

The Mustang Chronicles:

Traveling Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The FBI had done their job well.

Not a trace of Jack Parsons remained on the Boleskine House grounds except, perhaps, for one who knew how he had lived his final decades.

Like Elizabeth Duryea.

Modest furnishings remained in the Gate Lodge, but the young woman known in Montana as Mustang didn't concern herself with that upon her arrival via a rogue lightning bolt. She rested atop a grassy hillock, against the lone vertical support of Parsons' wooden altar, the other pieces piled haphazardly, slowly rotting after being torn apart by the strike which had transported her home nearly two years earlier. Her dizziness eased within minutes, and she oriented herself to a landscape drenched in steamy mid-day haze - she'd left Las Vegas at dawn, and forced herself to remember the time difference - before trudging along an overgrown trail to the winding gravel drive.

The gate itself, blocking access from the road circling Loch Ness, hung askew on its hinges. That would be her first project, she decided. Rusted padlocks secured the Gate Lodge doors, front and kitchen, easily pried loose with a sturdy twig.

Mustang saw no need to use the power Parsons had transferred to her on this very estate when her own ingenuity sufficed.

Within the dim four-room abode, chairs and tables had been draped with white sheets, in turn covered with dust and cobwebs. Other priorities taking precedence to house cleaning, she located a kerosene lamp and lit the wick.

Her worn backpack - restored to her by Ben Espinoza, having been confiscated when FBI agents searched her parents' home upon her abrupt departure for California - was emptied, clothes and cash, onto the tall chest of drawers in the bedroom. She removed the ring given her by James of Salisbury and set it, his sword and scabbard amidst the clutter. The window open, a variable breeze relieved the stuffiness; she discovered a cache of fresh linens in a cedar cupboard and made the bed.

The teen had hopes for life in seclusion, a combination of comfort and peace. Money won from casino slot machines would make a good start toward achieving the desired comfort. Peace would come with the knowledge no one could disturb her on the property.

Obstacles presented themselves from the first. Strolling to the main house, which Parsons hadn't used since abandoning his occult "experiments", hazel eyes peeked through filthy windows. She recalled the presence of extravagant decor

within; someone had stripped the dwelling bare. It might take weeks to acquire what she needed, and confining herself to the Gate Lodge for a prolonged period didn't appeal to her.

She ached to ride, besides. The neighbor who grazed his horses on Boleskine acreage might be willing to sell some of his stock; she'd need a barn and corral to house the animals. Such a building she could not construct on her own. Discouraged yet energized, she set off for the tiny village of Dores, literally ripping the gate off the post and pitching it into the underbrush.

Flowing red hair made her instantly recognizable to the locals, though they hadn't seen her in months - and, then, just in passing. The inn's owner welcomed her with a thick Scottish burr. She inquired about a contractor who could perform extensive renovations and order reliable appliances, unable to comprehend his answer.

Japanese could be translated inside her head. English spoken with a harsh accent, no such luck.

The two phrases she caught involved the name "MacDonough" and "two miles south". A fortuitous happenstance, to be sure, because Glenn MacDonough was not only the neighbor who owned the horses she admired, but also project manager for a construction firm based in Inverness.

He had blue prints drawn up before Saturday, and a bill of sale for a sorrel gelding, a bay mare and three roans. "Give me a month, lassie, and this place will be fit for a queen."

A hermit queen, she mused. Before the isolation commenced, however, she determined to see the world as ordinary tourists did, circumnavigating the globe - influenced by a copy of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, which she'd found discarded at a campsite FBI cadets must've used during their annual training on the estate.

Not that Phileas Fogg's route appealed to her. She had no need to stay in the northern hemisphere, as that fictional character had done. Africa and South America were included in her itinerary, after a stop in Monte Carlo to augment her cash assets at the Riviera's lush casinos.

Mustang secured the Gate Lodge and instructed MacDonough to install new deadbolts on the main dwelling before hoisting her backpack over one shoulder and hiking north. A simple command would have whisked her to London, her departure point, but she wanted her wounded palms to heal once and for all. Besides, she could not risk the weather service tracking any anomalies. She'd even changed her hair color to jet black, to prevent others from distinguishing her in a crowd.

Flying would be avoided, she vowed. Her experiences in airplanes - from New York to Scotland, and multiple times in small propeller-driven craft with Erwin Rommel - left her queasy at the thought of soaring above the clouds, in the conventional sense. The train from Inverness to Edinburgh, then an overnight express to the British capital, would be slower, but less nerve-wracking.

Hard on the spine, too. She didn't think to pay for a sleeper, and ended up sitting awake in a first class carriage for 12 hours. The lesson from that mistake would carry forward into future travel arrangements.

London reminded Mustang of her meanderings through the Bronx during a power outage, hunting for JFK International Airport. Streets were packed with cabs and pedestrians; streets curved and twisted in random patterns, making navigation difficult. She happened, by chance, upon Buckingham Palace. The royal flag flew above the main entrance, a signal of the queen in residence. Outside the gates, handymen scrubbed the fountain beneath a life-like statue of Queen Victoria; Mustang would've liked to see it with the water flowing.

She managed to find a tourist agency, and bought a map. No wonder she was confused, she realized once she unfolded the huge sheet. Split by the River Thames, the city's layout made absolutely no sense. On the reverse side, a chart of the London Underground system showed how to get to various landmarks. Better than wandering lanes and byways, she concluded.

A one-day pass proved cheaper than individual tickets. Fortunately, she'd deposited her American money into a Scottish Bank, which had issued her a debit card good for British pounds or the newer Euro. She managed to disembark at the right stop to see Parliament, then continued to Picadilly, and the British Museum. Not intentionally, she paused in the King's Library beside a statue of Sekhmet. The lower shelf of a nearby glass display case contained scrying artefacts used by John Dee, the 16th century scholar who'd recorded the Enochian language Jack Parsons had integrated into his rituals on the hill at Boleskine...

She returned to the Great Hall, where a circular chamber housed more books than she'd seen in any Montana library. Her backpack unslung, she rested it atop her sneakers, and flexed her shoulders. A few t-shirts and jeans could get heavy, being toted for hours at a stretch.

That's when she noticed the pink designer backpack set against the wall of a souvenir concession. A mental directive allowed her to detect the quiet vibrations of a cell phone ringing in silent mode. "Contain the explosion!" she uttered aloud, just as blocks of C-4 detonated to launch an assortment of nails and tacks - a "dirty bomb" - at nearby patrons.

Hardware clattered on the floor in a harmless heap. The rapport, nonetheless, brought security personnel running from all directions. Mustang nonchalantly retrieved her backpack and moved toward the nearest exit.

Too late. The complex locked down, no one was being allowed to leave. A thorough search commenced, every purse and duffel rifled, torsos and legs patted for concealed weapons. Living in an age when terrorists targeted innocent people sucked, the teen sighed, waiting in a long, long queue.

The idea she might be pulled from the line never crossed her mind, until a robust security guard and a trim, brown-haired figure in black pin-stripe suit approached. Their discussion, though hushed, clearly targeted her.

Her dread escalated when three other armed, uniformed men joined them. “May I see your identification, please?” hailed the middle-aged plain-clothes official in crisp British tones, flashing a badge hooked to his inside pocket.

Mustang groped in the bag for her passport. As she opened the cover, she realized the photo showed her with auburn tresses. Suspicious brown eyes gazed at the booklet through small, squarish glasses, then at her, then back at the laminated image. She shrugged in resignation.

“When did you change your hair?” asked the official.

“A couple weeks ago.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I got tired of it being red.”

“This passport shows no stamp from your port of entry,” he continued, flipping pages.

The teen grasped at straws. “Yes, it does. There’s one from Edinburgh, two years ago.”

“Are you saying you’ve been in the British Isles for two years?”

“Staying with... relatives.”

“Come with us, please.”

They led her into a busy office, the underlings shooing out museum employees. Two of the men pulled a swivel chair from a desk and sat her roughly on it.

“Go easy, will ya?” she protested.

“Why should we go easy, when you tried to kill dozens of people?”

“I didn’t try to kill anybody! I *stopped*...” She clamped her lips shut, not wanting to open a can of worms which would cause more trouble.

The official didn’t hear her, dumping her personal possessions on the desk blotter. His disappointment showed in a somber frown.

“Didn’t find any incriminating evidence?” taunted Mustang.

“We’ve still got you on illegal entry into the country.”

“Illegal how?”

“Foreigners are required to report their whereabouts to local authorities on a regular basis.”

She retorted, “We don’t have to do that in America, unless we’re a convicted criminal on parole!”

“You could be a criminal: a terrorist.”

“If I was, would I have been standing ten feet from where that backpack exploded?”

“Someone intent on making this a suicide bombing would.”

They weren’t going to release her until they were convinced she had nothing to do with the bomb.

She pleaded, “Can you, at least, tell me your name and where you get the authority to detain me?”

“I’m Charles Faulkner of Interpol.”

“Not to show my ignorance, but what’s Interpol?”

“The International Criminal Police Organization, with jurisdiction to conduct investigations around the world.”

Mustang didn’t like the sound of that. “Kind of like our FBI back home, working in all 50 states.”

“On a larger scale, yes.”

“Oh, hell.”

Thankfully, she’d deleted her FBI computer file via Ben Espinoza’s Blackberry, and he’d promised not to recreate it... Regardless, bits and pieces of circumstantial evidence could be stacked into an impenetrable wall if she wasn’t careful...

“The bomb was activated by a cell phone, right?” she queried.

Stiff brown waves barely moved when Faulkner nodded, though the silver frames inched down his slender nose.

