

The Mustang Chronicles:

Iconic Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Tentative feet ascended a seemingly endless staircase, bathed in blackness. Mustang's sole hope lay in the door-shaped rectangle of light far in the distance, beckoning her upward.

She trudged on, thinking the scene part of a dream. Then, she missed a step and stubbed her unshod right big toe. Pain coursed through her body - very real pain.

No nocturnal fantasy, this.

Nor was she dead.

As she approached the lofty summit, a din of voices reached her ears. Not a handful speaking loudly, but thousands or....

Millions.

Stepping through a gold and ivory-inlaid portal, hazel eyes blinked against brilliant sunlight, and a sea of bodies pressing against barricades twenty feet away, their numbers stretching down the steep incline, far past the horizon. Three others stood on the impromptu grassy stage: Mark Twain, Francis of Assisi, and Mahatma Gandhi.

"Oh, hell..." she gasped. "I'm sorry if I interrupted..."

A wave of cheers arose from the throng. "Mustang! Mustang!"

Memories assailed her, of crowds in Vatican City for the last pope's election - glimpsed years earlier on the evening news - shouting, "Viva il Papa!" or videos of rock concerts, when the lead singer made his grand entrance.

She tugged the sleeve of Twain's trademark white coat.

He turned from reading banners flapping in the gusty wind. "Ah, you're here."

"What's all this, Sam?"

The author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* grinned beneath his bushy white mustache. "Word of mouth has elevated you to prominence, Elizabeth. The world has need of your wisdom."

"That's crazy. Maybe ten people living know the truth about me. There's no way..."

"How do you think the people of India learned about my march to the sea in protest of the British prohibition to making salt?" interspersed the dhoti-clad Gandhi. "One person tells five, or ten, who tell ten others, and so forth. Such methods work faster than newspapers, or even your internet."

"But, overnight?" countered Mustang.

“You acquired your gift ten years ago, Signorina,” Francis reminded her. “You cannot say this occurred overnight.”

The enthused mob pressed against a make-shift metal blockade, threatening to swarm the peak’s remaining open space. A cordon of uniformed soldiers raised their semi-automatic rifles.

Mustang bolted forward, yanking away the nearest guard’s weapon. “Stop this!” She spun on the trio. “I don’t understand. Why here? Why now?”

“Didn’t you once tell me, ‘When the student is ready, the teacher will appear?’” shouted the balding Scot, Barney Kerr, at the front of a boisterous delegation to her left.

“That I did,” she replied. “But, it ain’t me.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself! More students have found inspiration in that statue I carved using you as a model...”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Your skill as a sculptor is their inspiration. Or when they read about these great men...”

“It *is* you,” stated the Italian saint. “Our time has long since come and gone...”

Twain concurred. “This is a task for someone young, energetic and creative.”

“With extraordinary powers, perhaps?” Mustang scoffed.

“Indeed,” said the Father of India.

“Gandhiji, you can’t believe that. How many times have I told you three: I may control the forces of nature, but I can’t change the minds of human beings?”

“They’ve changed their own minds. They’ve come here of their own free will, to seek your aid.”

“What kind of aid? I haven’t the funds to pay their debts, or feed their children...”

An emaciated Francis raised his arms, the Stigmata piercing his palms visible to all. The clamor of voices quickly faded, jostling eased, and every ear awaited his word. He addressed Mustang, however. “Listen to their pleas, then decide.”

“To hear every one would take more than a lifetime,” she objected.

“Choose those who will speak on behalf of the others.”

Desperately, Mustang scanned a sea of eager faces. Her jaw gaped as she recognized smile after smile. A slender blonde visage mystified her, though. The eyes sparkled in a familiar way, though the frame attached had matured.

Little Bonnie Thompson had been a golden-haired seven-year-old when last Mustang had seen her. She’d wandered into the woods during a class field trip to

the Duryea's Montana horse ranch. Hard to fathom that had been almost a decade, and she was now a striking teenager. She stood next to her mother, Irina, and brother, Andrew, surrounded by - from the bright green jackets they wore - every student or teacher who had ever set foot inside Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School.

"Mustang, you've got to help us," the girl pleaded.

"What makes you think I can, Bonnie?"

