wet grass and periodically staring up at Mustang. “This blade must’ve been embedded here for years,” he muttered. “If ye killed White within the last twelve hours, this can’t be the murder weapon.”

Mustang squatted beside him and studied the design on the hilt. “Only if Parsons... White had more than one of these.”

A plastic evidence bag provided a receptacle for the dagger. MacLeod admitted he had compromised any fingerprints with his own, and the dirt. “The lab crew may still be able to extract blood or DNA data...”

“Now do you believe me?” Mustang sighed.

“I dinnae know. Without a body, this could be a figment o’ an over-active imagination...”

“Parsons... dammit, White was not a figment of my imagination. Take me to the Gate Lodge, and I’ll prove he was living there as recently as this morning!”

“All right, all right.” The batteries in the torch were losing their charge by the time the pair reached the Land Rover. Turning the vehicle proved a tricky maneuver, requiring MacLeod to jump from reverse to first gear twice. His mood darkened further navigating the meandering drive to the small domicile.

Fortunately for Mustang’s sanity, the interior of Parsons’ home remained undisturbed. His clothes hung in the closet of the single bedroom - she showed

them to MacLeod. A pair of dirty socks from the previous evening were jammed inside the Hush Puppies he wore when not performing rituals. The bed had not been made, and half a pot of coffee stood thickening on the kitchen counter.

“Well?” the teen ventured.

“‘Tis clear *someone’s* been livin’ here...”

“Look, Mr. MacLeod. Parsons... White had extraordinary powers of some kind, to conjure wind from absolute calm, rain without clouds, fire without wood, and earthquakes capable of destroying buildings. Take me with you to Inverness. I sure as hell don’t want to stay here, and you can check with the local meteorologists and seismologists about such events over the past few days...”

“And will ye submit t’ an evaluation?”

Gritting her teeth, Mustang agreed.

“Gather your things, then.” Drawing a small key from his coat pocket, he unlocked the handcuffs.

It took less than five minutes for her to stuff her few clothes, toothbrush and shampoo into the backpack hanging on the kitchen coat rack. Mustang expected to be restrained again before making the trip north; MacLeod left her unshackled.

She tried unsuccessfully to sleep while he drove. Fear tightened her muscles as the surrounding landscape appeared to rise up and attack the Land Rover through darkness and increasing fog. When he jerked the steering wheel unexpectedly, she was flung sideways, despite the seatbelt, and bumped her head on the glass.

“What the hell...” she sputtered.

“Sorry,” hissed MacLeod. “I could’ve sworn I saw a tree fallen across the road...”

“Is it always this creepy, traveling here at night?”

“Many people believe the Loch Ness legends have taken on a life o’ their own, smotherin’ the countryside like a giant, black pall.”

“The monster has that much influence?”

“Not only the monster. Urquhart Castle is supposedly haunted by the dead o’ many prolonged battles, and ghosts have been seen roaming a burial cairn not far from there. Little is known about what heinous deeds transpired during Crowley’s ownership o’ Boleskine House a hundred years ago, which adds t’ the mystery. Belief, even in unsubstantiated rumors, can be a powerful force t’ reckon with.”

“If I wasn’t seeing the effects for myself, I’d think it kind of cool.”

“Seein’ the effects has sent many a weak-minded fool t’ the sanitarium,” MacLeod commented.

Mustang shifted on the seat. “You think me weak-minded?”

“I think ye are too young and impressionable t’ be wandering these parts unchaperoned. Ye meet a man who weaves a tale aboot havin’ special powers and bein’ on this earth for nine decades, though he looks naught over 40, and ye believe him.”

“Parsons... White never mentioned his powers. I saw those for myself.”

“Ye saw optical illusions, caused by the sun playin’ on the dew...”

Never one to take criticism well, Mustang shut down. She averted her face and spoke not another word into Inverness.

The constabulary had nothing on police stations she’d seen in the States. But then, crime wasn’t as much of a problem in the northern part of Scotland as it was across the Atlantic. MacLeod escorted her inside the brick building. A freshly-scrubbed rookie locked her in one of six cells at the rear of the structure.

There she waited, and waited. The sun rose; no one brought her breakfast. The slab bed proved uncomfortable - she could never sleep without a pillow, anyway. Thus, she sat on a molded plastic chair and gave way to tears of exhaustion and anger.