“There’s no cell phone in my bag, or my pockets. How could I have made the necessary call, standing where I was, without one?”

The robust security guard replied, “An accomplice could’ve made the call.”
Strike one.

“Why would I carry two backpacks into the museum? Wouldn’t such an oddity have been noticed at the entrance? Furthermore, if I intended this to be a suicide bombing, why bother to bring my clothes and toiletries?”

That statement got the men thinking.

“Check the security tapes from all doors,” instructed Faulkner.

Mustang attempted to rise.

He waved her back with a sturdy hand bearing one beaten silver ring. “Not yet. We’re not letting you go until we corroborate your story.”

“Fine.” She settled on the unsteady chair.

The pair contemplated each other in silence until the guards reappeared, reporting surveillance cameras showed nothing unusual about her visit to the museum.

“She entered from Montague Place, with a single backpack, and it never left her possession.”

Two minutes later - belongings jammed once more into the bag - she emerged between the Romanesque columns and bounced down the steps, headed for the Russell Square Underground station. “When will I learn to mind my own business?” she chided herself, heading toward Charing Cross to select a five-star hotel.

Having witnessed the FBI murder Jim Neville in cold blood, and dealt with time traveler James Michael’s machinations, Mustang saw no viable reason not to enjoy what her power could manifest. Ten pulls on one-armed bandits had netted her \$150,000 before her departure for Scotland, so luxury could be bought without calling upon the natural elements.

The Savoy offered that luxury. The suite she occupied dwarfed her parents’ ranch house, fully color-coordinated; her mother’s cherished living room group appeared shabby in comparison. A maid and butler hovered close at hand, unneeded, given the extent of her luggage. Like Phileas Fogg, she could purchase supplies, clean underwear and socks along the way, never having to bother with dirty laundry.

Wearing sweats and a tank top, she crawled under a thick quilt on the king-sized bed, switched on the 50" wall-mounted plasma television with a remote, and flipped to a classic movie channel while waiting for room service to deliver a six-course dinner.

“Eating like this every day, I could get fat,” she commented after polishing off a bowl of vegetable soup, a plate of roast beef, boiled potatoes and spinach, tossed salad, a steamed fish concoction and huge champagne flute filled with chocolate mousse. Reaching for the bedside phone, she had the switchboard connect her with a reputable travel agency, booking tickets on the train from London beneath the English Channel to Paris, then from Paris to Monte Carlo.

A walk to St. James Park the next morning preceded Mustang’s cab ride to the train station. She hesitated with her fingers poised above the shiny chrome door handle, however. A half-block away, the vaguely familiar face, crowned by a

brown mop and pretending to gaze into a bookshop window, caught her eye. Shades of Ben Espinoza and his FBI flunkies: Interpol had issued a surveillance order.

II

Less time elapsed during the trip between England and France than on the journey from Edinburgh to London. The speed of this conveyance glued Mustang to her seat, her knuckles white gripping the arm rests. She sensed, more than saw, Charles Faulkner in the same car, and swore to lose him in Paris - despite her lack of knowledge about the city. If it was laid out anything like the British capital, she could duck down an alley and wind her way around, until he gave up the chase.

The teen didn't count on this Interpol agent's dogged determination. From the Eiffel Tower, which she didn't feel the urge to climb, she trekked to the Arc de Triomphe, along the Champs Elysees, and managed to find the Louvre. Among the art exhibits, a young, rather wild looking young man passed behind her, pinching her posterior. Reflexes kicked in, and she backhanded him as he moved out of reach. He tumbled across the tile floor, shocked.

Two insistent hands grasped her upper arms and whisked her from the salon into an alcove. She glared at Faulkner almost eye-to-eye, her fist clenched anew.

"One thing I hate," he snapped, angled jaw set in a scowl. "Tourists who fail to check local customs before traveling. Petty thieves have one thing in mind when using the pinch tactic: seducing the woman into a one-night stand and making off with her valuables while she's asleep, or being assaulted in return, to score a few Euros in exchange for not filing charges when the gendarmes arrive."

She shook free of his grasp. "That's crazy."

"Perhaps, but true." He pushed drooping spectacles up his nose. "If you like, I'll let you handle the situation on your own but, unless you speak French, I don't see how..."

Mustang strode away from Faulkner wearing a confident smirk. The young man had been helped to his feet by witnesses - possible accomplices who would share the spoils of his deed - and he brushed dust from designer jeans with scraped hands.

"You people saw how this foreigner hit me for no reason!" he whimpered.

Though Faulkner heard her words in English - it being his native tongue - everyone else heard her in an earthy dialect, thanks to her power.

“Game’s over, smart ass. You’d better get moving because, by my calculations, you have ten seconds before your lying tongue and grabby fingers - and the rest of your skin - turns bright green.”

The discoloration spread from the tip of his right thumb; the crowd recoiled and the thief yelped in terror. He bolted from the museum and, her shadow thus distracted, Mustang slipped down a narrow corridor, past a row of administrative offices and through an employee entrance.

She roamed Paris streets as night fell, stopping to eat at a sidewalk café, without worrying whether Faulkner or his Interpol colleagues prowled the boulevard. Delicate pastries tantalized her taste buds; lights twinkled up and down the Seine.

The Champs Elysees offered easy access to the Hotel Napoleon on Avenue de Friedland. Not typical five-star accommodations, the private townhouse provided a fantastic view of the Eiffel Tower illuminated by thousands of golden bulbs.

Her internal clock had not adjusted to this leisurely schedule, and Mustang invariably awoke at 6:00 AM, regardless of the time zone. Back home, she imagined her father and the ranch hands feeding and watering the horses. No longer did any such responsibility occupy her - at least, not until she returned to Scotland and took Glenn MacDonough’s horses into her possession.

Seven hours riding another train brought her to Nice, where a quick transfer deposited her in Monte Carlo as the evening crush commenced at the casinos. Severely underdressed in jeans, sneakers and Pink Floyd t-shirt - compared to the other gamblers - the teen detoured into an elegant boutique, buying a pair of grey slacks, green silk blouse, and black flats. She ditched her backpack in a top-floor suite at the Hermitage, standing on the balcony gazing at the indescribably blue Mediterranean Sea.

Living her entire life in Montana, except for a few accidental excursions, Mustang had never really spent much energy contemplating larger bodies of water. She’d seen the Pacific when she and Jim Neville had spent a night at the Hotel del Coronado near San Diego, and flown over the Atlantic during that initial trip to Scotland. To be utterly still and listen to waves crash over the beach...

The thought popped into her head before she could prevent it: what a flood she could cause with so much water.

What a mass of human beings would die if she brought down the Casino de Monte Carlo’s ornate roof proved another unbidden idea. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor - though all presenting an appearance of wealth, judging by their fashionable attire - crowded around roulette, black jack and baccarat tables.

Unlike Las Vegas, “one-armed bandits” were not the rage here, confined to the Atrium and Salle Blanche.

She’d seen Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*, and knew the basics of roulette. Too chancy, though. Black jack... maybe, but it would take too long to win the amount of money she needed to complete her world tour. Peering through the door of the Salle des Ameriques, she glimpsed a possible means to her ends: the craps table.

How difficult could it be to throw a pair of dice?

She stood on the fringe of the crowd, behind a couple speaking German. Their conversation interested her more than the Canadian shooter rolling his share of snake eyes, points and sevens.

“We’ve been to every casino in Monte Carlo,” grumbled the stocky, sandy-haired man.

His much blonder, hippish companion countered, “There’s no way to deposit a dead woman’s body under one of the gaming tables without being observed.”

“Or frame her husband by slipping loaded dice in his inside pocket.”

“Then have the murderer escape, undetected.”

Either they were planning a crime, or researching a mystery novel. Mustang chuckled quietly, guessing their futile mingling could benefit from a playful distraction.

“Look, the prince has just arrived!” came a disembodied voice from across the chamber.

Simultaneously, hundreds of eyes whipped toward the door, and many of the gamblers abandoned their chips for a closer view of the Monaco royalty - including the German couple. They halted in their tracks, realizing the import of the event.

Mustang hadn’t moved and, as they retraced their steps to the craps table, she grinned. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“We’re grateful you did,” gushed the man, extending his hand warmly.

“We were desperate for a solution...”

“Sometimes, when you concentrate too hard, you miss the obvious answers.”

The woman squeezed Mustang’s left forearm between fleshy fingers. “You are so right, Fraulein. And we must thank you for your help, mustn’t we, Rolf?”

“Indeed, indeed. We’ll dedicate this next book to you, Fraulein...”

“Mustang... er, Elizabeth... Neville.”

Rolf studied the teen’s face. “Mustang?”

“A nickname, because I love horses. You don’t need to dedicate the book to me; I’m sure you have many close friends or family members more worthy.”

“A compromise, then,” said his wife. “We have a list of acknowledgments to add, and you’ll be among them.”

“Fine.” She’d already grasped using her real name might enable certain people - Interpol, her parents - to find her. Since she’d seriously considered accepting Jim’s marriage proposal, had he lived to make it, using his surname seemed appropriate. And, to explain what some might classify her eccentricities... “Formally, it’s Lady Elizabeth Neville.”

The woman’s eyes brightened. “I wouldn’t have guessed you were nobility, Your Ladyship.”

“I don’t... broadcast it.”

“We don’t usually make our profession so public, either,” the man remarked. “We are Rolf and Greta Steckling, of Salzburg.”

“Ah, Austria! I’ve heard your country is beautiful.”

“There can be no doubt, some of the most gorgeous countryside in Europe. Still, we’ve seen many awe-inspiring sites on our travels.”

“Research for your stories?”

