

The Mustang Chronicles:

Radical Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

His sandaled feet soaked from the moist earth, the emaciated figure in “Save the Whales” t-shirt and baggy jeans peered into the barn. Mustang Duryea glanced up from a pile of fresh straw she was spreading in Pietra’s stall. A lock of black hair dangled between her eyes, having escaped her pony tail.

“You okay?” she puzzled at the man’s strained expression.

“I believe I disturbed one of your neighbors.”

While he spoke in Italian, the American heard him in English, thanks to an ability revealed on an unplanned trip to Rome years earlier. She knew, also, her words were translated by his brain into his native tongue.

“Who, Glenn MacDonough?”

“No, a woman.”

“Unless Glenn has guests, the closest woman lives in Dores.”

“Her... shack, no larger than my Porziuncola, lies just beyond the remnants of your eastern fence. She was tending her garden when I came upon her, and I don’t think her reaction was warm or welcoming.”

Having exercised her horses every day along trails cut through 47 acres, Mustang had never noticed any buildings to the east. She set aside the pitchfork and motioned her guest to grab a saddle.

“We’ll ride out so you can show me,” she directed.

“I... do not believe horses should be ridden.”

Mustang paused, the girth half-tightened around Sarge’s midsection. She sighed. In ways, she grasped this respect for the animals, yet understood their desire for a good trot through the woods. “Fine, we’ll walk.”

Grabbing her parka from a hook in the tack room, she followed Francis of Assisi into the chill spring air.

Grateful, too, she’d worn her old leather riding boots. The ground had begun to thaw in the early spring, and her feet sank in the mush as they walked. Her companion didn’t seem to mind mud squishing between his toes, but the sight caused Mustang to shiver.

Besides which, he wore no coat. “How can you stand the cold?” she wondered.

“I am accustomed to it.”

“Having been dead 800 years?”

“In death, there is neither hot nor cold.”

“But, in Italy, it’s always warm...”

He chuckled, a melodic echo reverberating through the silence. “You did not live there four decades, as did I. High on Mount Subasio, the temperature drops extremely low during the winter. My cave - you remember our visit there? - kept out the winds, but I always had to keep a fire burning.”

“Still, you wore nothing but sandals and a tattered robe,” remarked Mustang.

“I needed nothing more.”

“Too bad there weren’t more people like you back then. Over the centuries, greed might have disappeared.”

“The base desires will never disappear. You have helped me see that.” Francis paused to finger a bud emerging on a low tree branch. “Little hope exists for our species.”

Mustang’s heart wrenched with true agony. “I’ve turned you into a pessimist.”

“No. You have allowed my eyes to be opened. That is a gift for which I can never thank you enough.”

They proceeded along the soggy trail, until the cluster of pines, oaks and maples ended at a clearing’s edge. There, a tiny log cabin had been erected, and smoke rose from a narrow metal chimney.

“This wasn’t here last summer,” Mustang stated. “Someone must’ve bought the property, or...”

From the structure’s rear, an older woman appeared, hoe in hand. A shock of white hair atop her head startled the Mistress of Boleskine, because it didn’t match her tanned, youthful features or energetic demeanor.

She belonged in a sixties-era floral print house dress, Mustang thought, rather than sweats and a rainbow peace t-shirt. Noticing the pair approach, her head tilted and she smiled.

“So, my saint has returned, and brought a friend,” she greeted cheerily.

“How does she know who you are?” whispered Mustang in Francis’ ear.

His response was equally low in volume. “I do not know. I said nothing when I first encountered her.”

“You both look like you could use a hot cup of coffee!” the woman added. “Come inside!”

The building could have easily fit in the Boleskine House kitchen, measuring approximately ten feet by ten feet in size. Yet, it contained the basics one needed to live: bed, stove, table, chair. Candles provided light, and there must’ve been a well close at hand; a bucket beside the door contained clear water.

“Might I ask what you’re doing here?” Mustang ventured tentatively, seated on the straw mattress.

“I live here.”

“Since when?”

“A month ago.”

Two steaming china cups were presented to the guests. Mustang warmed her hands on the delicate porcelain.

“You... own this place?” prodded the young woman.

“The house, yes. I had it built in America and shipped over. Amazing what they can do in factories these days, isn’t it?”

“Then, you’re American?”

“I was. Like you, I left.”

A sip of the hearty brew choked Mustang. “How’d you...”

“You’re a legend around here, Lady Elizabeth. But, I’ve seen you before, too.”

“When? Where?”

“That’s for later. You’re wondering whether I’m legally occupying what might well be part of your estate. To be honest, you can call me a squatter, whoever owns this land.” The woman sank on the lone wooden chair and poured a bit of cream into her cup, stirring with a silver spoon.

“What is your name?” asked Francis.

“Peggy Calhoun.”

“Signora Calhoun, why would you want to ‘squat’ on someone else’s property?”

“Because ownership is a fallacy. No one ever owns anything in this life.”

Mustang’s head drooped. “Oh, hell...”

“What?” countered Peggy.

“I... forget it.”

“You find that idea offensive?”

“No, I... agree with you. I just have to think what I said to...”

The possibility Mustang had uttered an inadvertent phrase to materialize another renegade spirit knotted her stomach. Struggling more than half a decade with her singular command of natural forces - passed to her by Jack Parsons - had taught her, seemingly, nothing.

“Until today, we’ve never spoken,” Peggy assured her. “Like I told you, I had this place built in the States and brought over on a freighter. A trucking company transported it from the port, and offloaded it here. No problem.”

“That’s impossible. Didn’t anyone care about the land deed...”

“Not when you carry a diplomatic passport.”

Both Francis and Mustang refocused their gaze on the woman.

She laughed, a gruff note to the humor. “You see, Lady Elizabeth, I’m sort of in hiding, too. The Peruvian government knows me as Margaret Escovar, widow of the late ambassador Joaquin Escovar e Garcia.” She sobered. “When my husband died at the hands of militants in 1976, I took over his duties. In short order, though, I decided I didn’t want to play politics with global heads of state. I... discovered too much.”

“What, military secrets and the identity of spies?” murmured Mustang, in awe.

The mirth returned. “No. The truth about life.”