Which was when the tiles began trembling under her feet, like the ground at Boleskine House during Parsons’ ritual. Unsure how to react, Mustang pulled herself into a fetal position, listening to officers’ yells of disbelief penetrating the walls.

A crack developed in the masonry behind her head, running up to the ceiling. The floor split in two, as if huge fingers were tearing the cell asunder. Glass shattered in the barred window; Mustang shielded her head with her arms. The thick iron bars confining her twisted and collapsed like a broken tinker toy.

MacLeod and the jail attendant burst through the cell block’s heavy steel door, melting with unseen heat. Mustang still sat, and shrugged at them. The chair tipped when the fissure in the floor widened.

MacLeod bellowed, “Get out of there!”

Mustang moved the only direction she could - over the rubble of the exterior wall into the street. The inspector retreated through the front offices and rushed after her.

Not that she was going far. She crossed to the opposite sidewalk, where a crowd of curious shopkeepers and passersby had gathered to watch the building crumble. Panting, MacLeod shoved through the press of bodies to her side.

“Are ye responsible for this?” he snarled in her ear.

Mouth agape, she turned to him. "Are you kidding?"

"I wouldna joke about wholesale destruction of public property."

"What, you think I had a bomb concealed in my jeans?"

"This wasn't caused by a bomb, nor by any natural force. The weather service replied t' my e-mail not five minutes ago, confirmin' a series of bizarre storms around Loch Ness this past week, and an earthquake measurin' 6.2 on the Richter scale, with no subsequent aftershocks, affectin' only a ten-square kilometer area. I'd barely finished reading it before this happened."

"What about the knife?" asked Mustang.

MacLeod repeated, "What *about* the knife?"

"Did you have it tested?"

"Strange thing about that," he snorted. "The blade disintegrated when I pulled it from the evidence bag. The lab did find blood residue on the hilt, though, less than 24 hours old."

"See, I told you!"

"The blood wasna human."

"What?" Mustang shrieked, nearby eyes glaring at her outburst.

"If ye killed anythin' yesterday, 'twas a deer."

Despite his rotund build, MacLeod's quick reflexes prevented the teen from hitting the concrete when she fainted.

## IV

White-washed walls and a textured ceiling greeted Mustang when she opened her eyes. She didn't recognize the room and immediately sensed danger. That feeling redoubled when she tried to sit up, and discovered cloth restraints binding her wrists and ankles.

"Oh, hell..."

MacLeod hadn't taken her back to jail; he'd brought her to a hospital psychiatric ward.

How she ached for the peace and quiet of Montana at that moment. She wished she'd shredded the plane ticket her grandmother left when she died, or run from Jack Parsons when he told her of his work. The worst trouble she'd been in back home was skipping school. Here, she could be sentenced for murder - and horse theft - or confined in a padded cell for the rest of her life.

Getting upset again served no purpose, she reminded herself. A few deep breaths slowed her heart rate and relaxed tense biceps. "I just want to get out of here," she spoke aloud.

She didn't realize anything unusual had happened until the fly buzzed past her nose and she automatically raised her right hand to swat it. The restraints somehow had come unfastened; a close examination showed they weren't broken or ripped, but had been neatly unbuckled, like a man loosens his belt after a large meal.

"Stop playing games," she said to no one in particular, suspecting a hidden camera monitored by the hospital staff. "I just want to get out of here."

Tumblers in the bolt clanked audibly, and the metal door swung outward. Mustang waited for her captors to appear; all was silence.

She sat up, rose and crossed the small chamber. Peering around the door jamb, she saw an empty corridor. Not knowing where to find the exit was her main dilemma. She had to attempt escape, though, or risk permanently losing her freedom.

The rubber soles of her sneakers squeaked on the linoleum; no one investigated the noise. Past a row of locked doors, a sign pointed to the stairs; the handle was alarmed. Another corridor branched to the right, and Mustang poked her head around the corner. The nurse's desk stood vacant, her backpack half-unzipped in a plastic utility basket.

"They must be on break," the girl surmised, snatching her belongings as she jogged toward the far exit.

These glass panels, instead of being alarmed, required an access code to activate. Mustang grabbed the keypad, tempted to rip it from the plaster. The door slid aside.

"It can't be that easy..."

It wasn't, of course. In the visitors' lounge near the elevators sat Nigel MacLeod, reading a magazine.

"Don't look up, don't look up," Mustang chanted quietly, tip-toeing past. He did, as the elevator doors opened in response to the "Down" button being pressed.