Steckling nodded. “For this work, we’ve visited Brussels, Cannes, Monte Carlo and, tomorrow, we leave for Athens.”

Mustang’s eyebrows arched. “I envy you!”

“Would you like to come along?” invited Greta. “We sail on a yacht, so there’s plenty of extra room...”

Travel *on* the water might be worse than travel by aircraft, Mustang debated. Nonetheless... “I would be honored to join you.”

“Good, good!” concluded Rolf, drawing her close to the high-sided craps table.. “Come, now, Your Ladyship, you must play.”

“I... have no chips.”

“Here’s 200 to start you off.” The croupiers resumed their positions after the royal false alarm. “Or would you try your hand?”

Mimicking a line from some movie set in Las Vegas, Mustang accepted the dice. “New shooter coming out.”

Manipulating two spotted cubes didn’t tax the teen’s power much. Eight passes with six as the point, she moved her chips to another spot, and rolled three straight elevens. Another two points, and she cashed in winnings exceeding \$200,000.

Rolf and Greta had followed her lead, netting themselves a tidy sum, as well. Parting at the brightly lit casino entrance near midnight, they agreed to meet

on the beach at sunrise, to tour the tiny principality before setting out on the yacht for the Greek Isles.

The yacht was not Mustang's idea of the term. Her idea encompassed an oversized fishing boat, fifty feet long, tops. The *Ultimate Escape* - according to the name painted on the stern - dwarfed any private craft she could imagine. Some tourist cruise ships weren't as large.

"This is yours?" she stammered as a launch neared the starboard side.

"Greta's cousin is president of a prominent Swiss bank," explained Rolf. "He's in America, negotiating some business deal on the Stock Exchange. He let us borrow his 'baby', as he calls it, since most of our stops were on the coast."

"I'd hate to see how much it costs to fill the fuel tanks."

"It doesn't use traditional fuel. It's completely powered by solar and wind energy."

"Amazing!" She peered through a window at the spacious dining room.

"Don't you get lost?"

Greta chuckled, "Only in the closets."

And those closets were huge. The yacht's owner and his wife kept theirs filled with the best clothes money could buy. Greta and Rolf's collection was more modest, given their short time on the craft. Mustang would have preferred a small cabin on the lower deck, but objections were raised by the staff who claimed that space as their own.

Thus, she found herself near the bow as the captain weighed anchor and steered the boat south-eastward. A late breakfast revealed much of the Steckling's personalities. Married 27 years, Rolf had spent long days in a Salzburg courtroom, as attorney and - later - judge. Greta had been a fashion designer, exporting her creations to burgeoning eastern capitalist markets.

On a whim, Rolf had penned a mystery novel one summer, a diversion from the legalese he read and wrote on a daily basis. Greta proofread the pages and added feminine touches. Their new career was born. In five years, they'd written six books, selling millions of copies on the continent.

"Our publisher translates the manuscripts into English, making them more widely available," Greta noted. "German isn't spoken much beyond our own borders anymore."

"We've heard Hollywood may be interested in purchasing rights to the series," injected Rolf.

"Fantastic!" Mustang remarked. "What's this latest project about?"

"A German spy during World War II. His wife doesn't know of his occupation, and is killed by a Russian assassin in Monte Carlo, the husband framed

for the crime. To prevent being exposed, he flees, following the assassin to Greece and across the Black Sea, catching him right before he reaches the port city of Novorossiysk.”

The twists and turns in the story would make it unusual, not like some American novelists who used formulaic plots to produce “salable” material quickly. Mustang promised herself to watch for its release; it would make a great evening’s read in the isolation of Boleskine House.

The water so clear, the teen could see fish swimming beneath the white caps as she leaned over the rail. Not-so-fond recollections of her visit to Sean Forbes’ pirate ship resurrected a foul taste in her mouth, yet the yacht cut through the water so smoothly, her stomach did not fully rebel.

Greta joined her there in late afternoon, as they rounded Sicily and passed Italy’s boot. She and her husband came from sturdy Germanic stock, enjoying the fruits of post-World War II reconstruction. They could romanticize the Hitler era in their novels, because they hadn’t experienced it first-hand. Mustang had, through Georg Schiller’s eyes, and saw nothing worthwhile in the turmoil of any armed conflict.

This world tour could be a peace pilgrimage, she speculated. Her power enabled her to melt weapons and disable engines; why not turn their machine guns into formless metal and stall their tanks?

History proved, though, such destruction would be ineffective. She could not change the human mind. Without the technology of war, people would use sticks and stones to beat each other senseless, enforcing their beliefs.

With strange tenderness, the teen recalled a conversation on the Normandy beach between herself and Erwin Rommel. A beauty of the species: independent thought. So long as people refused to conform to a common way of life, the race would remain viable and diverse.

Conversely, so long as people refused to conform to a common way of life, their opposing ideas of right and wrong would spark wars.

“We’ll reach Greece by morning,” Greta announced, interrupting her guest’s reverie.

“If I remember my world geography, Athens isn’t a port city. How...”

The older woman laughed. “That’s why it’s last on our itinerary. We’ll dock at Pireaus, and drive to the capital. The boat will head for London to pick up my cousin upon his return from the States.”

Crossing the Ionian Sea at night, beneath a full moon, restored a degree of inner peace Mustang had sought to reclaim since meeting Jack Parsons. She’d been known to skip school and wander the vast wooded acres of her father’s

ranch, communing with nature. Being able to control that same nature had changed the dynamic, especially when her slightest utterance could cause catastrophes, and even death.

The bustling port city of Pireaus, Greece surprised her. She'd expected something quaint and ancient; cars and trucks filled the modern streets, along with tourist hordes.

To prevent further questioning from officials, Mustang had decided to change her hair color back to its natural shade when passing through customs. Lagging behind Greta and Rolf Steckling, they didn't heed the alteration, and she wasn't delayed longer than the average traveler.

Climbing into a hired limousine, she tossed her backpack on the floor. "Why so lavish?" she asked.

"We can afford it, thanks to you," replied Rolf, tapping the left chest of his sport coat, inside which rested his overstuffed wallet.

Honestly, if she'd had to admit it, she would've done the same. Might as well be comfortable on the journey.

Mustang's freshman world history class did not prepare her for the magnificence of Athens. The Parthenon, in ruins prior to an extensive restoration project, stood on the Acropolis like a watchful guardian. She was reminded of her time in Rome, when Franciscan Brother Giovanni had shown her sights - and sites - dating back millennia.

The Greek culture pre-dated Rome by centuries. The skill required to construct buildings which had lasted so long put 21st century "civilization" to shame. To this day, few had been able to accurately analyze how such feats had been accomplished.

A different kind of heat enveloped the city, combining weather, a crush of August tourists and vehicle fumes. Mustang accustomed to open air, she left her companions at the hotel and set out for higher ground.

Haze somewhat obscured her view from the Acropolis. She turned inward, then, gazing at thick, carved Doric columns, so precisely placed, so unmoving. From a Greek temple to a Christian church, a mosque and even a munitions storehouse, it took a well-aimed 17th century mortar to ignite the explosives and decimate the structure.

The fruits of man at war with himself.

Crews in hard hats milled around the interior, measuring and taking samples. Signs announced the impending restoration in many languages, and prevented average sightseers from gaining access. Mustang could easily have

disregarded the prohibition - she'd made herself invisible before - but contented herself with surveying the activity.

She didn't cause the minor tremor which shook the hill, and reasoned few would have felt it. It was enough, however, to unsettle a damaged section of column, being studied by a group of archeologists or architects. It tipped, and there was no time...

"Stop!" she cried.

The stone paused in mid-air, reminiscent of how Lyndon Bixby had been suspended above the Helena library lobby when he fell off a ladder. The cluster of bodies didn't stir, stunned immobile and ogling the phenomenon.

She yelled, "Move, you idiots!" The same linguistic command which allowed her to comprehend countless tongues meant every ear heard the words in the vernacular.

All but one complied. He shifted, then turned to retrieve a notebook lying on the floor. Mustang had released the block...

Unseen hands yanked the man from beneath the six ton stone. He stumbled and pitched into a pile of debris, which is where the teen squatted beside him.

"Are you all right?"

Knocking off his hard hat, he raised his dust-coated head and blinked disoriented brown eyes repeatedly.

"Oh, hell..."

It was Charles Faulkner, of Interpol.

III

"What are you doing here?" Mustang demanded.

Faulkner slowly righted himself, running quivering hands through his disheveled brown mop and straightening the silver framed spectacles. "I could ask you the same. This area is off-limits."

"What, you're a security guard, too?"

"No, I'm on a special tour. My hobby is archeology."

"And you just happened to be in Athens..."

"Because your entry at Pireaus triggered our computers. Nice try, using a private water craft to flee Monaco."

"I didn't *flee*. Friends offered me transportation."

"A convenient form of transportation, basically untraceable. Typical terrorist tactics."

"Oh, shut up. I'm not a terrorist, and you damned well know it!"

“I know no such thing,” he insisted. “You’re not the average American kid on summer holiday from school. You’ve already changed your hair from red to black twice in a short period...”

“What,” Mustang interrupted, “you’ve got video of customs?”

“Indeed.”

She stormed away; Faulkner pursued her.

“How did you turn that Frenchman’s skin green?” he probed.

Mustang whirled, fire lighting hazel orbs. “The same way I’ll transform you into one of these columns for eternity, if you don’t leave me alone, sir!”

He halted, and she gained a bit of ground in her escape before he resumed the chase. “Who is Lady Elizabeth Neville?”

“Your worst nightmare.”