"I remember what you did that day I got lost at your ranch, and I grew to learn changing the leaves' color was not a mere magician's trick. The whole county..."

"The whole state," interrupted Irina.

"The whole state's been devastated by wildfires and drought. Thousands of homes have been burned to the ground, with their owners still asleep..."

"I could stop the fires, but I won't deliberately make it rain just to ease the drought," pledged Mustang. "Besides, if I do it for you, I'd have to do it for the entire country, or anywhere in the world where the weather causes such problems. That's why I went into hiding..."

Scrutinizing the terrain suspiciously, her own question rang inside her skull, "Where am I?"

"The stock thereabout is dying of some unknown disease," added a bearded alum, close to her own age, elbowing his way through the throng.

"Horses?"

"And cattle. What little fresh water is available is tainted because the flow from the mountains is cut off."

"You are..."

"Eddie Daniels."

Mustang recollected the arrogant senior who'd spent a few months apprenticing at her father's ranch before graduation. "I didn't recognize you without that crumpled straw hat, and a cigarette hanging from your mouth," she chuckled.

"No time for that now. People are losing their livelihoods."

"Didn't you become a veterinarian? You should be able to treat the animals."

"I took over Doc Griffith's practice last year. He and I are working together, but we can't figure out how the bacteria is destroying the red blood cells..."

"So, you want me to cure them? They still won't have enough fresh water, and will be reinfected."

“You’re heartless!”

This from another blonde further along the barrier. Mustang had little trouble recalling her face, though she’d long since lost her cheerleader’s figure having three children, who huddled in front of her: Chelsea Barker.

Her brain muddled by this bizarre reunion, the Mistress of Boleskine contemplated her reply as she moved toward the still-catty female. “It’s not heartless being fair to everyone. I’ve made too many mistakes trying to help one person while wreaking havoc on thousands of others.”

“I want my kids to have a future. You need to step up and take care of this mess...”

“Last time we were together, I tried to find a way to prove I hadn’t lied in class. You wound up almost being raped on a pirate’s ship, remember?”

The mother’s head drooped. “That was an Ecstasy-induced hallucination.”

“No, it wasn’t. I have a letter from Sean Forbes which can prove it.”

Chelsea’s blue orbs flashed. “You still lie!”

The situation hopeless, Mustang proceeded down the line. The letter Sean Forbes, who later took the name Parsons and sired the son among whose descendants would be occultist and scientist Jack Parsons, would remain tucked in the latter’s journals, now safely locked in the Boleskine study.

She had a sinking feeling, somewhere on the ethereal plane, Peggy Calhoun Escovar, former Peruvian ambassador who’d died trying to saddle a horse, laughed at her this very moment. The prophecy - uttered in a tiny cabin regarding her status as the “Anti-Christ” - rang in Mustang’s ears: “You could be catapulted to fame in a heartbeat by one single act...”

What had she done?

Maybe Rolf and Greta Steckling could explain. The plump Austrian couple reached their hands toward her, embracing her warmly when she came within reach. Tawny haired Kathleen Fitzwalter, whom Mustang had saved from an abusive relationship and placed as the authors’ secretary, milled nearby.

“What is happening?” Mustang queried.

“You well know the answer,” responded Rolf cryptically. “If you don’t, you’ve been living in seclusion too long.”

“Tell me, please.”

Greta ventured, “More than ever, the politicians are being...”

“Politicians,” supplied her husband.

“*Ja*. They care not for the people, only for satisfying their own greed. The number of homeless families in Salzburg has tripled in the past six months...”

“It is the same around the globe.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang sighed.

Had these millions converged on this mountain to lay their troubles at her feet, expecting her to make everything right?

Would not one person’s idea of “right” conflict with another’s?

How often had she mentally debated that dilemma! Her concept of what needed to be done - saving a man from breaking his leg, or giving another the chance to clear his guilty name - had stood in opposition to that of law enforcement. Watching Hitler’s purge of the Jews during World War II, from within the body of German sergeant Georg Schiller, confirmed her quandary. The dictator had thought himself right to take such actions.

What about an enlightened concept of right? If these people had their minds opened, freed of human impulses like ambition, the need for love or power, would they not all agree on a common view?