“Oh, that.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“It’s... old news to me.”

“Truth is the essence of being,” Francis corrected.

“I know,” admitted Mustang. “It’s just, so many people have it wrong.”

“You ain’t kidding, there,” Peggy grinned. “In my travels, I met with the Dalai Lama, three Popes, the Orthodox Patriarch, the Chief Rabbi of the Jerusalem temple, Hindu gurus, Muslim imams, and assorted other religious leaders, in addition to countless elected and appointed officials. When their beliefs were challenged, they grew defensive to a man, and would give no quarter or listen to reason. My depression grew so intense, I... resigned my post.”

“That’s no reason to hide,” postulated Francis.

“It is, if you take with you millions in government funds.”

Mustang gasped, “You... stole from the Peruvian government?”

“Not me. My husband. After his death, I was contacted by a lawyer from Geneva. Dear Joaquin, I soon learned, had gradually syphoned a considerable sum from the treasury into a secret Swiss bank account. I was his sole heir.”

“Sounds like a bad movie.”

“Did you restore the money to its rightful owners?” queried Francis.

“In a way,” Peggy replied. “I set up a foundation to distribute the money to the poor in my husband’s native land, since their taxes had financed our travels and the government’s affluence.”

“Oh, hell,” Mustang snarled. “I’m surprised you haven’t been chopped into pieces by some assassin’s machete.”

“Now, *that* sounds like a bad movie.”

“You are in danger still?” Francis persisted.

“Weren’t you, every day after you discarded your father’s clothes and walked naked from Assisi to San Damiano?”

“How... do you know...” stammered Mustang.

“Five years ago, cable news networks around the world pre-empted coverage of a very important international peace summit with the image of a charismatic preacher in “Save the Whales” t-shirt and jeans, entrancing massive crowds from the steps of St. Francis’ Basilica in Assisi. Reporters interviewed a grandmother who’d been cured of arthritis, and a group of Poor Clares, with whom the man had been staying during a retreat...”

For the third time, the words escaped Mustang’s lips. “Oh, hell...”

“The footage of the damage to Santa Maria degli Angeli, well...”

“That is how you know me?” Francis urged.

“And Lady Elizabeth, though she had red hair then, using the name Mustang Duryea...”

“The news didn’t cover *that*...” swore the young woman, brushing a strand of ebony off her nose.

“Wanna bet?” Peggy refilled her cup, and extended the coffee pot toward her visitors, who both declined. “I was in Moscow, paying off some friends who’d smuggled me out of Morocco when things got too... hot, if you know what I mean. They had a wall of televisions tuned to every major news channel, in case their... operations warranted a bit of coverage and they needed to duck out quickly. Most crews cut their live feeds after Francis ended his sermon and reverted to the studio anchors for commentary. One didn’t, and I watched crowds swarming the church steps, with Francis whisked toward a black police van by a group of Carabinieri. Suddenly, your red head appeared in the midst of the melee, and everything stopped. The last shot was of you and Francis hustling down a narrow lane and cutting into an alley.”

“There’s... nothing special about that. Riots occur every day around the world.”

“But one teenaged kid doesn’t have the capacity to stop them cold.”

Mustang sighed. “So, the reporters traced us back to the monastery, and grilled the nuns...”

“Exactly.”

“Is that why you’re here? You’re looking for me?” Since coming to Boleskine House on a permanent basis, Mustang had tired of uninvited intruders.

“Not at all. I didn’t know you were living in these parts until you came out of the woods. I was attracted by strong currents in the collective conscious around Loch Ness.”

“Isn’t it the ‘collective *unconscious*’?”

“There’s nothing unconscious about it. It’s a phenomenal power, tapped by nature, which will eventually obliterate humanity entirely.”

“Whoa, that’s a harsh assessment.”

“Is it?” Peggy speculated. “Don’t you watch TV?”

“No.”

“Then, you’re totally isolated out here?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” quipped Mustang.

“Wildfires are devastating the American west, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes are wreaking havoc world-wide. Nature is retaliating for our ill use of her resources.”

“Sister Earth is indeed angry,” Francis concurred. “I have not spent much time in this century, but what I’ve seen...”

“What you’ve seen, I caused,” said Mustang. “But, you’re right. Back in Montana, the winters were getting steadily worse. And, here... the weather is nuts.”

“You’re from Montana?” Peggy probed.

“Near Helena.”

“I grew up in Frisco.”

For Mustang, that answered a lot of questions. The free spirits in San Francisco were known for their outrageous opinions. “In your quest for the truth, didn’t you ever meet up with Anton LaVey?”

Peggy crackled a fresh smile. “Actually, in the 60s, I attended one of his Satanic Black Masses. What a load of crap. But L. Ron Hubbard made LaVey look like an amateur. That lunatic Scientology...”

The banter ceased as Mustang again glared at Peggy Calhoun Escovar. Jack Parsons had mentioned L. Ron Hubbard during their brief time together, and she’d read her grandfather’s less-than-flattering commentary in the journals she’d confiscated from the Gate Lodge after his death. If Peggy had known the one, could she not have met the other?

“May I ask how old you are?” risked the young woman.

“How old do I look?”

“Fifty-ish.”

“That’s what you get for living alone,” chided Peggy. “You lose touch with reality. I’m 75.”

II

Francis timidly posed his question before Mustang could open her mouth. “This mention of seeing me before on... television. What did the people say... when they heard me speak?”

Both Mustang and Peggy laughed. “Vanity, dear Francis?” the latter smirked. “You never cared what others thought when you were...”

“Alive?” he finished. “Who is alive today who knows?”

“Your biographers...”

“Bonaventure and his like? They were good men, but they were too intent on making me a saint.”

“So were those cable commentators. Only one made the connection between you and... you. He even suggested viewers find a copy of Chesterton’s biography and read it cover to cover.”

“Did you?”

“Years ago.”

“You’re obviously a well-read woman, Peggy,” noted Mustang. “How long had you been searching for your truth, before...”

“All my life, I think. And, it’s not just *my* truth. But, before I bore you with that story, I’d like you to tell me how you two know I’m multi-lingual?”