"Hey!" he shouted.

"Close, close, close!" begged his prisoner, as if the inanimate gears could hear.

The inspector nearly had his hand crushed when he reached in to stop her. He suffered a small scratch on his index finger, jerking it from harm's way.

The alarm would surely be raised, Mustang knew, as the lift descended to the first floor. Dressed in her t-shirt and jeans, she blended in with throngs transacting business in the hospital lobby - signing in for tests, or buying gifts for

ailing relatives. She shuffled through revolving doors before security guards were notified of her flight.

On the bustling thoroughfare, she contemplated stealing a car - except she'd never learned to drive. She rummaged in the backpack and consulted the map her grandmother had provided. If she could hitch a ride south, she could walk back to Boleskine House from Dores village...

"Need a ride, lassie?"

This friendly voice came from the smiling, blond driver of a delivery truck, waiting at a traffic signal on the corner. Mustang didn't stop to count how many coincidences had played in her favor within the past few hours; it didn't occur to her the chain of events could be anything *but* coincidences.

She hopped into the passenger seat with a word of thanks.

"I saw ye at Loch Ness buyin' groceries last Monday," the friendly man said, pulling forward when the light turned green. "Ye seemed... a bit lost, if ye dinnae mind me sayin' so."

"I'm more lost than you'll ever know," she confessed. "Are you headed down the loch's east bank?"

"Aye, and runnin' late on me route, to be sure. A small earthquake caused a bottleneck on the streets this mornin', and findin' a detour was almost impossible..."

"I... heard."

"Do ye live near Loch Ness?"

"I've been... visiting an old friend of the family."

"Ye wish to go to Fort Augustus, or might I drop ye..."

"I'll hop out at Dores, if you don't mind."

"I ha' to make a delivery at the inn there, too, so 'twill be no trouble."

Throughout the journey, Mustang kept an eye in the rearview mirror, fully anticipating a fleet of police vehicles would descend upon the truck any second, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Her companion noticed, and snickered playfully. "Are ye bein' followed?"

"I... hope not."

"'Tis not a bad thing for tourists in these parts t' keep their wits about them. There've been troubles the past few weeks wi' pickpockets and car-jackers..."

Mustang didn't reply. She saw the police car racing toward them, and hunched down on the seat. "Damn this red hair," she grumbled, knowing it made her conspicuous even at large gatherings.

The driver looked over, and the truck skidded to a swift stop on the soft berm. "What on earth?" he cried.

She didn't understand his shock.

"A minute hence, ye had red hair. Now, 'tis black as night..."

The teen studied herself in the mirror. "Oh, hell..."

"Are ye a witch, or what?" demanded the man.

"No, I..."

He pinched her arm forcefully.

"What'd you do that for?"

"T' be sure ye aren't a ghost."

"I'm no ghost. I'm..."

She was interrupted by a female voice on the two-way radio. "Frankie boy, where are ye?"

"Five K north of Dores on B852," he answered through the handset.

"D'ye see anythin' odd when passin' near the Infirmary this afternoon?"

"Odd? What'd ye mean, Sal?"

"It's bein' broadcast all over: a psychiatric patient escaped around 3:00. A dangerous one, too."

"Dangerous? How so?"

"Killed a man yesterday, supposedly, and disposed o' the body, leavin' not so much as a drop o' blood at the scene."

Frankie laughed. "Ye been readin' too many detective novels, Sal. There's no such thing as the perfect murder. Just ask me dad."

"Your dad was a constable twenty years ago," retorted Sal. "Things have changed since then."

"Be that as it may, I've seen no killer today."

"Well, be careful coming back to town. She may be armed and desperate."

The driver glared at Mustang. "She?"

"That's right," Sal remarked. "Wee lass, still a teenager, so they say."

Frankie maneuvered the truck onto the tarmac and accelerated toward the village. "If ye are a killer," he whined, "I want no part o' ye after I stop t' make me delivery."

Her hair faded from black to auburn as he stared. "Do I look like a killer?"

"Ask me dad, and he'll tell ye: killers can look as innocent as the wife next door, or the chemist on the corner. When something snaps inside their heads - - from anger, jealousy or fear - they give way to primal instincts, leadin' to murder."

The steering wheel jerked, and tires sent up a shower of dust on the service road to the Dores Inn.