Those thick, unyielding fingers seized her shoulders. “Why is there no record of you whatsoever in the U.S. legal databases? No birth certificate, no application for that passport you carry...”

“Oh, hell...” When erasing the FBI record, had she erased every proof of her existence? She couldn’t remember how she had phrased the directive...

No way was she going to tell Faulkner to call Ben Espinoza. She’d never again be able to show her face beyond the perimeter of Boleskine’s 47 acres.

“What do you want?” she breathed.

“The truth.”

A nearly hysterical guffaw burst from her lips, unbidden. “Supposedly, the man many call Christ told his followers the truth, and they didn’t believe him. He couched his ideas in parables, and they gave him blank stares for his trouble. A certain statement about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days went right over their heads.” She extended her arms, symbolically encompassing the entire Parthenon. “It wouldn’t take me three days to rebuild *this* temple.”

Faulkner recoiled. “You’re insane.”

Mustang despised dealing with narrow-minded people. For his eyes only, she reassembled the ancient Greek landmark, smirking as she spoke the words.

The Interpol agent fainted at the sight. The teen hurried past tourists and staff, back to the hotel.

Rolf and Greta had ordered lunch; Mustang declined to partake of the local delicacies. Retrieving her backpack, she trudged toward the suite door.

Rolf protested, “You’re leaving so soon?”

“Pressing business, I’m afraid,” she lied. “I checked my voice mail from the Acropolis... big mistake. I should know better when I’m on vacation.”

Greta intercepted her, wrapping her in a stifling embrace. "It's been a joy spending time with you."

A tear trickled down Mustang's nose at the compliment. "No one's ever said that to me."

"It's true, you know," Rolf confirmed. "You're a handful, I can tell, but every day would be exciting around you."

"Thank you."

"You'll end up a character in one of our novels someday," added Greta.

Her husband agreed. "A whole series of novels, perhaps!"

The limousine drove Mustang back to Pireaus, where she hired a much smaller yacht than the *Ultimate Escape* to ferry her across the Mediterranean to Cairo. How could she circle the globe without admiring the Great Pyramid of Egypt up close?

African culture intrigued the teen, too. Tribes had warred among themselves in recent centuries, but they coexisted with nature in many ways. Hiring a car and a guide, she set off through the Sahara, stopping in Morocco. A cruise ship propelled her further south along the Atlantic coast and, eventually, she debarked in Cape Town, South Africa. Interacting with no one, keeping entirely to herself, made the most sense, though the incredible influx of knowledge merely from listening and walking streets of the various cities overwhelmed her brain.

All the more a pleasant adventure with no Interpol agents dogging her steps. She avoided customs officials entirely by making herself invisible - the only occasions she used her power over the course of weeks.

That would change in Mumbai.

The press of bodies in that metropolis, especially the slums and open-air markets, caused Mustang to feel claustrophobic for the first time in her life. Had Faulkner been standing three feet away, she wouldn't have noticed him, being shoved to and fro by the rush of feet. Slamming into Kanti Gandhi Dinn rounding a corner might have rated a million to one odds in a gambler's mind.

Yet, it happened.

The young Indian woman pulled this acquaintance into a tiny café. "You should have written me you were coming!" she chided in her lilting voice.

"Everything was last minute."

"You look well."

"So do you. Did you ever manage to convince your father to let you change majors at college?"

“Yes. I decided to take a semester off, but when I return to the University of Portland, I’ll be concentrating on visual arts and editing a feature-length documentary shot by my own film production company.”

“Outstanding!”

“We’re shooting footage north of the city tomorrow. Would you like to come and see what I do?”

“I’d be honored.”

Kanti took Mustang to her apartment, in a depressed neighborhood. “I choose not to live as the wealthy do. My goal is to expose the injustice and inequity of the Indian economy, to give the poor a chance to improve their lives.”

“Good for you. Have you made any contacts with distributors in the States?”

“This spring, I was fortunate to spend a week in Los Angeles. My ideas intrigued some of the men, who were far more accepting than men here. To this day, I am sometimes spit upon or struck by those who think I should be home raising a dozen children.”

“Exposing *that* should be your next project,” proposed Mustang.

“The script is already written.”

A simple meal of curry and rice satisfied the teen’s growling stomach, and made her sleepy. Both women retired early; they would be on the road before sunrise to fields where hundreds of underpaid, impoverished citizens spent their days.

The film crew was met by a blockade, and a government representative delivered a writ to the lead vehicle. “You will be arrested for trespassing if you set up your equipment,” he snarled. “You do not have the proper permits.”

Mustang, in the SUV’s rear, leaned forward to hear the exchange. Kanti spoke more to her than the obese messenger. “We are constantly harassed by the authorities. They do not want the world to know what happens here.”

“Sounds more like Myanmar, or China,” stated Mustang.

“You are correct.”

“Would you like some... help?”

“I no longer wear the locket with Bapu’s ashes. I do not wish it to be stolen or...”

“Damaged?” Mustang chuckled.

Kanti nodded.

“That’s not what I meant, anyway. I don’t think your great-great-grandfather could do much about this. There are other ways...”

Kanti instructed the driver to open the rear hatch, and Mustang vaulted over the seat onto the drought-cracked road. She approached the foul-smelling lackey, his balding head barely reaching her nose.

She might not be able to change men's minds, but she could give them a good scare.

A squad of soldiers had positioned themselves along the convoy of vehicles. Mustang scrutinized their faces - regular army rejects, she guessed.

"You're making a big mistake," she warned the official so he heard her in Hindustani.

"Miss Dinn is the one making the mistake. She wishes to destroy the government."

"That sounds like you're labeling her a terrorist."

"Of a sort."

"People have used that term to describe me - very recently. It's a way for the insecure to blame others for their own stupidity, while real terrorists go free."

"You know not what you speak."

"And you know not what I can do. Dismiss your men, or..."

"Or what?" the government messenger hissed.

Ammunition clips from eight semi-automatic rifles clattered on the hardened earth, and a microburst of wind whisked the soldiers into the very fields Kanti intended to film. Workers witnessed the scene, slowing their labors.

As the gust encircled the vehicles, the official was lifted off his feet and soared into a row of prickly bushes. The document he'd carried burst into flames.

"Bapu would not approve the use of violence," Kanti admonished when Mustang crawled back into the SUV.

"Gandhiji isn't here. Let's get moving."

Long before the film crew returned to Mumbai, news had spread about the morning's standoff. An entire regiment of battle-trained soldiers surrounded the studio where Kanti rented production offices. Crowds which had gathered to watch the confrontation prevented any vehicles from accessing nearby streets.

"Get your people to safety," Mustang advised, plunging into the throng.

Kanti asserted, "I'm coming with you!"

"You, but no one else."

Clasping hands, the pair wound their way to the army's temporary barricade. Mustang stepped over boldly; Kanti hesitated.

"It's okay," assured her companion. "I wouldn't want to see you hurt."

The teen stood in plain view, but it took two full minutes before the officer in command acknowledged her presence.

“Who are you?”

“One who can destroy everything she touches.”

“That’s her!” cried the portly messenger, his neck and cheek well bandaged.

Fifty weapons snapped toward her.

“And what, exactly, do you plan to do with those?” she scoffed.

“There will be no repeat of that roadside... fiasco,” barked a wiry captain.

“You’re under arrest.”

Memories of putting two Waffen-SS lieutenants in their place, doing the same to a group of radical animal rights activists, generated Mustang’s smile. She wouldn’t have to twitch a finger, or employ obscure phrasing, for the entire assembly to crash on their knees.

Guns clattered on the gravel, the metal too hot to hold. The captain’s mouth moved without speaking.

“These people are doing your country an invaluable service!” Mustang shouted, so even the furthest away could hear. “Every human being has a right to proper shelter, decent food and sanitary living conditions! You cannot quash the truth. If you try, you are no better than the British you expelled sixty years ago!”

She stepped closer to the officer, whispering, “If you don’t want your men to keel over dead, get them out of here. Now.”

The man signaled a subordinate. “Form ranks!” came the order, and the soldiers scrambled into position. Metal fencing was moved, and a column of three marched between the bystanders, some of whom pelted the troops with mud and stones.

Mustang sighed.

“Is it over?” Kanti inquired, as the people dispersed.

“Will it ever be over? Your documentaries will serve a purpose, but there will always be men who wish to build their wealth on the backs of the poor.”

“The wisdom Bapu so admired in you has increased since last we met.”

“Hard to believe it’s been less than a year.”

“Hopefully, we will see each other again soon.”

The young woman’s intuition astounded Mustang. “How’d you know I planned to leave?”

Kanti chuckled. “After you... display your powers, you withdraw into yourself. You seem to relish the results, but later regret your actions.”

“No. No regrets. I... just don’t like being around people.”

“Then, why venture around the world?”

The teen grinned. “I thought it’d be a good idea, before...”

“Do not shun the species, Mustang-ji. Your wisdom is too valuable.”

“Bapu’s wisdom was valuable, and it got him killed.” She eyed the teeming street ahead. “Remember, the best way to outsmart the government is to not be where they think you are. Travel in ordinary cars, not those black behemoths, and not in groups. Don’t advertise what you’re doing, and you’ll be assured success.”

The pair parted with an affectionate hug at the crossroad near Kanti’s apartment. Mustang hopped a train across India, daily papers gradually losing interest in the nation-wide search for the “mysterious foreigner”. She skipped the opportunity to ride an elephant, or take a detour to the last preserves where tigers dwelled. A ship bound for Thailand provided a convenient exit from the country.

She could’ve sworn she saw Charles Faulkner’s distinctive brown head and British suit on the dock as she ascended the gangplank.