Neither of the cabin’s visitors had considered the trait. Each time Mustang drew Francis onto the earthly plane, they conversed freely, unconcerned about their differing languages. They were behaving no differently now, not realizing...

“Oh, hell...”

“What?” Peggy prompted, then her violet eyes widened. “You mean, you didn’t *know* you were speaking in English, and Francis Italian...”

““Scusa, Signora. We have become so close, the words no longer matter...” muttered Francis.

“That, I can understand. Joaquin and I, toward the end, seldom needed to speak. I recognized every twitch of his face before he could form the words to express his anguish...”

“How did you meet?” Mustang puzzled.

“Better than jumping around from event to event, shouldn’t I start at the beginning?”

“Sure.”

Peggy rose. “If it’s okay, I’ll talk while I cook. I didn’t eat breakfast, and I’m starved.” She unhooked a cast iron skillet from the wall and laid it atop the

wood stove, pulling a carton of eggs from an insulated cooler. “Care for some, scrambled?”

“No, thanks.”

“So, I’m growing up in Frisco in the 40s, right? Things weren’t so... lively back then. My dad owned a restaurant; my brother and I helped out after school and on weekends. Being near the university, most of our customers were college students and professors. I listened to a lot of intellectual conversations, and learned more than from most books.”

Cracking eggs and stirring them in the skillet, Peggy related how she began to doubt her evangelical Christian roots, based on the animated debates she overheard while clearing tables and filling water glasses. Graduating high school, she decided not to remain in California, earning a full scholarship to the small Midwestern all-girl St. Mary’s College. “I was never certain who sent in the application to the school, because I wasn’t Catholic. Maybe one of the professors who befriended me was an alumna. The only reason I accepted was its proximity to the famous Notre Dame.”

“Notre Dame’s only famous for football,” grumbled Mustang.

“In some quarters, yes. Those who’ve been there know their academic program is excellent, and their library exceptional.” Having added some minced fresh onions and green peppers, she poured the eggs onto a pink plastic plate. “Being a theology major on one side of the highway, the two schools had an agreement where the students could share resources. Those books made me question the institutional religious doctrines being shoved down my throat all the more.”

“Did you graduate?”

“No, but not for the reasons you’d assume. I can’t deny I was extremely jaded about what they were teaching, but I could’ve changed my major any time. The whole atmosphere of the school was built around prayer and spirituality, which I initially saw as beneficial. On my summer visits home, though, I saw more and more that didn’t mesh with the lofty goals of the Sisters lecturing in the classrooms...”

Francis was engaged by the yarn. “Such as...”

“My dad had opened a chain of restaurants along the coast, the latest in Los Angeles. A group of science fiction writers and fans would gather weekly and talk about their novels and the future. I remember, one night, a guy was joking about how he’d almost blown himself and his colleagues sky high, testing a potential rocket fuel. More than one of the others jotted down notes on menus

and napkins scraps, to use in upcoming plots, I don't wonder. I was amazed at their view of not being alone in the universe, so at odds with religion..."

"What was the guy's name?" Mustang ventured tentatively, suspecting the answer to her unasked query.

"I didn't find out until a couple years later, when my dad sent me a newspaper clipping of a horrible accident in Pasadena. There were two photos - one of a destroyed garage where an explosion had taken place, and another of the man who'd died. I recognized him instantly. He was Jack Parsons."

Francis glimpsed Mustang's relieved exhalation and squinted. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, just fine," she replied. She watched Peggy shoveling forkfuls of omelette into her mouth. "By then, you'd already left college?"

Peggy swallowed. "The main reason I didn't graduate: I'd met Joaquin between the stacks of Notre Dame's library. He was a junior when I was a sophomore. We began dating and, a week after he received his diploma in political science, we were married. We returned to Peru after a honeymoon in the Caribbean."

Her husband employed in a minor position by the government's diplomatic service, Peggy witnessed all manner of turmoil in subsequent years. "The best day of my life was when Joaquin accepted the assignment as ambassador to France. We left Peru with no regrets, rarely returning except to make reports or be transferred to a different country. Travel was not so fast in those days, and I often let him go alone."

"You remained behind to raise your children?" asked Francis.

"We had no children. Joaquin and I loved each other deeply, but his medical condition prevented..."

"Medical condition?" Mustang blushed at her own rudeness.

"He'd had scarlet fever as a child, and couldn't..."

The younger woman recalled high school health class, and the list of now obliterated illnesses which had previously ravaged populations or crippled their victims. She also remembered how, in a freshman comparative religion course, she'd become disgruntled with the religious hypocrisy of institutional churches.

She could further relate to Peggy Calhoun Escovar because of her brief encounter with Jack Parsons, her grandfather.

The sun was well up in the sky by the time Mustang stiffly lifted herself off the narrow mattress. "We've taken enough of your time for one day."

"You're not going to turn me in for trespassing?" Peggy joked.

“I’m going to guess this is part of my property, and tell you you’re welcome to remain as long as you like. If anyone disputes the claim, we’ll settle it somehow.”

Peggy set aside her plate and extended her hand. “Thanks, Mustang. I’ll try to stay out of your way.”

“Same here.”

A delicate hand rested on Francis’ bony arm as he stood in the doorway. “I feel privileged to meet you, my friend. Of all the spiritual sorts I’ve consulted in my life, your innocent quietude speaks far louder than their deliberately worded explanations of faith.”

“Too bad you weren’t actually in Assisi when...” Mustang shrugged.

“You’ll need to divulge the juicy details of how you managed that someday,” insisted Peggy. “I’ve a feeling you connected with the truth far more deeply than I, to a point where it’s transformed your entire existence.”

The Mistress of Boleskine bit back a sarcastic guffaw. “That’s an understatement, if ever I heard one.”

Cheery farewells accompanied the pair across the clearing to the tree line. Mustang, nonetheless, carried with her a sense of dread, given this new neighbor’s knowledge of her secret. If the Peruvians who sought Peggy’s demise converged on the estate, would her safety be at risk, also?

“You are reconsidering your invitation?” Francis remarked.