Mustang leapt from the cab and waved to Frankie. "I do appreciate the ride, even if you think I am a witch, or a dangerous killer."

"I'll send ye off wi' a piece of advice: stay not long in these parts. If ye are suspect, they'll hunt ye like a wounded stag."

"Thanks."

She strode along the single-lane road, and hiked farther than she'd estimated. The waning moon shone between thick clouds by the time she reached the gate to Boleskine House. All she craved was a shower and sleep.

Instinct made her pause at the Gate Lodge door and glance back. The gate was not visible through the underbrush and trees, meaning the police could creep up on the dwelling, undetected. With the dawn, she would take action to prevent such intrusions.

Or an ambush, such as she suspected awaited her. Rustling noises around the side of the building propelled her further into the shadows, and she crept along the ivy-covered bricks to discover the source.

She let out a low whistle of relief upon seeing the dappled grey mare nibbling leaves below the kitchen window. The animal must've shaken off her impromptu bridle and reins in the village and wandered home. Returning it to the pasture would be another task for the morning.

Water cleansing her skin of grime from many roads and perspiration borne of fear, Mustang relaxed for the first time since a missing knife mutilated a vanished body. Wrapped in the red terry bathrobe Parsons had left hanging on the door, she sprawled on the sofa and was soon snoring.

It took time to convince herself the past few days hadn't been a nightmare when she awoke at sunrise. She imagined hearing Parsons preparing breakfast in the kitchen, could've sworn she smelled bacon and eggs cooking.

Nothing. Never in her life had she been entirely alone, and the same creepy sensation she'd felt on the drive to Inverness raised goosebumps on her skin. "Why am I here?" she asked the walls.

Receiving no answer, she rose and poured herself a bowl of cereal, which she didn't eat. Unsuccessfully poking through her backpack for a clean shirt and jeans, she remembered she hadn't done laundry for a week. Instead, she raided Parsons' closet, tying a blue flannel shirt tight at the waist with a leather belt, and using suspenders to hold up baggy black trousers.

A collection of books tumbled off the shelf as she reached for an old Cal-Tech ball-cap. She gathered them hastily, stopping to read a page which had fallen open.

Written in neat block letters - similar to how Mustang's uncle used to write on the blueprints he drew as an architect - the list of questions were unlike any she ever dreamed a sane person would pose.

"If I am the Anti-christ," ran the first, "am I not to use these powers to change the world? To dispel the fallacies wrought by those men who would deceive their neighbors for their own gain? To expose the governmental bodies as corrupt institutions, and the churches as brain-washing cults?"

Mustang flipped the pages, consumed by curiosity. Inside the front cover of the leather-bound volume was scrawled, "John Whiteside Parsons, May, 1952." Parsons' journals! She moved the stack to the living room, planning to read every paragraph in chronological order once her plans were accomplished. Dating to the time her grandmother would have known Parsons, the teen hoped to learn what their relationship had been, and the full scope of Parsons' "work".

First, she searched the pockets of Parsons' green windbreaker, locating keys to the main house. Finding a plastic bucket in the kitchen pantry, Mustang filled it with cool water and carried it outside to the thirsty horse. Once emptied, she seized a handful of mane, swung onto the animal's back and rode slowly up the drive.

Whether or not the man who grazed his stock on the Boleskine House property even knew one of his mares had been absent, Mustang didn't care. She kissed the sweet-tempered creature's neck as she dismounted, and watched it canter away.

The white robe, shredded by wind and storms, fluttered from a fence post. MacLeod hadn't sent a forensics team to investigate, after all.

At least, not yet.

Mustang let the peaceful forest permeate her being, strolling to the Georgian mansion. In light of the labors ahead, a few moments' quietude would have to sustain her.

The entrance hall smelled dank when she shoved the door inward; stray shafts of light played on cobwebs. Her fingers located a wall switch, and she grinned at the sconces lining the room.

"I knew I'd heard him right," she said. "And if they electrified this place at some point, there's bound to be coils of left-over wire somewhere."

Years earlier, Mustang's father had broken with his personal code of ethics regarding the treatment of farm stock, running electricity to the pen where his most ornery stallion was housed. The vicious brute hadn't let barbed wire stop his escapes and, valuable as he was, the elder Duryea had no choice.

The teen knew barbed wire stretching around the estate's perimeter wouldn't stop the police, so she made the same decision as her father.

She would hook up the wires much the same as she'd seen him do.