“I don’t think so,” smirked Brede Carver, the ancient Druid freed from a stone within a Scottish ceremonial circle. With her, historic preservationist Kyle Bowie, their matching gold rings answering the unspoken inquiry about their marriage.

They headed a deputation of environmental activists, bearing a myriad of banners and protest signs.

“Why not?” Mustang challenged.

“I’ve lived in this century only seven summers. I can safely say, with this technology so prized by people of the age, the tendencies toward fulfilling base desires at any cost has only grown worse since my day.”

Bowie asserted, “Because there’s more to conquer, more to acquire.”

“Then, what’s the solution?” begged Mustang.

“That’s for you to decide.”

The decision might be easy, after all, thought the young woman, as she turned from the crowd to find Francis, Twain and Gandhi monitoring her progress. She’d already listened to accounts of nature retaliating against human misuse of resources and, coupled with human over-reaction...

Again, Peggy Escovar’s astute observations - viewed as preposterous at the time - came to mind. Humanity would be decimated when its actions had pushed nature to the limit. The Anti-Christ could be the agent of that decimation...

Especially an Anti-Christ with power to call upon nature’s strongest forces...

They were here. Why not simply wipe them out with a word...

The stooped Mahatma’s gnarled hand on her arm broke this reverie.

“Come, there is more.”

A wild-eyed, disheveled elder in a baggy hospital robe had sneaked past the barricades and infantry, sweeping Mustang into a merry, albeit musicless, polka. She couldn't catch her breath long enough to ask his name. When he sashayed her toward a similarly garbed cluster, the pieces began assembling in this particular puzzle.

The only survivor of her mischief to land permanently in a psychiatric hospital had been briefly known as Abbondio Carneficina, real name Misha Epstein.

"Misha, stop!" she commanded and, just as quickly as the dance had commenced, he released her and cowered against the nearest soldier for protection.

She extended her hand, he slipped behind the armed man. "I'm not angry, Misha. Can't we talk without... you swinging me around like a dervish?"

He poked his balding head between the corporal's crooked arm. "No one heeds my opinion anymore. Will you?"

Their first confrontation had been sparked by his belief in a pending apocalypse. His failure to obtain the publicity he craved for his tirades led him to use magickal powers equaling her own to kill hundreds.

"What *is* your opinion?" she asked quietly.

If he'd babbled, "The world is coming to an end," she would've walked away. He didn't.

"No one knows how to enjoy the simple things in life anymore. They need to find joy..."

Perhaps freeing the man of his inoperable brain cancer, and his obsession, had been a fortuitous choice. He'd evidently worked through his guilt over the senseless murders, and discovered a bit of the truth.

"What, in your opinion, is the solution?"

"Destroy the technology. Destroy the guns. People need to be forced to return to the old days..."

"They'd still war against each other, using sticks and clubs," she objected.

"But, they'd also have to talk to each other, grow their own food, and ride horses..."

That, Elizabeth Duryea wouldn't mind. She became nauseous riding in the back seat of most cars, and her love of horses had earned her the nickname Mustang as a child. Still, if every contraption invented since the industrial revolution melted back to its core components, humanity retained the knowledge to recreate them...

She could alter how they lived, but couldn't change their minds.

“It’s a good idea, Misha, have you any other opinions?”

His lucid moment had passed, and he appeared to forget her. Bony, bare legs shivering, he cavorted back to his comrades, who decided to throw their own party in the midst of the crowd.

That’s when the fight erupted.

II

Without thinking, Mustang plowed into the fray, to prevent any possible injuries. She’d gotten the impression - from what she’d already heard - this had been a spontaneous convergence of peoples, all facing the hopelessness of the global situation.

Not that she agreed with that assessment.

She broke through a tight cluster of spectators to find four men, only one of whom still struggled. The other three were well battered, however. At least one broken nose, a black eye, and swollen lips would make this fiasco memorable for them.

Ripping off the lower section of her t-shirt, Mustang pressed it against tow-headed Brother Giovanni’s gushing nostrils. “You should be ashamed, a man sworn to peace!” she chided playfully.

“I didn’t start it,” snarled the Italian Franciscan. “Luigi got excited and tried to shove the others out of the way...”

Brother Luigi, his brown robe twisted, strained against the grip of a wiry Japanese, another familiar face. “Please let him go, Jiro,” instructed Mustang.