“My goal has always been to let people live, undisturbed and in peace. Sometimes, they make mistakes, or inadvertently place themselves in danger.” The list of names scrolled through her head: Wilfrid Bailey, Lyndon Bixby, Kanti Gandhi Dinn, Jim Neville... “Me believing I could help fix their problems... usually led to more trouble. I’ve just done it again. I’m letting Peggy stay in her little home, but maybe she should keep running.”

“She said she was attracted by the unusual energies of Loch Ness...”

“It’s an old wives’ tale. The mythical monster generates a lot of buzz, and it’s the tourists’ energy, more than anything.”

Still, nearly two years earlier, the woman known as Brede Carver had told of the Druids’ respect for the region, long before outsiders traveled to view Scotland’s largest inland body of water.

If such was the case, why hadn’t she found peace dwelling on its eastern shore?

“May I go back and visit her again?” Francis pleaded.

“You don’t need to ask my permission; you are free to do as you like when you’re here.”

The Italian saint knew better. “Except be seen publicly by those who might... cause you harm.”

“Not me. You. Before, we had no idea of your final sermon’s global impact. We might never have known. I’m rather shocked that enterprising camera crew who kept their lens upon us as we fled didn’t also catch the confrontation at Santa Maria degli Angeli, and your disappearing act.”

“When I next see the Signora, I will ask her.”

“If I’m right, don’t tell me. I didn’t learn, until much later, I could make people forget what they’d seen me do. I even told your brother Giovanni, after the basilica’s damage had been repaired, people would forget about it on their own. I was proven wrong when Abbondio Carneficina appeared on the scene...”

“Abundant Carnage?”

“A sorcerer suffering from brain cancer, with insane delusions about the world coming to an end... He, too, saw the coverage from Assisi, and forced Giovanni to help him find me...”

“You have never disclosed these facts to me before. I believed...”

“I was a naive, innocent child? Oh, hell, Francis, I lost my innocence the day I killed my grandfather.”

Francis stopped in the middle of a puddle, not caring when he sank ankle-deep in icy slush. “You are a murderer?”

“Not intentionally. Say, rather, I have caused people’s deaths through my own stupidity.”

“You said you killed your grandfather.”

“It’s a matter of viewpoint, I suppose. The world thought he was already dead.”

“Eh?”

“Peggy summed it up best. Jack Parsons, my grandfather, supposedly died in an explosion in his garage in 1952, at the age of 37. I met him here, fifty years after that event, looking not a day older, the victim of an FBI conspiracy.”

“Be that as it may, did you *kill* him?”

“He was what some term a ‘black magickian’. He dabbled in matters best left alone. During one of his ceremonies, he blindfolded me, and told me to thrust a knife into the center of a symbol drawn on his altar. When the time came, he had laid himself on the altar, and the knife went through his heart.”

Francis traced the Sign of the Cross and kissed his thumb. “Dear God.”

“I tried to turn myself in for the crime, but an FBI team was already on the property for training exercises. They didn’t want details of their deception leaked, so they stole the body and buried it. When no corpse could be found, I had to

escape from the psychiatric wing of the Inverness hospital. I destroyed the local jail, and traveled home on a lightning bolt...”

She flipped her palms upward, sunlight filtering through leafless branches accenting the rippled scar tissue Francis - and others - had once mistaken for the marks of the Stigmata.

“What about this man, Carneficina?”

“Last I heard, he’s still a patient in an Irish mental facility.”

“You used the plural when speaking of death? Who else, then...”

“Do you remember our little Christmas party a year ago?”

“Si.”

“The one man there, Lyndon Bixby, who I was able to reunite with his son...”

“Ah!”

“Because of me, a motorcycle gang attacked and killed him.”

“But, you have made restitution...”

Mustang whirled on her companion. “That is a concept people like you see as erasing debts for a misdeed. Yet, there are nights when my dreams fill with the faces of those I should never have known. The thousands at Dachau during World War II, hung and burned in the ovens... I should have stopped it...”

“When you were with that general, Rommel?”

“After we had parted ways. I had the chance to kill Hitler - I was standing as close to him as I am to you now. With a word, I could stop all violence on the planet...”

“Then, why do you not?” pondered Francis.

“Because, melting the guns and knives, or deactivating the bombs will not change men’s hearts.” Tears streamed down the young woman’s cheeks. “I blame religion for that. Peggy has seen it, too, I’m positive. When someone holds deep-seated beliefs, they look on those who do not share those ideals as not just different, but as a threat. Just across the sea west of here, in Northern Ireland, clashes between Catholics and Protestants persist, over a few minor differences in political ideology. I could stand in their midst and force them to stop, but I couldn’t force them to make peace with each other.”

Francis draped his arm around Mustang’s trembling shoulders. “Together, we might. I could speak for peace.”

“They would not listen. Human beings listen only to their own warped thoughts. Which is why Wilfrid Bailey died.”

“Who was...”

“He was insane, a murderer himself. I wanted to give him time to clear his name, before I knew how many he’d already killed. He was imprisoned, but escaped - twice - killing even more before the authorities caught him.” Best not to tell Francis how Bailey killed her own double, half her own being, conjured in a moment of teenage angst.

Nor did she wish to tell him about Jim Neville. Mark Twain knew, but he had met Jim in Hannibal, Missouri, when Mustang first awoke the famous author from a bronze statue in a park overlooking the Mississippi River.

She’d never manifested Jim Neville’s spirit - what others considered her ability to “raise the dead”. She wouldn’t have been able to bear the sight of the man who would’ve become her husband, or apologize profusely enough for involving him in her dispute with the FBI, which led to his brutal murder outside a convenience store in southern California.

“You are troubled,” observed Francis, guiding her toward the house, visible along the path. “I will cook you a nice meal, and you will feel better after you rest.”

“Better for you to go,” she sniffled.

Francis released her. “As you wish.”

A muttered command from Mustang’s lips preceded him vanishing into thin air.

“What on earth?” came the stunned contralto from behind her.

Swallowing hard, Mustang spun to see Peggy Calhoun, wrapped in a crocheted afghan, through the maze of tree trunks.

“Oh, hell...”

III

Had not Mustang reacted instinctively, Peggy’s head would’ve slammed against an exposed root when she collapsed in a faint.

If she *had* fainted.