IV

Buddhist monks, in pairs and small parties, dotted Bangkok, their red and saffron robes adding brightness to more subdued colors worn by the capital’s business community. What might be deemed an up-and-coming economy would some day rival Japanese and European commerce centers, with ambition a prime motivation.

Some Americans saw the country as a vacation spot, others an investment opportunity. As in decades past, when Asia gradually pried its doors open to Western visitors, Christians were driven to convert the “heathens” to the “true path”. Mustang snickered upon finding a modest, white-washed mission opposite a popular Buddhist shrine.

“They must try to catch the overflow,” she muttered, a steady parade of tourists passing through gigantic, gold-leaf temple doors.

The mission, in fact, was receiving a fresh coat of paint, courtesy of its pastor, Mustang assumed. Graffiti had been sprayed on the clap-board surface and, from what the teen could see of the lettering, they weren’t love notes.

Except for his starched shirt and white collar, the missionary might have been Jim Neville’s twin brother. Supposedly, every human had a duplicate somewhere in the world; Jim now had two, one a possible ancestor brought from the past by accident, and this ebony-haired, ascetic figure.

Mustang’s heart tightened in her chest. Her ongoing struggle to bury the memory of that awful day, aggravated because she - a fugitive, herself - could not attend Jim’s funeral...

“May I help you, sister?”

Even his voice, the same deep register.

“No, thank you.”

“You look lost. Do you seek salvation?”

Francis of Assisi, greatest of Catholic saints, had never thought it necessary to ask her such a question while they roamed his hometown in Italy’s Umbrian hills. Her high school comparative religion class had convinced Mustang no supposedly sacred institution possessed the truth of existence, and she spurned such beliefs. In the course of learning about her power, she discovered in nature more reality than any story of a prophet or savior.

“Not today, thanks.” She moved ahead, chancing to overhear a cluster of local boys discussing the missionary’s fate.

Her ears translated the rapid Thai banter, and she clenched her teeth at learning their plan.

“If he won’t leave, he dies,” concluded the gang’s leader.

“I mustn’t get involved,” she murmured.

She didn’t have time to persuade herself how judicious that decision was. Switchblades drawn, seven youths jostled past mid-day tourists, intent on their prey.

Not a fast runner, but good for a short sprint, Mustang bolted toward the man, shoving him through the mission gate, which slammed shut. She spun on the boys, who didn’t pause in their attack. The street so noisy, no one would have heard her scream.

Scorn permeated her tone. “If you keep attacking him, he’ll stay, just to prove he’s brave. If you kill him, another will come to stand his ground. The best thing you can do is ignore him.”

“Why do you defend him, if you don’t believe in what he’s doing?” rumbled the amply tattooed leader.

“He’s a human being.”

A key Buddhist tenet being respect of all life, they couldn’t argue her logic. One by one, they retreated into alleys and by-ways.

Pounding on the gate reminded Mustang she’d deliberately locked the missionary inside. Bursting free a moment later, he pitched forward and somersaulted on the cobbles.

She offered her hand; he grasped it with surprisingly strong fingers and stood upright. “Would you mind telling me what happened?”

“Put it this way, you were almost a martyr.”

“Oh, to be so blessed!”

“Shut up. A dead missionary converts no one. Best you pack your things and catch the next plane back to the States.”

“I won’t.”

“How’d I know you would say that?” Mustang retrieved her backpack where she’d dropped it, and went on her way.

Checking into the Four Seasons Hotel, she discreetly asked the bespectacled desk clerk about the mission. He remembered the structure. “It used to be a brothel.” He knew nothing, however, about its present occupant.

The suite she entered boasted authentic Thai decor, with a painted silk ceiling and furniture of oriental woods. At every stop on this trip, she acquired more and more ideas of how she would outfit Boleskine House upon her return. If she’d made a list, it would’ve been 50 pages long already.

Her sole hint the next day was Sunday - she’d ignored calendars the entire journey - was the presence of the cassock-clad missionary balanced on a fruit crate at the corner near the shopping district. He yelled prohibitions against owners for being open on the Sabbath, and the worship of mammon. Few slowed their pace to listen, until shots echoed between the buildings.

A projectile hit the cleric’s left shoulder, knocking him off his perch. Mustang, from habit, softened his landing, to prevent any broken bones. She hurried over and scooped him off the pavement, hustling him into a relatively quiet lane.

“Isn’t suicide a sin in your religion?” she panted, exhausted from supporting his weight.

“Of course, it is.”

“Then, each time you court death this way, you’re committing a sin.”

“Martyrdom for one’s beliefs isn’t a sin.”

“Desiring martyrdom is twisted and sick, by any standard.” His complexion paled from continued loss of blood. “C’mon. I’ll get you to a hospital.”

“No!” he objected. “The hospitals here won’t treat Christians.”

“What?”

“More precisely, they’ll treat Christians, but give Buddhists and other non-Christians precedence, no matter how critical the injury.”

“Fine. I’ll patch you up at the hotel. Then, we’ll take a cab to your mission. You’re packing and leaving.”

“I...”

She raised a warning finger. “One more word, and I’ll kill you myself, for being stubborn *and* stupid.”

Mustang removed her windbreaker before assisting the missionary to shed his cassock. Tearing a strip of material from the hem of the dress-like garment, she jammed the fabric atop the wound as an impromptu bandage, then draped the jacket around his shoulders, so no one would notice his blood-stained clothing.

By the way he leaned on her as they walked, the teen realized he was weakening fast. Her plan to get him out of the city that day would be postponed until he recovered sufficient strength. He flopped on the bed like a limp rag; she'd barely been able to hold him vertical in the elevator.

She felt for a pulse on his carotid artery. Feeble. Best to remove the bullet and stitch up the hole...

Room service received the bizarre call. "A friend fell at the market. Could you please send up a first aid kit and sterile gauze?"

Placing a towel beneath his torso to prevent soiling the bed sheets, Mustang reached into the man's body with her fingertips and wrested deformed metal from between twitching muscle tissue. She could have just as easily healed the wound; she dismissed the thought. This fanatic would learn nothing from the act. He would deem it a miracle - as had Brother Luigi from Rome - and pronounce how "blessed" he was by God.

A sewing needle and heavy thread, found in the bathroom cupboard, served to suture mangled flesh. The bellhop knocked as she cut the last stitch with cuticle scissors. Babbling incoherently, her patient remained oblivious.

An order for a bowl of chicken broth accompanied the employee to the ground floor. The only way for her patient to recuperate would be lots of rest and food. Ribs protruding from his chest, he didn't eat much, as it was.

Two days Mustang kept vigil from an embroidered sofa, changing the gauze and pouring soup into him when he woke briefly. His heart rate improved, and she finally slept Wednesday morning.

His puzzled expression when she tumbled off the furniture amused her. "I've seen you before," he remarked. "Where am I?"

"The Four Seasons Hotel."

"What!" He tried to rise, and fell back onto the pillows, his shoulder mercilessly throbbing.

"Settle down. You were shot, remember?"

The dialogue went downhill from there. The missionary insisted on returning to his establishment, and remaining in Bangkok. Mustang had already made train reservations to get them both out of the country.

"If you stay at the mission, in your condition, who will take care of you?" she challenged.

“There’s a small Christian community...”

She doubted that. “Where were they when this happened?”

He bowed his head mournfully.

Grabbing the last sterile packet, the teen placed a fresh white square over the wound. The bleeding had stopped; she didn’t like the red tint of the surrounding skin, or the puss oozing from between the stitches.

“Oh, hell...”

His grey eyes narrowed to slits in disgust.

“It’s infected,” she detailed. She laid fingers on his forehead. “And you’ve got a fever.”

Before she retracted her hand, he grabbed it, gaping at the scarred palms. “Who has tortured you this way?”

“No one. Those were caused by accident.” Mustang decided to call a doctor; the man needed antibiotics. She excused herself to the adjacent bedroom, warning, “Don’t move.”

The missionary’s estimate of how Christians were treated by the local medical community had been accurate. The nurse with whom she spoke must’ve suspected the patient’s beliefs, though the question was never asked. Nine hours later, the doctor still hadn’t arrived at the hotel.

His fever had increased; delirium made him mutter strange phrases, and yell at sinners conjured within his own mind. She’d noticed a pharmacy near the shopping district, but she was reluctant to leave him alone...

Begging for a prescription would serve no purpose, either. Still, no one would be the wiser if invisible hands snatched a bottle of penicillin off the shelves.

Not like she was after morphine or other addictive drugs.

The desk clerk saw her traverse the lobby, then reappear a short time later. Two days later, she and her guest checked out, carrying the one backpack. Not the typical tourist, but a generous tipper.

The pair had finally gotten around to exchanging names once the fever broke. Mustang bit back laughter when Mason Church introduced himself. What more apt name for a man of the cloth?

In the process of gathering his belongings at the mission, Church chose to concentrate on boxes of bibles shipped from America. “I can’t leave them to be desecrated.”

“They’re *books*, Mason. Human life is more precious than paper, by far. Stuff your clothes in a suitcase and let’s get out of here.”

The train departed Bangkok's station shortly after noon. Mustang felt obligated to sit beside the still-recovering Church, all the while wishing she'd brought ear plugs to muffle his tirade against the Asian heathens.

North into China, the teen yearned to see the Great Wall and Beijing before crossing the Pacific Ocean. A bit of trouble at the border, presenting their passports, was smoothed over by the sudden manifestation of required documentation bearing government stamps and signatures.