Fingers equivalent to steel clamps flexed open as the Japanese bowed obediently. “*Hai.*”

His companion, Yasuo, son of Sakurai’s mayor, also bent from the waist in respect.

Luigi fell to his knees, then prostrated himself on the grass before Mustang, clearly uncomfortable with these expressions of honor.

She addressed Giovanni. “Tell me why Luigi is so... excited.”

“He saw you.”

“Then he’d go ballistic if he saw Francis.”

“No. Francis already spoke to him. Since word of this... assembly reached us, even increasing the dose of his medication has not helped.”

“Last time we talked...” Then, she recalled their meeting in Ireland had been erased from his memory. “He’s still under a doctor’s care?”

“We moved him - and a number of our other brothers - from a private facility five years ago. The top two floors of the General House in Rome have been converted to a secure hospital, where they are tended with love and kindness.”

Mustang squatted near the disturbed gardener, urging him to raise himself off the ground. “Luigi, you wanted to come and see me. What have you to say?”

“We need you, dear angel,” he gushed, propped on his elbows yet not meeting her gaze. “The world needs you to save it from destruction.”

“Another miracle?”

“Not one, many. We need your miracles now more than ever.”

“You are fully capable of making your own miracles,” she remarked.

“Thinking and acting wisely create better results than any miracle.”

Giovanni lifted his confrere to his sandaled feet. Gently, he brushed stray wisps of Luigi’s hair from his rheumy eyes. “It is as Father Francis told you, my brother.”

“But she *must* save us!”

The pair moved back into the crowd; Mustang signaled Yasuo and Jiro to accompany them, in case Luigi’s enthusiasm resurfaced. Both, so calm and mature in contrast to the impulsive, youthful selves she’d encountered when visiting Rick Shimoto’s family purely by accident, bowed low and kissed her hands.

That’s when, over Jiro’s shoulder, she noticed the camera.

“Oh, hell...”

This outpouring of misplaced affection did not need to be televised via satellite to the rest of the world.

“Turn that thing off!” she shouted.

The lanky individual wielding a SteadiCam paused long enough to consult the petite woman to his right. Beneath her ring of dark tresses, Kanti Gandhi Dinn smiled.

Mustang glanced from the Mahatma, watching from the hilltop, back to her. “Did you stage this, just to film it?” she snapped.

“No. We learned of it in Mumbai, and brought our equipment to capture the images for posterity.”

“If there is any posterity,” added the videographer.

“You’re a sensible woman,” Mustang stated. “Why has this fatalist attitude infected everyone?”

“More and more starve each season. Only the very wealthy can afford to keep their homes, while others live in tents or shanties. There are no jobs, and few charities to aid the poor. No one else on earth has the power to solve this crisis...”

“This ends here.” The Mistress of Boleskine stormed toward the metal barriers, vaulting the four-foot height as if leaping onto a horse’s back. A biting indictment of such mass hysteria and stupidity burned her tongue; she was ready to release a building rage using the same techniques nature had already employed.

Until she spied her cousin, Rachel, on the opposite side of the clearing, a curly-haired toddler cradled in her arms.

The two hugged for a long time, and tears flowed in abundance. Mustang kissed the youngster on her chubby cheeks, and her resolve to chastise the throngs melted with the sound of the delighted giggle.

“I got your letter about being pregnant,” related the younger Duryea. “And then the birth announcement.”

Rachel affirmed, “None of this could’ve happened without your intervention. You cured me, and I have a full life ahead of me. I want the same for my daughter.”

“Not you, too,” Mustang moaned.

Ben Henderson, Rachel’s husband, laid firm hands on Mustang’s shoulders. “I love your cousin, and our child. From the examples she’s given me of your capabilities, can’t you see we have no choice but to beg you to help?”

She shook free of Ben’s grasp. “What do your visions show?” she asked Rachel.

“Long ago - remember? - I saw you atop this mountain, standing with great men. This is that day.”

“This is Croagh Patrick?” Mustang gulped.

Rachel nodded solemnly.

“Oh, hell...”

“This is your destiny, Mustang,” the dark-haired teacher declared. “The past ten years, I’ve known it. I just didn’t know when...”

“But, how did I get here? Last I knew, I was in Scotland, walking my property...”