At Peggy’s age, such a shock to the system might have triggered a stroke.

Mustang called upon nature for added strength, lifting the former diplomat off the cold earth and carrying her the remaining distance to the Georgian structure she’d called home for three years. Navigating through the narrow front door proved a challenge, before she shuffled across the main hall to her bedroom. If Peggy were truly ill, better she be comfortable, instead of sprawled at odd angles on the living room sofa.

Especially since Mustang felt like fleeing the building, rather than have to explain Francis' dematerialization. She could call an ambulance from Dores as she escaped, and the doctors at Inverness' hospital could treat whatever ailed the woman.

Her own cowardice disgusted her. Since acquiring her power from Jack Parsons, she'd had to explain the miscellaneous phenomena caused by her impetuous words time and again. This would be no different and, possibly, less troublesome, since Peggy cherished solitude as much as she did, and would not likely divulge the secret, nor live much longer - should the Peruvian authorities catch up to her, or seven decades of wear on her petite physiology take its toll.

Deceptively bright violet orbs fluttered open moments later. "Where am I?" mumbled Peggy.

"My house. You..."

"Saw something incredible," she interrupted.

"Your eyes were playing tricks on you in the sunlight."

"Don't try to con a con." Propping herself on one elbow, she blinked against a wave of dizziness. "You're what many would call the Anti-Christ."

Mustang couldn't repress her laughter, tossing her parka in the closet. "I got the impression you don't believe in such nonsense."

"Even if I don't, millions do."

"They'd be wrong about me. From what I read, in a really lame textbook, the Anti-Christ - if one ever shows up - will be very charismatic, wealthy and powerful in a tangible sense, with millions of followers. I can count on two hands the number of people who know about me, and you don't see any of them hanging around here."

"You're still young. You could be catapulted to fame in a heartbeat by one single act of..." Sitting upright, Peggy waved her hands, imitating a stage magician.

"Stupidity," her host completed the sentence.

"Is that how you describe what happened in Assisi?"

"You, as an ambassador's wife and, then, an ambassador yourself, grasp the importance of each syllable. I... had no idea at first and, even when I figured things out, I still slipped and caused... major disasters."

"Slipped how?"

"Wishing to meet Francis, for example. Or Mark Twain. Comparing Mahatma Gandhi's ashes to powdered drink mix, then dropping them in water. Understand?"

“Definitely. I stuck my foot in it many times, embarrassing not only my husband, but the government. A politician’s sense of humor is never genuine, and my jokes were... not appropriate for state dinners and formal balls. One reason we never had children was my husband’s abiding belief I would not be a suitable mother.”

This last Peggy spoke with such profound regret, Mustang mirrored the tears dampening her sun-darkened cheeks.

“I feel the same about myself,” the Mistress of Boleskine confessed. “My parents considered me dysfunctional before all this... and, after, if I could’ve been confined in an institution, they would’ve rushed to sign the commitment papers. Worse yet, the people I’ve tried to help have been equally dysfunctional, like we’re drawn together by unseen forces...”

“But, they end up dead, and you survive.”

Mustang wiped her nostrils with a baggy sweatshirt sleeve. “Not from lack of effort on the part of those I’ve offended.” She smiled wryly. “I’ve been shot at, beaten, drugged... even seen my own dead body suspending from two trees.”

“Are you sure the Peruvian government isn’t after *you*?”

“No, but the FBI will be, if I don’t lay low.”

“Ah.” Peggy stretched and rose. “How ‘bout a cup of coffee? Some caffeine will help me get my strength back.”

“Sure.”

The pair headed to the kitchen, where Peggy’s eyes widened at the sparkling appliances. “You sure don’t live like a hermit.”

“All this has to last me the next forty or fifty years. Why shouldn’t it be the best?”

“You really believe it’ll be necessary for you to stay in hiding your entire adult life?”

“For the very reason some might see me as a possible Anti-Christ. I don’t dare interact with the public, ever again.”

“You must be terribly lonely.” Peggy located a jar of instant coffee in a cupboard and a pot to boil water.

Two ceramic mugs were unhooked from a wall rack and placed on the granite counter. “I’ve always preferred being alone, really. I used to skip school, just to wander in the woods by myself. People... get on my nerves after a little while.”

“Like I am now?” queried Peggy.

“Not yet. You’re intelligent, curious. You don’t buy into the standard approach to life.”

“Is that why you keep company with Francis?”

Mustang nodded.

“And all you need to summon him is a word?”

“Yes.”

“I envy you that.” Steam swirled in the air above the pot, and Peggy switched off the electric burner. “You mentioned Mark Twain and Gandhi. Who else have you...”

“Can’t we change the subject?”

“As long as it’s not about me. We can talk about literature, music, history...”

“You’ve been to Paris.”

“I lived there for a few years.”

“I was in the Louvre a couple years ago, but an... incident prevented me from seeing the Mona Lisa. Is it as intriguing as they say?”

“Museums are vastly overrated,” Peggy chuckled, sipping the warming liquid. “So is sight-seeing, for that matter. While my husband was alive, the diplomat’s wives invariably were bundled off to see the cities they were visiting, and meet school children. At no other time of my life was I ever that bored.”

“What if you had to pick one city as a personal favorite?”

“It’d be San Francisco.”

“Where you grew up?”

“Definitely.”

“But, you can’t go back...”

“It’d be the one place the Peruvians would look.”

“After so long?” pondered Mustang

“I risked it once: ten years ago, for my great-nephew’s wedding. I swore I saw their black suits and sunglasses on every street corner.”

“Could’ve been the FBI...”

Peggy mused, “I suppose so. It made me so nervous, I was glad to leave, even without...”

“Without what? Staying for the wedding?”

“No, I attended the wedding. It was actually held in Des Moines, Iowa. Something about the bride’s family traveling from various parts of the country...”

The cup cradled between Mustang’s hands nearly slipped free as a vague memory rushed through her head. Mental fingers tried to grasp the elusive, wispy strands, unsuccessfully.

Fortunately, Peggy's narrative continued. "Their father was a retired Marine, and his four kids were... different, to say the least. One was a cop in Montana..."

"Oh, hell..."