Resemble Jim Neville he did, even to the black lock of hair drooping over his forehead, but Mustang didn't like the missionary. He placed too much value on labeling others - Christian, non-Christian, civilized, barbarian. She finally erupted within sight of the Beijing terminal.

"You've distorted the message beyond recognition, Mason. No wonder you've reached so few. The main premise of any belief system is: actions speak louder than words. Look at the Muslims. The few who've radicalized the Qu'ran to justify their killing spoil it for the rest, who want to live Mohammed's dictates peacefully. Fundamentalist Christians - like you - butcher the Gospel, using only what is convenient. Why don't you try living what you believe for awhile, instead of merely talking about it? I see no proof of this 'loving God' in your deeds; I see only hate and prejudice. Stop putting everyone you meet into categories. Accept them as human beings, supposedly created by your God, and deal with them as equals."

It felt good to blow off steam; she knew he wouldn't place any value on the monologue. Additional warning about the Chinese treatment of unauthorized missionaries would be ignored, also. He rejected her invitation to the hotel; she didn't force the issue.

When the call came the following afternoon, though, she wasn't surprised. Mason Church had been arrested in Tiananmen Square for preaching to the crowds. She, on the other hand, had spent a glorious day in Taoranting Park, where Chinese elders played chess, flew kites and exercised freely. Mustang had chanced upon a Wushu instructor, Han Feng, learning from him ancient Shaolin techniques of kung fu.

Invigorated and content, she had no intention of fouling her mood by trying to extricate Church from his incarceration. She was fully aware: to press their association would endanger her freedom. A conversation with the American Embassy was as far as she'd go, and they'd already been notified of the situation.

Playing tourist, she boarded a bus for an excursion to the Great Wall her third day in the city. The fortification wouldn't stop today's armies, but the

engineering had served a vital purpose centuries earlier. Undeniable evidence of an enduring culture, albeit subjugated by the current communist regime.

She was in the middle of another lesson from Han Feng when soldiers converged on the park. Many eyes turned from their respective pastimes to the detachment, and fright claimed their faces. Mustang was about to attempt a spinning kick, when the move was blocked by a horizontal rifle barrel.

“Oh, hell...”

The shaggy-haired Wushu master did not retreat when so ordered by what must've been a sergeant. Han sensed the injustice, most likely, which was what Shaolin warriors had fought against since their temples had been established in ancient times.

This wasn't like fighting Yasuo and Jiro, allowing the Japanese youths to save face. These men had weapons, and would fire them without hesitation. She feared them more than the Indian army personnel, who had been deployed around the film studio to intimidate Kanti.

“There are twenty of them,” Mustang stated. “If I go peacefully, they will not harm you.”

Han's features hardened into a stern mask; the muscular instructor held his ground. “Too many of my friends have been taken this way, never to be seen again. Better to die fighting for integrity, than live oppressed.”

As one resolute individual had defied an approaching tank during the Tiananmen Square protests, so this Chinese young man wanted to exert his rights as a human being. Mustang signaled him forward, both assuming a defensive stance.

Weapons aimed. Abruptly, the firing pins clattered to the pavement. The playing field thus evened, the sergeant barked an order for his squad to attack.

Mustang wished she'd had martial arts knowledge during her time with Erwin Rommel, when the SS officers had beaten her - or, Georg Schiller - in the tiny French restaurant. Rather than using her power, she could have reduced them to blubbering heaps of broken bones in minutes.

Not so simple a feat with those who shared the same training. She did, indeed, augment each kick and punch with her power, but managed to disable only five, while Han astounded his opponents, knocking twelve of the fifteen cold.

“You must flee, before more soldiers arrive,” recommended Han Feng, leading her from the park, past a row of shops into an alley.

“What about you?”

“If I must die, it will be knowing I saved an innocent woman from persecution. Come. My brother drives truck for a fruit export company. He will take you to the coast, where you can catch a freighter...”

There was an easier way, Mustang just had to utter the command. She glanced at her hands, and decided against it.

“Hurry!”

She followed Han, who quickly outdistanced her, thanks to his youth, advanced training and agility. A third friend, employed in the hotel where Mustang had stayed, retrieved her backpack and brought it to the rendezvous. Mustang paused long enough to bow, left hand cupped over her right fist in the traditional manner, before being stuffed in the back of a tarped short-bed vehicle among assorted bags and boxes of locally-grown produce.

V

A view from her cabin porthole allowed Mustang to watch the freighter *Destiny* unload and load cargo in a series of different island ports. She could have disembarked on any of them - Okinawa, Taiwan, the Philippines - but she'd paid the captain \$30,000 to take her to Panama, no questions asked. Why waste that kind of money?

The stop at Guam, on the other hand, would last two days. No sense wasting time holed up below deck. She hid behind a stack of papaya crates being lifted from the hold to slip past U.S. customs agents checking the crew's papers, the island being a American territory. Hiking to a four-lane highway, she headed north.

After an hour, she ambled into Agana, the capital city. American culture had infiltrated even this small country: fast food restaurants, convenience stores and strip malls abounded among the palm trees and classic Spanish-style architecture. People she passed spoke both English and Chamorro, the native dialect incorporating Asian tongues, Spanish and English at such a rapid rate, Mustang's brain could scarcely keep up.

A magnificent cathedral faced the sea, a statue of Pope John Paul II on a strip of land outside the main entrance. This bronze work stood at an odd angle, leaving Mustang to wonder at its construction, until she saw it *move*.

She leapt backward, thinking she'd finally gone mad. “The base rotates 360 degrees once every 24 hours,” rang a familiar, accented baritone.

Faulkner.

“Oh, hell...”

“You’ve succeeded so well in eluding the technology, but you underestimated plain, old-fashioned detective work,” he stated.

“Huh?”

He studied her over the top of his square, silver frames. “Newspapers and satellite news channels have been having a field day with your merry escapades. Though no names have been mentioned, after what you did in Athens, I knew your every movement.”

“What now?”

“I’m pretty much convinced you’re no terrorist - an anarchist, maybe, if the reports of your anti-authoritarian tirades were accurate. You could be arrested on a host of other charges, nonetheless.”

“But, you won’t?”

“Not yet. First, I intend to find out how you do what you do. Over dinner, if you like.”

“Before I eat, I want a shower in a real tub.”

“There are excellent accommodations at the Hyatt Regency, on Tumon Bay. I’ll drive you. It’s not far.”

“The better to keep an eye on me?”

The brown head bobbed.

Compared to Mason Church’s intense fanaticism, Charles Faulkner’s company was refreshingly welcome, despite his official status. During the ride in a rented Hyundai compact, he pointed out unusual sights along Guam’s western coastline. “Some of the natives make a rather good living renting jet skis to tourists,” he noted, passing a rusty pickup pulling a trailer with two Sea-dos. “The Piti Bomb Holes offer some really good snorkeling, too.”

“The Piti Bomb Holes?” Mustang echoed.

“During World War II, the island was bombed by the Japanese, then the Americans. Some say the deep craters were made by shells which missed directly hitting the island, others think they’re collapsed underwater caverns. Either way, the marine life is fantastic to see.”

“How come you know so much about this isolated chunk of ground?”

“I was born here, in the Navy hospital. My dad was a lieutenant commander - a pilot, born in Dayton, Ohio - stationed at NAS Agana, before the base was decommissioned. My mom was British. When they divorced, she took me home with her.”

“Are there lots of sailors way out here?”

“Navy, and Air Force, up at Anderson, on the north tip of the island.”

“How come I saw so many Japanese in Agana?”

“This is a popular destination for newlyweds, like your Niagara Falls.” The car turned toward Tumon. “It’s a beautiful place, really, except for the snakes.”

Mustang almost leapt from the passenger seat into his arms, as if one of the creatures was coiled beneath her seat. “Snakes?”

“Brown snakes. Rode over in crates and on commercial aircraft years ago. They’ve multiplied unchecked, having no natural predators.”

“Are they poisonous?”

“No, just nasty. Their bite can take off an arm. The geckos can be even more annoying.”

“What’s a gecko?”

“A small lizard. They’re everywhere, indoors and out. I remember, as a kid, going to bed one night and there sat one on my pillow. I swear it was smiling.”

The teen forced herself to laugh. The sound ceased when Faulkner braked beneath the Hyatt’s portico. The sun, which had exacerbated the natural humidity of the region, had suddenly vanished behind a bank of clouds, and heavy rain poured down around them.

“That’s the other drawback of life here,” added the Interpol agent. “It rains every day.”

“That, I wouldn’t mind. The snakes... no, thanks.”

Faulkner directed the desk clerk to assign Mustang a suite on the same floor as his room. Riding in the elevator, her backpack resting atop her sneakers, she queried, “Am I under arrest?”

“Let’s say you’re under around-the-clock oversight.”

She sniffed. “Does that include while I’m taking a shower?”

“No. As untrustworthy - and impulsive - as you’ve been, you won’t disappear on me again.”

“Not until my ship leaves, anyway.”

“Which is?”

“Thursday morning.”

“Headed where?”

“Panama, eventually.”

“May I ask why?”

“Why not?”

Emerging on the sixth floor, he restrained her from proceeding along the corridor. “Why are there no records of you in any computer?”

“I’m not certain, really. I know the FBI file was erased. That may have triggered other information being deleted. There are countless newspapers, though, which have recorded... various incidents over the past two years.”

He unlocked the door, ushering her over the threshold. “For example?”

“The freakish destruction of the Inverness jail.”

“I read about that. Weather reports confirmed it as a 6.2 magnitude earthquake.”

“Caused by me.”

“You *are* insane.”