In the meantime, she marveled at Boleskine House's size and furnishings. If, as Parsons had said, Aleister Crowley's creditors had repossessed his belongings to pay outstanding debts, then these pieces had possibly been supplied at the expense of U.S. taxpayers. Queen sized mattresses were set up in five bedrooms, headboards matched the night stands and armoires, with three fully-modern bathrooms, and a kitchen any chef would envy.

Tucked in the cupboard under a stainless steel double sink: two spools of electrical wire - black and red. More than enough to serve her purpose.

Next, she needed tools. Parsons had lived alone in the Gate Lodge for decades; she assumed he made his own repairs when the plumbing or appliances malfunctioned. Indeed, one shelf in the linen closet was cluttered with pliers, wire cutters, hammers and wrenches.

Unscrewing the main fuse, Mustang trimmed the insulation and connected wires at the box, unwinding fifty feet in order to run the lines through the trees before hooking them to the conductive material connected to the gate. Tightening the fuse once more, she heard the hum of high voltage safety.

She stirred a mug of hot cocoa en route from the kitchen to the sofa. No better way to begin perusing Parsons' journals. The first was dated 1947, detailing the original Babalon Working, and the deceptive behavior of L. Ron Hubbard. Mustang wondered if the Scientologists who revered him so blindly knew the truth of the history he'd invented for himself.

Into Parsons life after this series of rituals came Marjorie Cameron, who called herself "Candida". She became close friends with another young woman renting a room in Parsons' Pasadena house, Sylvia Matthys - Mustang's grandmother.

Parsons wrote only one paragraph about Sylvia in that journal: "Of all the women who pass through these doors, Sylvia is the only one to be fully trusted. Her participation in the Gnostic Masses displays a true devotion to the Lodge, and she learns the Enochian invocations for private workings faster than anyone else. She could be Candida's twin, with her flaming red hair and searching eyes." Having never known her grandmother well, Mustang suddenly missed the woman. If she'd been alive, she could have explained Parsons' work, and what had transpired on the hill...

The journals explained it, in part, she discovered. Parsons hadn't been so much greedy for power, as curious. His research and experiments at Cal-Tech and,

later, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, made rocket flight possible. He wasn't in it for money, but for the challenge of solving a seemingly unsolvable puzzle.

The same could be said of his interest in the magickal arts. During the early days of his membership in the Agape Lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis, he recognized a kernel of truth, and swore to bring it to fruition. He looked to Crowley for help unraveling the secrets and, when that aging despot offered little assistance, Parsons struck out on his own.

Mustang read with fascination of the rituals, the rocket fuel tests, and the personalities. Parsons' main flaw, perhaps: his inability to read people, until the damage had been done. His first wife left him for another man, his second wife ran off with Hubbard, and his third wasn't the Scarlet Woman he hoped she'd be.

He possessed an ability to control the elements, nonetheless. During the Babalon Working, the wind howled for days. At his command, rains would soak the city, or hold off until a vital outdoor experiment had been completed. His mastery of fire was limited, as proven when he attempted to ignite a JATO - the solid fuel cells he'd invented - and it exploded, nearly killing him and three colleagues. "Suicide Squad", indeed.

Looking up from the page of the fourth journal, Mustang stared at the fireplace. She hadn't actually witnessed Parsons use matches to light a fire the day they were soaked during the ritual on the hill. Had he used his powers...

And, given the events of the last 48 hours, could she now do the same? "I wish I had a fire on the grate right now," she murmured.

The flames flared like charcoal igniting in a kettle grill amply doused with lighter fluid.

She chortled in disbelief, simultaneously hysterical at the revelation. No need for sappy rhyming "spells" writers devised for the old television series *Bewitched* - watched in re-runs on cold winter days - or the circle-drawing, candle-burning scenes from recent films, which got them banned from local movieplexes in conservative Montana.

After pouring herself a glass of water to soothe her nerves, Mustang resumed reading. The last mention of her grandmother comprised the final entry before Parsons' "death" in 1952: "All were present yesterday when a justice of the peace legally recognized the union between Sylvia and Tony Armbruster. It is for the best she leave this place, carrying with her the seed of the new Aeon."

Did that phrase mean what it implied? Had Jack Parsons gotten her grandmother pregnant, then married her off to someone else?