The clouded image solidified in the young woman's mind, and she shuddered. Peggy set aside the mug and steadied her,

"What's the matter?"

"Was your nephew's name Glenn?"

"How would you know..."

Mustang dropped onto one of the kitchen chairs. "I met the whole family a couple years ago. I was... seeing Jim, the cop, and we went to his other sister's wedding, after meeting up with his family in Des Moines."

"The Nevilles?"

"Exactly."

"Did you marry Jim?"

"We... never had a chance."

"You broke up?"

"He was... killed by the FBI."

"Corrupt?"

"No. It was my fault."

Peggy smirked. "Another of your 'accidents'?"

"Sort of. My grandfather had left behind a... sensitive scientific document, and the FBI suckered me into finding it for them..."

"And your grandfather was..."

"Jack Parsons."

The elderly ambassador sank onto the wooden chair opposite. "This is getting very bizarre. I knew your grandfather, and you know my great-nephew..."

Shaking off her goose bumps, Mustang ventured, "You never knew a doctor named Jonas Fairchild?"

"The name's not familiar..."

"Thank heavens for that."

"Why?"

"He lived in California, too." Peggy's blank stare demanded more. "The psycho who strung up my double between the trees..."

"Ah!"

"You said you left San Francisco without something. Without seeing your father, maybe?"

“He was long dead by then. No. We were staying at Glenn’s family home in Livermore before caravanning east for the wedding. I lost a pearl necklace Joaquin had given me for our fifth wedding anniversary...”

“And, even if they found it, they didn’t know where to send it, because you were...”

“Constantly on the move.”

Impulse brought Mustang to her feet. “Look, I’ve got... chores to do. If you want to swing by later for dinner, I can cook up some steaks, or salmon...”

“Delightful.” Rising, Peggy raised the colorful afghan over her white hair and strode toward the door. “I’ve become accustomed to the European habit of eating late. Nine o’clock?”

“I should be... back by then,” responded Mustang absently, her mind thousands of miles away.

“What will you be doing?”

“The horses...”

“I’ve seen you riding them. Magnificent animals. Especially the Arabian.”

“Feel free to take one out, if you’d like.”

“I... haven’t ridden in years.”

“You never forget.”

“Thanks.”

The kitchen door closed behind the visitor, and Mustang twisted the lock on the knob. She scurried in the opposite direction, through the steel-reinforced main entrance, turning her key in the deadbolt. She could hear Peggy’s merry whistle drifting over the crisp air as she jogged toward the hill where Parsons’ rotting altar marked the tragic spot where she’d ended his life.

Odd how she’d never known Jim’s brother-in-law’s last name. It had never seemed important in the midst of the craziness which marked those final months of high school, the trial of the animal activist horse thieves, and her search for Parsons’ legacy...

She did, however, remember the name of the company he co-owned, shouting her command above the brisk wind. “I’m going to the Livermore Research Group building in California!”

Whether or not the Scottish weather service tracked this rogue flash of lightning, she didn’t care. She did end up caring about the difference in time, though, arriving slightly disoriented on a gloomy, pre-dawn lane an hour’s drive east of San Francisco.

Through a plate glass window, she noticed the digital display above the security desk - 6:03 AM. A lone guard dozed near the monitors. No sense

disturbing him, especially when she needed the hour or two to think what she'd tell Glenn Calhoun.

Would she even recognize him, having seen him over a period of days in the excitement of a wedding and journalists' interviews about Mark Twain's missing statue?

From a bench in a manicured garden - where employees might enjoy their lunch on a warm day - Mustang watched the influx of bodies begin before 7:00. Security guards changed shifts as daylight brightened the surrounding neighborhood and illuminated the three story red brick-and-steel complex.

She didn't expect Glenn to park his silver Cadillac a few feet from her and emerge, clutching the San Francisco *Chronicle*. She'd thought him shorter, but it might have appeared so only when he'd stood next to Jim. He'd grown a beard, mostly grey, and his dark, close-cropped hairline had receded another inch above his squarish forehead. His face, nonetheless, beamed with expectation, like a scientist on the verge of a great discovery. Reflecting, Mustang realized she'd seen a similar expression light Parsons' mien the morning of that final ritual...

Was Glenn near to making Parsons' formula a reality?

"Good morning," he greeted, buttoning his Ralph Lauren suit coat. "May I help you?"

For a scant second, Mustang didn't remember if her hair automatically changed back to its natural red during her travels. Had it not, Glenn would never recognize *her*.

She decided to wing it, standing. "Hi, Glenn."

He paused, studying her features. "Oh, my God. Mustang?"

"Hi," she repeated awkwardly.

Her perplexity at being hustled along the stone path and through the building's glass doors, stopping only once sequestered inside the elevator, was evident in her expression, distorted by the stylized mirrors on the walls.

"Sorry," apologized Glenn. "But, what in hell are you doing here?"

"I... came to see you." So much for an elaborate tale.

"From where? My research showed you disappeared off the face of the earth after..."

No reason to bring her power into the explanation. "When my FBI file was erased from their database, it destroyed... other records."

"Wow." They stepped onto the third floor; Glenn escorted Mustang to his corner office, overlooking the park, now shining with dew beneath a gentle rising sun. "So, where have you been?"

"Do you want to be in even more danger?" she countered.

“I’ve never told a soul about...”

“So, you haven’t been working on it...”

“Privately, in a lab set up in my basement at home. Why? What have you heard?”

“Nothing. I came to find out... where Jim is buried, for one.”

Glenn tossed the newspaper on his metal-trimmed glass desk and faced the full-length windows. “When the Feds released the body, his parents had him cremated and scattered in the ocean. It was the end to months of pain and frustration.”

“Months?”

“The government tried to cover up what happened, for obvious reasons. Offered the family ten million dollars to keep quiet.”

“What excuse could the agents give for shooting an innocent man?”

“According to unclassified documents, the FBI wasn’t even at the convenience store that day. It was local and state police, tracking a sex offender who’d raped a 12 year old girl...”

“What?”

“They’d caught the guy an hour earlier, a few blocks away. The FBI sprang him from the county jail, took him out to a deserted farm and shot him in cold blood, then substituted his body for Jim’s.”