“I didn’t do it intentionally, for Pete’s sake. After I... inherited my rather... unique abilities, I had no comprehension of their potential. My words evoke an immediate response from nature. I also learned any spontaneous emotional extreme - like when two people kiss - can destroy an entire city block.”

“Impossible!”

“You know who Thomas Burton is?”

“The Irish actor?”

“He’s Welsh,” corrected Mustang, “but he lives in Ireland. When my dad’s cousin died, we went to Boise for the funeral. Thomas got drunk, and kissed me. It nearly shook the house apart. Same reaction in a pub outside Limerick. Chairs splintered and the overhead beams cracked. The first time Jim kissed me, the Des Moines police received dozens of calls about shattered glass and ground tremors.”

Faulkner gulped, “I pity the man you choose for a husband.”

“That’s only one reason I won’t ever marry. My high school shifted on its foundation the time I broke down crying in the gym. And, to this day, I mustn’t get angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry, or when there’s danger. ”

“Which is how you disabled the Indian and Chinese soldiers’ weapons?”

“*That* was intentional.”

Faulkner sank on the brushed purple velvet sofa and buried his head in veined hands. “This *is* becoming a nightmare.”

“Moreso for me. I’ve seen men die from my lack of control. You can find the articles on-line, I’m sure. Lyndon Bixby, killed during a fight with a motorcycle gang. I tried to protect him, but I was too inexperienced...”

“Protect him, how?”

She tugged his sport coat. “Stand up.”

He resisted.

She yanked the fabric. “Up!”

Complying, he waited.

“Try to hit me.”

“I wouldn’t...”

“I promise, you won’t be able to touch me.”

“I’ve been trained...”

“Do it!”

The punch Faulkner threw would have knocked a man twice his size to the floor. Instead, his fist rammed an invisible barrier, leaving his knuckles bruised and swollen.

“How’d you...”

“Hard to explain. Now, if you attacked me with a knife, or fired a gun, unless I incorporated those parameters into my defenses, I could still be injured.”

Realization dawned. “Which is why Bixby died.”

“One of the thugs used his switchblade.”

“What about the others?”

“Wilfrid Bailey... er, Jonas Fairchild - now, *there* was a nut. I don’t know how many people he actually murdered. Came after me, twice. Shot down like a dog by the cops while trying to escape.”

“Who else?”

“Rick Shimoto. If we hadn’t traveled to Japan last summer, he might not have been involved in the wreck which killed him.”

Faulkner exploded, clutching her biceps. “There should be some record of you flying to Japan! Why isn’t there?”

“We didn’t fly, in the conventional sense. I...”

“What, you sneaked in on a whaling ship?”

She raised her hands, palms upward. “Do you really want me to go into detail?”

He released her. “No. I wouldn’t believe you, if you did.”

“Look, let me take my shower, then we can go to dinner. While you’re waiting, I’m sure you have a laptop, you can search the Montana Meteorological Service list of weather anomalies. Most of them occurred near Canyon Creek, my home town. The Italian news sites might have reports about an earthquake in Assisi, which damaged Santa Maria degli Angeli basilica.”

“You wrecked a *church*?”

“I fixed it,” she snarled. “I’ve tried to undo all the damage I caused.”

She kicked off her shoes and strode toward the bathroom, Faulkner’s brown eyes staring into space, totally bewildered.

Not having the opportunity to buy any new clothes since Cape Town, Mustang slipped from the suite after the Interpol agent left. She selected three t-shirts, two dress blouses, jeans and black slacks at a shop on the bay. When

Faulkner returned at 6:00, her naturally auburn, damp tresses hung free, and she felt totally rejuvenated from twenty minutes in the marble tub.

“Here we go with the hair again!” he sneered.

“I don’t have to hide any longer, do I?”

“I suppose not.”

He escorted her to the beach, where open-air bamboo shacks offered drinks and light meals. A delightful idea, Mustang thought, but not very practical.

“Entirely practical,” countered Faulkner. “They have frequent typhoons on Guam. The natives don’t invest in expensive construction, which might be ruined by the storms. If these huts blow away, they’re cheap to rebuild.”

They had a pleasant evening; Mustang encouraged her companion to talk about his childhood on the island, and in Britain. She didn’t use her power, and he didn’t mention the subject.

At her door, he informed her, “I’ll pick you up at 7:00.”

“Why?”

“We’re going snorkeling.”

Not much of a swimmer, Mustang demurred, but Faulkner was adamant. “You can’t leave the island without seeing this.”

He was right, to be sure. The fish and coral of the Piti Bomb Holes Marine Preserve astounded the teen. Flippers on her feet, she propelled herself slowly across the warm water’s surface, gazing into what seemed infinite depths. Taking a break after an hour, she was glad she’d worn a scuba suit. Faulkner had opted for cut-off jeans, his bare back and rippled legs now beet-red from the sun.

Without his glasses, she noticed the odd crease running from the outside edge of each eye back toward his hairline, more prominent when he smiled or laughed. He apparently had forgotten their unnerving conversation of the previous day, and didn’t even mind the sunburn.

Until he pulled on the brightly-patterned shirt. Then, his grimace made *her* chortle.

“I’d forgotten how dangerous it is to go without sun block,” he breathed.

“Is there anything I can do? Any medicine?”

“We can pick up some ointment in town. Then, it’s back to the air conditioning.”

“Yes, and since I need to be on the ship bright and early, I want to be in bed by nine.”

“Me, too, since I’m going with you.”

Mustang’s jaw sagged.

“I’ve already chased you half-way around the globe. Why should I let you slip through my fingers again?”

“My question would have to be: why? If you’re convinced I’m not a terrorist - which was the reason you targeted me at the British Museum - then why continue the pursuit?”

“International security. If I were to report my findings to my superiors, I’ve a strong suspicion they’d want you locked safely away so you couldn’t cause a war, or the Apocalypse.”

“You do understand, I could walk to the beach this minute and vanish in a bolt of lightning, and you’d never see me again?”

“Lightning?” He blinked, contemplating his own palms, then extending them toward her. “That’s how you...”

“Yes.”

“So, Italy, Japan...”

“Yes.”

“I can’t let you go. It’ll be my job if I do.”

The teen acquiesced reluctantly. “Let’s get back to the hotel.”

Mild objections from the freighter’s captain about the *Destiny* not being a passenger ship were ignored by the pair when they boarded Thursday at sunrise. “There’s an extra bunk in my cabin,” said Mustang. “None of your crew will be inconvenienced.”

“Besides, you’re making a good profit, given what you’ve already been paid,” Faulkner added.

Both battled sea-sickness crossing the rough waters of the Pacific. Only when they stood on dry land in Panama did either consider eating any solid food, and grasp how starved they were for sustenance.

“Where, from here?” Faulkner inquired as they watched Venezuelan oil tankers pass through the canal’s locks from a verdant hilltop.

“Rio.”

“Any particular reason?”

“No. I intended to travel around the world, but I saw no need to go through the States, since I lived there for 18 years...”

He hinted, “And you might be arrested?”

“If certain people found out certain things, yes.”

“Like about these powers you have?”

“Oh, they know about those,” she smirked. “There’s a copy of a highly sensitive document they think was destroyed, and only myself and one other

person know of its continued existence...” She lowered her eyes. “The third person involved, they killed.”

“They wanted to kill you, too?”

“They know that’s impossible, so they agreed to my exile.”

Faulkner’s brain performed some mental calculations. “How long ago was this?”

“A couple months.”

“But, you told me you’d been in Scotland for two years...”

“I came to Scotland two years ago, and left via...” she showed him her hands.

“And returned the same way?”

“It’s faster than flying commercial.”

“I suppose there’s a federal warrant out for you, and a reward?”

“If someone could prove another copy of the... document was floating around, there might be.” She detected the movement toward his shoulder holster.

“And I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

He snickered. “You’d just eject the bullets, eh?”

“Or worse.”

They rented a car and drove along the northern coast of South America toward Rio de Janeiro. The tension between them grew by the hour, and Mustang feared she might have to do something drastic to divert Faulkner’s warped sense of duty and personal greed.

VI

With the 120-foot-tall soapstone statue of Christ the Redeemer looking down from Corcovado, Faulkner and Mustang wandered Rio’s streets as the sun set. An assortment of restaurants lay before them, and lively music resounded between the buildings. Ordinarily, Mustang might’ve ventured into one of the clubs, but not with this clinging shadow. His presence had turned from sociable to bothersome, ruining her appetite - and she’d chosen Rio as her last stop partly to experience the food.

The knots in her stomach tightened upon returning to the Copacabana Palace. Visible beyond an arched doorway, Ben Espinoza sat at the bar, sipping a martini.

“You’ll need to hit the casinos again to afford this hotel,” commented Faulkner stalking through the lobby. “I don’t need a penthouse...”

She spoke through her distraction. “My finances are none of your damned business.” Then, she focused enraged eyes upon the Interpol agent. “You’ve been busy with your detective work, haven’t you?”

“I sent a couple e-mails when we stopped for lunch yesterday.”

Ten seconds later, she’d mounted the barstool beside Espinoza. “Hello, Ben.”

“I thought you were going to stay in Scotland,” the Hispanic FBI instructor greeted, chewing an olive.

“If your boys had left Boleskine in decent shape, I would have. I had to hire a crew to whip the house into habitable condition, and I couldn’t stick around with the renovations in progress.”

“So, instead of picking one spot - like the French Riviera - and behaving yourself, you go gallivanting across four continents, creating a royal uproar.”

“You know me well enough to understand I had very good reasons for what I did.”

“Including secreting a copy of Parsons’ formula?”

Mustang felt Faulkner hovering directly behind her, to prevent her escape. “How much of a reward did you promise him?”