Maggie Armbruster, Mustang's mother, was born in February, 1953, fitting the time frame indicated. The teen took another sip of water and tried to breathe steadily. Had the man who died at her hands, in fact, been her grandfather?

The impact of the news almost proved too much. She could never discuss this with her mother. Did her mother even know the truth, for that matter? Mustang paced the living room floor, cursing in low tones, afraid her heart might explode.

She went for a jaunt around the property, not to enjoy the beauty of her surroundings - possibly her inheritance, if Parsons had left a will - but to cleanse her body of the adrenaline rush making her restless and angry. Anger was not an emotion to harbor, she knew, based on the destruction caused at the jail, and her unaided escape from the hospital.

Hearing voices near the horse pasture, crackling as if on a radio, she decided exhaustion was getting the better of her. That, or the grounds *were* haunted, which wouldn't have been that unusual. Back at the Gate Lodge, she debated whether to continue reading, finally succumbing to curiosity.

Parsons recounted his staged demise in the sixth volume, more than a year after he'd been exiled in Scotland. "I still have pain from the burns, and if I had one wish, it would be for J. Edgar Hoover to be doused with gasoline and set ablaze, much as his agents did to me."

The rationale for constructing the hilltop altar were outlined. His solitary rituals at the site did not bring about the results he desired and, eventually, he abandoned the effort. Every October, he lamented the arrival of undercover FBI agents, checking on him, instructing him to limit his interaction with locals, and offering him huge sums of money to return to the States and continue his research before the Soviet Union or China found him and killed him.

Mustang closed the book. She racked her brain, then rifled through her backpack, finding the one-way airline ticket. She'd left New York on October 4<sup>th</sup>. Time had blurred in the days which followed, but she guessed it to be October 12<sup>th</sup>.

Had those bastard FBI flunkies visited Boleskine House in her absence, and made off with Parsons' corpse, to preserve their secret? Worse, had they witnessed the deed itself from concealment in the woods?

Disgusted, she kicked the books off the cushions, the cuff of Parsons' oversized trousers unraveling.

"I wish these pants fit right!" she moaned.

In the blink of an eye, the material shrunk to her exact proportions. "Neat trick," commented a strange baritone.

Startled, Mustang rolled off the sofa, almost hitting her head on the coffee table. She recovered instantly, crouching in an attack posture, facing the figure framed in the doorway.

“Who are you?” she barked.

“Ben Espinoza, FBI.”

## V

Her head throbbing, Mustang forced herself to remain calm. “Let’s see your ID.”

Espinoza flashed his credentials; she snatched the wallet from his gloved hand.

“How’d you get in here?”

“We’ve been on the property since Tuesday, performing routine surveillance exercises.”

“What, you use this place as a training facility?”

“Once a year, yes. It gives the academy graduates new ground to explore. Especially when there’s a fresh corpse.”

“Oh, hell...”

“No need to worry. I’ve only been with our international field office a couple years, but I think Parsons was more than ready to die.”

“You saw?”

“The red team reported you fleeing the area on horseback. The blue team observed your return with a representative of local law enforcement. The only thing I personally saw was you running wires to the fence this morning...”

“Two days too late,” sighed Mustang.

“My hair is curly enough, I don’t need an electric shock to make it worse.”

Despite the serious circumstances, the teen chuckled. This lean, athletic Hispanic defied stereotypes portrayed on television and in Congressional reports on corruption. He might be willing to aid her...

“No can do,” he stated after listening to her plea. “If British intelligence knew we were here, the tension between the new prime minister and the president would worsen. Interfering in a police investigation is anathema.”

“But, they think I’m delusional, because you took the body...”

“You knew Parsons was under our protection. You never should have told an outsider what happened.”

“How was I to know they weren’t privy to the information?” Mustang fumed. “I wasn’t sure he was telling the truth, or if he was a bit touched in the head, himself. I was only here to honor my grandmother’s dying wish.”

“The only suggestion I can make is leaving the country.”

“And, just how do I go about doing that?”

“There are ferries to Ireland, where you may be able to hop a plane bound Stateside, or cross the Channel to France...”

“Do I *look* rich?”

Espinoza smirked. “Every year, we brought Parsons his... allowance, for lack of a better term. Since you’ve rid us of a very sticky problem, I don’t see why you shouldn’t claim it as a reward.” He extracted a thick manila envelope from his trench coat. “There’s the equivalent of ten thousand dollars in there, in 20-pound British notes. Think that’ll last you awhile?”