Mustang flopped onto a buttoned leather armchair. “While keeping Jim’s body on ice, until...”

“Right. For a few weeks, we thought they’d caught you and...”

“No. They knew better than to try.”

“So, you weren’t put into the witness protection program?”

“Once the formula was destroyed, they... let me go my own way.”

“But, the formula wasn’t destroyed.”

“The paper copy was torched in a Las Vegas hotel room. They... don’t know about the electronic copy.”

“Are you certain? They could’ve downloaded the memory on Jim’s cell phone...” Glenn fell silent, then broke into a broad smile. “Except the phone was hit by bullets and smashed when Jim hit the ground...”

Mustang sobbed aloud.

IV

Glenn comforted Mustang as best he could. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so... blunt.”

Her diminutive frame eventually stopped shaking, and she dried her eyes on the embroidered handkerchief he offered. "It's... okay. I haven't tried to think about it for so long..."

"Obviously, you wanted to know, or you wouldn't have come..."

"That's not the only reason. Did you ever find your aunt's pearl necklace?"

"My aunt?"

"Peggy Escovar."

"I thought she was dead!"

"Not yet."

"You know her?"

"We're... neighbors."

"As a matter of fact... we did find it, when we were moving a few years ago. My wife keeps it in her jewel box."

"Would you mind if I restore it to her?"

"Not at all." Glenn glanced at his Rolex. "We can run home at lunch..."

"Fine. That'll give me time to hit a casino..."

"Casino? Are you a gambling addict?"

"No. It's how I replenish my bank account."

"There's no guarantee you'll win..."

"Why do you think I went to Vegas after Jim died?"

He considered. "To win enough to... escape?"

She shrugged.

"There's a casino here in town. Do you have a car?"

"Never got my license."

"I'll have one of the techs run you there."

Mustang rose. "Thanks, Glenn."

He intercepted her before she reached the threshold. "What about... the formula?"

"You keep it safe?"

"I deleted the file from my cell after printing a copy, which is kept where no one will ever find it."

"Good. I wouldn't want to carry the guilt of knowing the FBI was dogging your beautiful family."

On that note, she departed.

Dawdling at the Livermore Casino for three hours, Mustang sensed the eyes of intimidating security guards on her at various times. She scaled back her winnings to divert suspicion, but her red hair made her visible every second.

At least, cashing in wasn't a problem. As with all large amounts, state and federal governments wanted their share, which required presenting an ID at the cashier's cage. Being able to transform paper napkins into \$20 bills, or convince an Interpol detective he saw Athens' Parthenon fully restored, made it easy for the young woman to use anything from her old library card to a store coupon as a substitute. Those punching the data onto a computer screen saw what she wanted them to see: any of a dozen names with corresponding Social Security numbers.

She remembered, too, to scramble the security camera feed, so her image would not be clearly recorded.

The debit card holding \$125,617 slid into her wallet as she bid the scowling guards a cheery farewell.

Glenn waited beside his Cadillac when the Toyota Prius rolled up the circular drive. Mustang went from one passenger seat to another, enjoying the air conditioning which offset the already oppressive spring heat.

"A good day?" Calhoun inquired.

"Reasonable. I don't gamble much in the States anymore. They're always on the lookout for pros counting cards or carrying loaded dice..."

"You play black jack?"

"No, but I do shoot craps now and again. Mostly, I stick to the slot machines."

"And... manipulate the gears?"

Mustang glared at her companion, concentrating on mid-day congestion at a traffic light. "How much did Jim tell you about me?"

"Just the bare essentials, and I took that with a grain of salt, knowing how much he loved you. A big part of our research involves the power of the mind to aid in curing terminal diseases. We're linking mental energy with certain medications..."

"So you understood what... I can do?"

"Honestly, I'd like to get you in my lab and do a comprehensive study. The resulting paper would rock the scientific community, which pretty much frowns on our endeavors."

"If that's your speciality, why work on anti-gravity propulsion?"

"I studied physics in college, only minoring in pre-med. If I could create a working model of the unit, it would be far more lucrative than the piddly NIH grants we've secured."

"And more hazardous."

“That’s why no one else knows about it. I don’t even have a lab assistant, and I frequently could use an extra set of hands.” Glenn braked at a stop sign on a residential side street. “If I asked you to...”

“I’d refuse,” Mustang retorted. “Politely, of course. Except for an occasional trespasser, I live a quiet, peaceful life with my horses.”

“Back in Montana?”

“No, and I won’t say where, in case...”

“The Feds can be worse than the Gestapo, I’ve heard. They’ll do anything to get information, whether or not Congress has approved their methods.”

“Including shooting men in cold blood.”

The Calhoun home was a modern four-bedroom Victorian-style in a gated subdivision. Glenn pulled into the driveway, to be mobbed by his three children - older than Mustang remembered.

“Why aren’t they in school?” she asked.

“Jean home-schools them. They learn a lot more that way.”

“No chance of skipping, either.”

They laughed, corralling the youngsters toward the front door, where Jean, blonde and lithe, welcomed them.

“I didn’t expect you until late,” she addressed her husband, kissing his cheek. Then, playfully, to Mustang, “I didn’t expect you at all.”

“She came for Aunt Peggy’s pearls.”

“Flimsy excuse to come from Montana...”

“Farther, actually,” confessed Mustang, self-consciously concealing her hands behind her back to hide freshly charred palms.

“Come on, then. I’ll give you the 50 cent tour.”

Glenn strode across the foyer toward the rear of the dwelling. “Is lunch ready?”

“Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“My favorite!”

The women chuckled as they ascended polished teak stairs. Great care had been taken in decorating each child’s room; the three bathrooms surpassed luxurious. Veering through the last into the master bedroom, Mustang marveled at rolling hills beyond the balcony.

The necklace was entwined around her fingers as she held back the curtains for a better view. “Oh, hell...” she gasped.

Not merely a string of shimmering pearls, but engraved gold disks and tiny diamonds completed the ensemble. Custom made, surely, Mustang assumed. No wonder Peggy had been distraught at its loss.

“How is she?” queried Jean.

“Not that I have anything to compare it with, but she’s well.”

“Still running from assassins?”