“The cries of the millions summoned you, and nature transported you.”

Mustang flipped her palms upward. The wounds from her last trip via a lightning bolt - from Lisbon - had healed as best they could, to nasty scars. Had she inadvertently wished to cross the Irish Sea, the skin would’ve been freshly charred.

“I don’t believe you, Rachel. This is some kind of hallucination, or a nightmare.”

“Then, why would thousands of teachers come with me, across the oceans, to plead their case?”

“I don’t know. I don’t... know.” Dejected and confused, Mustang sank on the incline and buried her face behind her knees.

“Nae o’ that, lassie.” Ian MacIntosh, his beard neatly trimmed and grey mane combed off his forehead, hoisted her upright in one swift motion. His Scottish burr assailed her ears. “When ye suffered that nasty crack on your noggin, ye hallucinated about killing a man in white robes. Ye could no more commit such an act than imagine these millions would create this spectacle...”

The caretaker’s logic had one flaw: she *had* killed Jack Parsons a decade earlier. She’d climbed the hillock near Boleskine House, where his altar had disintegrated except for one last rotting chunk, to commemorate that fateful day, to watch the sun rise.

A sudden cramping chest pain doubled Mustang over. MacIntosh grabbed her at the waist. “Are ye all right, lassie?”

“I concede this reality,” she gasped, her lungs seemingly unable to suck in sufficient oxygen. Gradually, she straightened as the spasm subsided. “Still, it must end.”

“Why, when you could dissolve the world’s corrupt governments and enthrone yourself as ruler?”

Mustang spun on that unique, Celtic-tinged baritone, his bronzed mop tinged with auburn. “The last thing I want is to be queen, Thomas. You should know that.”

“Reluctant leaders make the best ones,” Thomas Burton grinned. “Shakespeare proved as much. They have no ambition, and dedicate themselves to serving the people.”

“My only ambition is to be left alone. I’ve caused too much trouble since...”

“She’s right, Thomas,” agreed Peter O’Donnell, embracing his step-daughter, Rachel, and her child. “To turn her loose on this quagmire would only hasten our collective demise.”

Unable to determine if the blond Irishman was joking, Mustang focused on his sparkling blue eyes. “Is that what your ESP tells you?” she probed.

“I don’t need ESP to draw this conclusion. You’re not ready. You probably won’t ever be ready. You’ve decided to disconnect yourself from the human condition, using your power selfishly, shunning the opportunity to use it in a positive way...”

“Shunning the opportunity?” she echoed vehemently. “Every cry for help which has reached me since I sought refuge at Boleskine has been answered with

as positive a response as I could muster. Ask anyone here, and they can confirm that truth...”

“You did so reluctantly,” Peter admonished. “The only time you use your power with any enthusiasm is when you gamble in Monte Carlo.”

“Or Dubai,” chuckled Burton.

“Are you trying to make me angry?” Mustang growled. “You know I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“Fine. Get angry. Wipe us off the planet in one fell swoop. It’ll save us having to die a slow death of desperation and fear.”

She screamed at the top of her aching lungs, “You - all of you - are trying to convince me the world has gone to hell in a handbasket! I won’t believe it! You come to me because you’re too lazy to change yourselves or your own communities! You’re looking for a new savior, because the one you’ve held sacred these many millennia hasn’t made your life the joy ride you want it to be! You want a god who will answer your prayers, because the selfish petitions you’ve offered in your churches, synagogues and temples have fallen on deaf ears! Well, look elsewhere, fools, because I won’t lift a finger - or speak one word - to help you, until you wake up and help yourselves!”

Sighting a stunned Glenn Calhoun, his wife Jean and their three children, she pointed to him. “There! This man has studied the brain’s ability to assist in curing the body. He’s far more qualified than I to lead you to improving your lot! Until you realize the futility of your present course, I can do nothing but provide a huge bandage for a wound which has been infected and grown gangrenous.”

“I don’t want that kind of adulation, any more than you do,” muttered Glenn.

“Then, why *are* you here?”

“To thank you for what you’ve already done.”

“To thank you for loving my brother,” Jean added.

Mustang bit back the sob at the last second. Eight years had passed since Jim Neville had been gunned down by the FBI, and still intense grief could wash over her like a tidal wave at the memory.