“I didn’t kill Parsons for any reward,” declared Mustang, batting the parcel into the corner.

“I know you didn’t, kid. Look, we’re wrapping up our exercises and will be heading south in an hour. How ‘bout a ride into Glasgow? You can catch a train from there...”

“Sounds good.” She flopped on the sofa. “Tell me one thing, would you?”

“If I can.”

“What’d you do with Parsons’ body?”

“Legend has it ‘Jock White’ died thirty years ago, and is buried in an Inverness churchyard.”

“MacLeod told me.”

“Well, what had been an empty coffin now has an... occupant.”

She bit back an expletive. “Why did the Feds kill him off thirty years ago, anyway?”

“Same reason Jack Parsons died in ‘52. An undesirable element wanted him to work for their interests...”

“The communists?”

“This last time, the CIA photographed KGB agents at the Loch Ness Exhibition Centre in the village. We barely had time to fly over and move Parsons out before they overran the property.”

“What’d they do when they didn’t find him?”

“Accepted the story we planted in local papers, that he’d died as the result of a riding accident. A couple of them stuck around for the funeral, then flew back to Paris.”

“You also had him sell the place to Jimmy Page?”

“Temporarily.”

Mustang retrieved the journals from the floor and stuffed them into her backpack. Espinoza crossed the room in three strides and confiscated the bag.

“What the hell...”

He pulled out the books. “You can’t take these.”

“How’re you going to stop me?”

“I do have handcuffs, if I need to restrain uncooperative suspects, and a sidearm, if they try to escape with sensitive, top secret documents.”

“And I wish you’d... go away.”

Had a bungy cord been hooked to a harness around Espinoza’s torso, he wouldn’t have been yanked from the house with any greater force. Mustang rushed through the door, and saw him soar over the fence and make a sizeable splash when he impacted the waters of the loch.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered, hurriedly fetching the books and the backpack.

Other FBI agents, alerted to their comrade’s fate, raced along the drive toward the road. Once they passed the Gate Lodge, Mustang took off toward the main house. She cut sharply onto the path up the hill, not stopping until she sagged against the wooden altar.

“I wish I was home!” she screamed.

Gunfire erupted; a dozen agents must’ve been directed to pursue her, while the rest assisted Espinoza.

“Not one step farther!” her command echoed across the clearing.

Halted in mid-stride, the sweatsuit-clad rookies fell to the ground, pistols flying from their hands.

“Don’t struggle,” Mustang continued. “I won’t hurt you, and you can’t hurt me. I’m going home, and you can’t stop me.” She crawled atop the charred altar. “I’m going home!”

The agents managed to raise themselves into sitting positions as the ground jolted. “Not again!” one shrieked.

A sudden microburst of wind bent trees double and snapped off limbs. Rain and hail pounded the unwilling observers, and fire burst from the stone pit. The flash of lightning made a direct hit on the altar.

When the afterglow faded, Mustang was gone.

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A pleasant autumn breeze rustled red and gold leaves on the rise above the ranch house. Maggie Duryea stood at the kitchen window, watching the sunset and washing dinner dishes. The abrupt earth tremor and devastating blast of air wrenched a cry from her lips. “Joe!”

Her husband abandoned his pipe and newspaper, joining her at the sink. Not a cloud marred the sky, but both saw a lightning flash strike the grassy pasture.

“I’d better check it didn’t start a fire,” Joe said.

“Be careful,” warned his wife.

Jumping on the ATV he used to corral his horses, Duryea bounced across the acreage and up the slope. He almost flipped the vehicle when he closed in on the blackened earth where the bolt had struck.

In the middle of the circle lay his daughter, unconscious, her palms blackened as if she’d been holding the lightning bolt with her bare hands.

Waking in her own room the following morning, Mustang knew she’d never be able to tell her parents what had happened. Her father surmised she’d been walking home from the bus station, and poor timing placed her on the hill when the freakish weather had occurred.

Parsons’ journals would remain secret, well hidden in a compartment she cut into the rear wall of her closet. So long as the FBI didn’t come looking for her - how could they, unless they wanted their activities made public - and the Scottish police wrote her off as a delusional lunatic, not a murderer facing charges, she could reside in her quiet corner of Montana, undisturbed.

Powers or no, she really didn’t want to change the world...

The greater challenge would be for people to change themselves, and no power on earth could accomplish that.