“He gets nothing, until we locate the copy.”

“And if I told you he lied?”

“He had too many facts to be lying. They matched entries in the file I may end up recreating, after all.”

“You can’t recreate a file on a person who doesn’t exist,” the teen quipped.

“Huh?”

She ordered a soda when the bartender paused near the trio. “When I deleted my FBI data, every government-issued document disappeared, evidently. Birth certificate, inoculation records, school transcripts, passport application...”

“How...”

Faulkner interjected, “When I did a background check on her, after the British Museum bomb scare, it came up empty.”

“There are old paper copies,” the FBI instructor huffed.

She wondered, “Are you going to rummage through the Montana state archives to find them?”

“If I must.”

“A waste of taxpayers’ money.”

Espinoza glanced around the room. “This is no place for such a discussion. Let’s go to your room.”

“Fine.”

Up the elevator to the sixth floor, they settled on the airy balcony, city lights flickering below. A butler had poured them drinks - Mustang's ice water - before being dismissed for the evening.

"So, how'd you find out about this so quickly?" she asked.

"Don't change the subject. Tell me where the copy is."

"We've got plenty of time for that. Charles sent an e-mail..."

"To the CIA. Interagency cooperation has deteriorated again since 9/11, but they forwarded the post to us when your name didn't appear on their terrorist list. The director's secretary just happened to be the one who scheduled my flight to Montana after we determined the only way to get our hands on Parsons' formula was to give you the will. When the e-mail reached her in-box, your name jogged her memory."

"And she sent it to you."

"While simultaneously calling the airlines."

"I wish Interpol worked that efficiently," drawled Faulkner, glasses dangling off the tip of his nose.

Mustang and Espinoza swiveled on their lounge chairs to gaze at him.

"He sure can't hold his liquor!" Espinoza grumbled.

"No, he's going to sleep," observed Mustang. "And so are you."

"What, you put drugs..."

"Why would I need to do something so low?" She rose, saluting him with her glass. "See you 'round."

He yawned. "You know I'll be after you, now that I know..."

"No you won't, because when you wake up, you'll think you're here investigating an international drug smuggling ring. Neither of you will remember seeing me, or what was said. Charles - arrogant bastard that he is - won't recall interrogating me at the British Museum after the bomb scare, or Paris, India or Beijing. He'll believe he trailed a shipment from the Orient, through Guam, to its drop point."

"You're a devious woman."

"No, just pragmatic. You're right; I should've stayed in Scotland. I could've rented an apartment in Edinburgh for a month or two, and supervised the construction. What's done is done, and I have no regrets."

Espinoza's eyes closed. Mustang collected the three glasses, washed them and replaced them on the bar. Her possessions in the backpack, she quietly departed the lush penthouse, taking another room on a lower floor, leaving a wake-up call for 6:00 AM.

The men wouldn't be roused until she checked out.

An equitable end to a wild adventure. Mustang boarded the new Queen Mary at the docks, making her way at a leisurely pace back to the British Isles. She left the ship at Limerick, hopped a train to Dublin - indulging in a tour of the Jameson whiskey distillery - then caught a ferry across the Irish Sea.

Strange how, setting foot on the long, gravel drive, the teen felt she'd come home. The beating of hammers on nails reached her, even at this distance. How could they not be finished with the project?

Able-bodied carpenters, she discovered, created the noise as they secured the final pieces on a three-acre corral fence. Wisps of fine white hair ruffled by the wind, Glenn MacDonough stood on the front porch steps at the main house, which shone like a gem in the sun.

"We ran new electrical to every room, and updated the pipin' and fixtures in the bathrooms and kitchen, where the cabinets were rehung and stained. All the windows have been replaced wi' insulated casings and glass. Two coats o' paint on the walls, and fresh varnish on the floors, as ye requested." He opened the steel reinforced storm door. "I noticed the wood on the old one had warped, so I took it upon myself t' order this, complete wi' a dead bolt."

She crossed the threshold ahead of her Scottish neighbor, impressed by the restored Georgian abode. The only things missing were furniture and appliances.

"I know an exceptional interior designer," MacDonough suggested.

"No need, but thanks. I did some shopping in Edinburgh yesterday, and everything will be delivered by truck tomorrow."

"Ye are welcome to use m' guest room..."

"I'll stay in the Gate Lodge tonight."

The solid, squat contractor stated, "Tis in worse condition than this. That caretaker surely neglected his duties these many years."

Mustang tried to conceal her grin. Jack Parsons, rocket scientist and co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, deemed a mere caretaker by the locals.

Hammering ceased outside, and the pair strolled from the house to the hand-built stables. "When will ye want me t' be bringing over the horses?" queried MacDonough.

"Tomorrow afternoon, if that's convenient."

"The best supplier of oats and hay in these parts is old Ben MacPherson, north of Dores."

"Leave me his number, and I'll give him a call."

"But, lass, ye have no phone, remember? And ye didn't ask me t' install new lines..."

“I’ll go see him in person, then.”

“Are ye sure ye will be safe, alone here wi’ no phone, no car...”

“Perfectly safe.”

He retrieved his jacket from the fence post. “I’ll see ye tomorrow, then. I’ll bring the bill wi’ me.”

“I’ll have the cash on hand.”

She inspected the barn more closely as MacDonough’s pickup truck navigated the winding drive. Stalls for each horse, a tack room, food bins and water troughs... suddenly, tears welled in her eyes. She missed Heartbeat, her pinto.

Would Joe and Maggie take care of him, as she had, or turn him out to pasture with the other stock? Given what the horse had told her, when she’d inadvertently made it possible for him to speak English, he might prefer grazing with his own, no longer being ridden or pampered. One certainty: he would never be mistreated on the ranch.

The construction crew hadn’t done any work at the Gate Lodge; she hadn’t concerned herself with the four-room dwelling before leaving. Chairs and tables remained covered with sheets, the refrigerator disconnected and empty. She had errands in Dores, anyway, so she added a stop at the grocer’s to her list.

The jaunt did her good. Scottish air bore a different scent than anywhere else in the world. Perhaps it was the proximity of Loch Ness, the heather growing wild, or turf-stoked fireplaces fending off chill autumn air. No matter; she breathed deep and smiled in contentment.

Until she noticed her reflection in the display window of the Dores post office. She’d let her hair return to its natural red after Charles Faulkner tracked her to Guam, and never restored it to the less conspicuous black. Retreating behind a call box, the deed was done, and she proceeded along the street.

A standing order of food and staples, sent to Boleskine House every two weeks, would eliminate the need for repeated trips to the village. The shopkeeper jotted the list in a cloth-bound ledger. “Your name?”

She’d debated her answer the entire trek from the estate. “Mustang Duryea” might precipitate too many questions. Residents might remember “Elizabeth Duryea” - even without the auburn tresses - from strange claims of Jock White’s murder two years previous. Only three people knew she’d used another alias: Rolf and Greta Steckling, surely back in Salzburg putting the finishing touches on their spy novel, and Charles Faulkner.

There would be no legal records to trace her under that name, though...

Besides, people would make allowances for her eccentricities, if they believed her a member of albeit minor nobility. They would be less likely to disturb her, though she had no plans to restrict access to the property in daylight. Seekers after Aleister Crowley memorabilia would, as Parsons had told her, always come poking around, hoping to get a glimpse of his legendary evil.

All they'd find is a woman riding her horses.

"Lady Elizabeth Neville," she replied to the man's question.

She chose exquisite saddles and bridles from MacPherson's shop, and placed her order for oats, hay and straw. The hike back to Boleskine was interrupted by a group of children racing down the road after school. The soccer ball they were kicking back and forth nearly hit her in the head; quick reflexes deflected it into a ditch.

Thorn bushes prevented the children from fetching it, and two of the youngsters sobbed with disappointment. As she squatted beside them in a futile attempt to ease their anguish, the multi-colored orb slowly rolled up the hill, beneath the undergrowth and onto the berm.

A lanky pre-teen snatched the ball, jaw agape. "I coulda sworn..."

"The eyes may see, but the mind can be deceived," Mustang chuckled. "Be more careful, now, won't you?"

"Aye, ma'am."

She slept soundly for the first time in weeks, her stomach filled with eggs, bacon and hash browns.

A truck convoy trundled up to Boleskine House the next morning, and eight men unloaded six rooms of furniture. Mustang had purchased beds and chests for just two of the five bedrooms, seeing no reason to fill spaces which would never be occupied. The living room, a small study, the kitchen and dining room rounded out the delivery. Stainless steel appliances arrived an hour later, while two women hung draperies to shield the owner from uninvited, prying eyes.

Each laborer received a generous tip as they departed. The bank clerk had been hesitant to release the large sum Mustang had requested, convincing her to accept a cashier's check to cover MacDonough's bill. "If people find out ye keep so much cash about the place, ye will be a target for thieves."

Rather than make regular trips to the tiny branch, she arranged for automatic payments to the grocer and MacPherson in advance of her bi-weekly orders being delivered.

They'd notify her, too, when her account ran low.

Which wouldn't be for quite awhile, with her balance over 100,000 British pounds.

The tranquility when the activity had concluded couldn't have been more welcome. The primary lesson learned on her trip: people are bombarded by so much noise, they forget to appreciate silence.

Grooming the horses in the stable, she listened to them nicker and whinny, and lap fresh water with their long tongues. Birds sang in the trees, and rabbits rustled through falling leaves and pine needles.

A mug of hot cocoa accompanied her to the grassy hillock, where she sat beside remnants of Jack Parsons' altar, reveling in the sun's descent over Loch Ness.

A glorious day done, a new life beginning.