Francis of Assisi slipped up behind her and led her to the mountain’s summit. “I’m sorry, Signorina. Perhaps we were wrong to bring you here...”

Her head snapped around so abruptly, her neck popped. “*You* brought me here?”

“*Si*. Myself, Signore Clemens, and Signore Gandhi.”

“But, why?”

“We heard the people’s cries,” said Gandhi. “Knowing you as we do...”

“Oh, hell, Gandhiji, knowing me as you do, you should’ve left me in my solitude.”

Mark Twain chewed his cigar pensively. “As your friend pointed out, Elizabeth, reluctant leaders often make the best ones. Given your personal growth and increasing wisdom, we three expected you would take no action without serious deliberation, and be able to assist in the needed recovery...”

“I’m afraid you were wrong, my friends.” She scanned the visages of these lauded men. “It’s taken a long, long time for me to limit the use of my power so I don’t cause more trouble than I solve. I’m only 26 years old. Most kids my age are still drinking and humping their way through life, avoiding responsibility like the plague.”

“You can, nonetheless, inspire great changes...” urged Francis.

“And when people fail to implement those changes? What then? Should I go off like Misha Epstein, and force humanity to obey me? No, guys. No.” She faced the strangely hushed legions, hanging on her every syllable. “Go home, all of you! Look to your own hearts for what you seek, not to others. Tend your families, your neighborhoods, and build something good.”

Millions of feet remained motionless. From some remote quarter, the chant resumed, “Mustang! Mustang!” becoming louder as more and more voices joined the chorus.

“See?” she muttered to her companions. “They won’t heed even that basic advice.”

“A storm might disperse them,” suggested Twain.

“Come on, Sam. You know I won’t manipulate the weather.”

“What about a vision?” came the New England accent from the left.

Mustang whipped toward the sound. Beneath silver-rimmed glasses, a sideways smirk characteristic of his lineage. “Don?”

“Dr. Lyndon Bixby White, if you don’t mind,” he corrected lightly.

“You didn’t become a meteorologist?”

“Of course, I did. Once I got a job at NOAA, I was able to afford to earn my graduate degree, too.”

“Congratulations.”

Ascending the rise, he grasped Mustang’s hands. He dipped his chin in greeting to the historic figures. “Since I feel I know these men after our Christmas celebration together, I’ll speak candidly.”

“Can I stop you?” Mustang sighed.

“I doubt it.” Tender lips kissed her fingers, then he peered at her with grey-flecked brown eyes. “The one aspect of life you’ve never come to grips with

is love. You don't know what it is to be loved. You grew up in a home where your parents never expressed their fondness for each other, so it scares you, and you shun those who love you."

"For their own protection."

"Bull."

"The first man I dared love is dead because of me!" Her voice quavered with the beginnings of tears at her still-unresolved anguish over Jerry Richards' ghastly demise in a plane crash the previous October, and the passionate, stormy romp on the hill with First Minister Sloan MacTavish. "And the others..."

"That's one kind of love. If you think about it, you've loved many others, just were too frightened..."

"Don't do this..."

"You wouldn't have helped my father, or myself, if you didn't care. Many of the people here are just as afraid of love - or trusting others - as you are. If you show them a vision of what is possible when humans hope, dream, and work toward their goals..."

"How?"

"Don't rush yourself. Relax. You'll think of something." Smooth fingers caressed her chin. "You shall bless the world..."

Then, the hand slapped her, hard.

She winced against the stinging sensation.

A second strike.

Her eyes opened, burning with rage.

To see a ceiling-tile grid mottled with harsh fluorescent light fixtures above her prone form, the cubicle encompassed by striped curtains suspended from metal tracks.

She tried to lift herself off an uncomfortable mattress, and couldn't budge. Shades of being strapped to a gurney in an Inverness hospital rushed through her brain.

"Oh, hell."

III

“Mustang, don’t.”

The male voice meant to soothe, but only enraged the Mistress of Boleskine more.

“Get me out of here, or I’ll bring the roof down on our heads!” she swore.

A different, English-accented baritone intervened. “There’s no need for that.” Its owner stepped through a gap in the curtains, smiling. “I’m glad you’re awake, though.”

“Awake?” growled Mustang. “I wasn’t asleep...”