“So she says.”

“Having no way to contact her, she doesn’t know the regime which had a contract out on her was overthrown ten years ago, and the last of the corrupt politicians was executed shortly thereafter.”

Astounded, Mustang spun from the window. “I’m sure she’s kept up on the news...”

“This was very... hush, hush. Conditions in Lima are not... ideal.”

“How did you find out, then?”

“Glenn has contacts around the globe. If it’s one thing researchers like to do, it’s talk to others in their field. Almost as if no one else will listen to them...”

“I know the feeling.”

Jean sympathized with her guest. “How have you been, since...”

“Hiding, basically.”

“Did Glenn tell you what happened, after...”

Mustang cringed affirmatively.

Ushering her back to the stairs, Jean stated, “Know you’ve always got friends here. Jim confided to me in Hannibal he was planning to buy an engagement ring and propose.. I feel like I’ve lost not just a brother, but a sister-in-law, too.”

They embraced, and Mustang sidled toward the door.

“Don’t you need a ride, to the airport or... wherever?” Jean speculated.

“I’ll be fine. Thank Glenn for me.”

From the corner of her eye, Jean glimpsed the flash of lightning moments later, while clearing dishes off the kitchen table.

Glenn also shifted his gaze toward the patio. “What was that?”

“A freak of nature,” Jean commented.

Descending the frost-covered hillock at Boleskine, Mustang didn’t worry so much about finding her way in the dark, as she did about her foolishness in agreeing to meet Peggy so late. Being 6,000 miles away, in full daylight, she’d briefly forgotten the protective defenses in place to deter nocturnal intruders would not differentiate between friend and foe once the sun had set.

Not finding Peggy waiting near the main house, she hurried through the woods to the tiny cabin. The door stood ajar, the fire in the wood stove had died, and no candles burned.

If not either of those places, then where?

She retraced her steps, watching for signs of the woman having fallen on the dim trails, or becoming lost. Calling her name aloud disturbed the sleeping wildlife, and merited no response.

Dejected, Mustang detoured into the barn to check the horses. Rather than ignite the row of overhead lights, she grabbed a flashlight off a hook beside the rack of saddles, aiming the beam at the floor.

Whinnies and snorts of annoyance met her ears. "It's all right, guys," she soothed. "It's just me."

An educated finger checking levels in each stall's water trough, her boot jammed on something solid where there should have been only straw. Molly nuzzled her with a wet nose, then stamped the floor with a nervous hoof.

The narrow light ran over an upturned saddle, and Mustang recoiled. The stables never locked, had someone been trying to steal one of her horses, and fled at her approach?

Molly bumped her arm, forcing the torch beam further left. The lump's vivid colors startled Mustang anew.

"That's not one of my saddle blankets."

She knelt beside the pile and plucked at the corner of the crocheted granny square assortment with hands freshly singed by lightning. The body beneath propelled her backward, between Molly's legs.

Peggy lay curled in the straw.

No choice now but to turn on the lights. Mustang scrambled to the tack room and flipped the switches. The horses made their disapproval audibly known, and she had to squint against the sudden brilliance. It couldn't be avoided; this was serious.

Slowly, as if to prevent destroying any evidence of foul play, the Mistress of Boleskine tip-toed back to the stall. It didn't take a detective to determine no crime had been committed, however. Peggy had lifted the heavy saddle and tried to carry it to her chosen mount...

The former diplomat might not have forgotten how to ride, but she hadn't taken into consideration the equipment's weight and her advanced years.

For that matter, she might never have had to saddle her own horse. She would've had servants to handle those chores.

Mustang bent to feel Peggy's neck for a pulse, finding none. The accident might've happened hours earlier and, without immediate treatment, there'd been no hope for her.

The last time one of the region's constabulary had set foot on the estate, Jack Parsons body came up missing after his death. Mustang had been locked in a

psych ward, until she engineered an escape with her newfound power. To summon the police for an investigation would... present unnecessary complications.

Swinging onto Molly's back without a saddle, Mustang urged the horse into the night. The ride to Glenn MacDonough's via the paved thoroughfare took less than ten minutes, though she must've looked a fright by his shocked expression upon answering her knock.

"Call an ambulance," she requested, having related the details.

"Aye, your ladyship. And ye come inside this minute and get warm by the fire."

Indeed, anxious to locate Peggy, Mustang had forgotten she wore no coat. She accepted MacDonough's offer, settling in the armchair he had just vacated, his smoldering Meerschaum pipe resting in an ashtray beside her.

"I'm really sorry to interrupt your evening," she apologized.

"Dunna be concerned for me. Think more about getting a phone hooked up at your house. Ye have too many emergencies..."

"Not of my own making," protested Mustang.

"Whatever the reason, trouble seems t' find ye like a magnet finds iron." They laughed together at the truth of his statement. Within minutes, they heard the sirens on the B852, and MacDonough sent one of the stable hands in a pickup to Boleskine, in case the medics had questions.

They didn't; the situation could not be mistaken. The death was ruled pulmonary edema; the strain on Peggy's heart had been too much.

After years of stress, looking over her shoulder every minute for Peruvian assassins, it might have been expected.

Unlike Jack Parsons, Peggy Calhoun Escovar could be buried publicly, those wishing her harm long dead themselves. Mustang paid for the coffin and a simple service in the Dores church, attended only by herself, MacDonough and a few curious locals. The pearl, diamond and gold necklace had been fastened around Peggy's neck.

Her body would not share the same plot as her husband. Mustang believed, somewhere on the ethereal plane - amidst the collective conscious, as Peggy had called it - they were together once more.

Despite the older woman's assertion - scrawled in dust on the stable floor before her final breath, Mustang guessed - that the Anti-Christ would soon end the world.

Had Peggy meant it as one last joke?

Sweeping away the lettering and laying fresh straw, Mustang grit her teeth. Too many radicals held such outrageous ideas as truth when, as Peggy had proclaimed, humanity itself - violating nature and attempting to control what could not be controlled - would bring about its own demise.

The very reason she didn't try to alter weather patterns was the same reason nature would eventually eradicate humanity.

Content in her solitude, she would not contribute to their decline.

Unless people kept bothering her.