“True. You’ve been in a coma for about a week and, this morning, we performed surgery to remove the bullet from your spine...”

“What!”

“You couldn’t have asked for a better surgeon, Mustang,” praised the first man. “You were lucky he was visiting his uncle near Dores...”

Subduing her emotions and focusing on the pair, she breathed, “Oh, hell.”

Ben Espinoza, FBI, his tanned Hispanic countenance framed by curly black hair, hovered beside her, red necktie loose atop his cuffed silk shirt. At her feet, in a white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around his neck, Denis Sommers’ blue orbs beamed, despite the concerned furrows marring his forehead beneath a straw-textured bronze mop.

“You said something about a bullet?” she murmured, trying to piece this insanity together with her presence at Croagh Patrick.

Sommers demurred to Espinoza.

“I suppose you want all the gory details,” quipped the latter.

“Unless you want another bath in Loch Ness.”

“I’ll pass.” He settled on a stool. “You were shot.”

Mustang spoke through clenched teeth. “I’m not going to play twenty questions, Ben. And I’ve got no patience for games. Get on with it.”

“There’s no easy way to do this, Mustang. I’m sorry. From what we can tell, you were on the hill at Boleskine last Wednesday, near that old wrecked picnic table Parsons used for... his shenanigans. The bullets came from a line of trees to the west. Glenn MacDonough found you; he’d heard the shots. Fortunately, his nephew was visiting from Manchester...”

“Who did it?” she prodded.

“We believe he was a man named Mason Church. We found his body on the B852 between Boleskine and Dores. He’d committed suicide, and the rifle used in the murder attempt had been smashed into pieces less than fifty feet down

the berm. Our investigation found he'd been a failed Christian missionary in Sri Lanka, then Hong Kong and Bangkok. He spent seven years in a Chinese jail for preaching on street corners in Beijing. Did you know him?"

A flood of images flickered before her mind's eye. Jim Neville's twin, she'd first thought, seeing him painting the mission wall opposite a Bangkok Buddhist temple. She'd nursed him back to health after an attempt on his life, and dragged him to China with her for his own safety. His dedication to converting the "heathens" had been his undoing, and he'd been arrested within a day of arriving in the capital.

"You didn't have a chance to ask why he wanted to kill me?" she puzzled.

"No, but a cousin in the States received a few letters from him during his incarceration. He blamed you for ending his chances to bring non-believers to Christ."

Mustang intended to cover her face with her hands, but her arms would not move. "C'mon, Doc, you don't need the restraints this time."

"You're not restrained," confessed Sommers. "You're... paralyzed."

Silence filled the cubicle while she assimilated this information. Her next words were barely audible, and tinged with grief. "How... bad?"

"One bullet severed your spinal cord just below the sixth vertebra. I was reluctant to operate initially, because I thought more damage would be done if the bullet was removed. But the MRI confirmed no way to repair the injuries."

"One bullet? There were others?"

Espinoza supplied, "He emptied an entire clip, but he wasn't a good marksman. Only three hit their target."

"Where?"

"Your right thigh and... your backside," Sommers didn't try to suppress his chuckle.

"Ha, ha," she responded snidely.

"Actually, if Uncle Glenn had ignored the racket, you'd be dead now. The shot which hit your leg nicked your femoral artery. You could've bled to death."

"My savior."

Two buff orderlies drew aside the curtains. "Look, Mustang. They're going to take you to your room," noted Sommers. "If there's anything you want..."

"I want to walk again."

"We'll be able to offer various types of physical therapy to prevent muscle atrophy, but beyond that..."

Espinoza snorted uncharacteristically. "I thought you said you knew her, Doctor. She'll be up in a week, if past events are any indication."

"Don't give her false hope, Ben. It'll just make accepting the truth more difficult," countered Sommers. "It'll take awhile for her body to heal, and her mind even longer."

The gurney's brakes were disengaged, and Mustang could only watch the ceiling ripple past as she was wheeled from the recovery room.

Espinoza followed.

Past rows of surgical suites to an oversized elevator, the group ascended three floors. Unable to swivel her neck, Mustang sensed more than saw the doors on either side. In what must've been a lounge, she heard distraught visitors discussing their relatives' conditions. Access to the intensive care unit was tightly restricted, the touch pad requiring a four digit code sole means to activate the mechanical doors. Then, they skirted a bustling nurses' station, with racks of patient files, humming computers and chirping phones.

Her private room boasted machinery meant to monitor heart attack survivors and stroke victims. The view from the window didn't impress the patient when one surprisingly strong orderly lifted her off the gurney and deposited her between the bed's molded plastic railings. He activated the controls, raising her head slightly, as his partner maneuvered the bulky metal cart out to the corridor.

"Would you like some water?" asked the young man.

"Sure."

A styrofoam cup with a bent straw was held to her lips. The icy liquid felt thick as she tried to swallow, and some dribbled onto her baggy hospital gown.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He dabbed the splotch with a towel, tucked the blankets around her legs and departed.

Leaving Ben Espinoza leaning against the wall.

"Am I under arrest?" Mustang snapped.

"No."

"Then, why are you here? Surely, you weren't needed to track my would-be assassin."

"It's coincidence, really. I was on a flight to Edinburgh when the news broke about the shooting. Not that you're so renowned in these parts, but Church's methods ran to the extreme..."

"You were on vacation, and just happened to be headed to Scotland?"

"I've taken four days' vacation in the last ten years."

“You never let it go, did you, Ben? When I deleted my FBI file on your Blackberry and agreed to this exile, you couldn’t stomach ordinary assignments, or forget...”

“I’m a deputy director now.”

She mocked, “Congratulations.”

“But, you’re right. Your periodic antics wouldn’t let me forget. And even if your file was deleted, the ones on Jack Parsons, your grandmother and your mother were still available...”

“My... mother?” In that moment, Mustang wanted to rear up and attack the agent. “Why in hell did you have a file on my mother?”

“Because she was Jack Parsons’ daughter. It’s not even ten pages total, though. She, fortunately, liked to live quietly.”

“You’re using the past tense. Why?”

“She’d dead, Mustang. That’s why I was flying to Scotland.”

Her blunt retort went unspoken. The experience on Croagh Patrick, learning of her paralysis and her mother’s death was too much for one day. Tears flowed in abundance.

Espinoza grabbed tissues from a box on the bedside table and patted her skin with astounding gentleness. He pushed tangled strands of auburn hair off her shoulders. “If I could’ve avoided this, I would’ve,” he groaned. “I’ve got my duty...”

“Which is to harass me and my family?”

“You don’t understand. It wasn’t me, personally. J. Edgar Hoover started the file on Parsons and, more than anything, wanted that anti-gravity propulsion formula. When Parsons wouldn’t surrender it, Hoover decided to go after his various... women. That’s when agents reported the birth of your mother. Even though neither your grandmother nor your mother knew where the formula was hidden, they were kept under surveillance for years.”

“What a bunch of dirty, rotten bastards!”

“It makes sense, really. The bureau thought, as Parsons got older, he’d write to one or the other, and tell them...”

“And, when he didn’t?”

“Thing is: he didn’t age. Something about the drugs used in treating his burns after the explosion altered his metabolism. In a way, I’m shocked Hoover didn’t haul him in and have the scientists run a host of experiments on him.”

“Ben...”

Espinoza flopped onto a vinyl armchair in the corner. “How do you think your grandmother got the passport and airline ticket for you? Didn’t you ever

wonder how your high school freshman ID photo got from Canyon Creek to Massachusetts?”

“You set me up?”

“The idea was that Parsons might confide in a relative. With my team doing training, if that happened, we’d been instructed to take you into custody...”

“You had the Gate Lodge bugged?” With every phrase, Espinoza was compounding his own punishment in Mustang’s eyes.

“Yes, but Parsons never said anything. He didn’t even divulge the details of that final ritual, and we didn’t discover his purpose until you’d killed him.”

Sarcastically, she drawled, “I’m amazed you didn’t know about his journals, and try to steal them a lot sooner.”

“We didn’t have access to the hidden cameras available today. Those nights when nothing came through on the tapes, we thought he was asleep.”

While Mustang was realizing the events on Croagh Patrick had possibly been a coma- or anesthetic-induced apparition, Espinoza’s tale was a nightmare. “How did my mother die?”

“A car accident. The ranch foreman was driving her into Helena to do the weekly shopping. An overnight rain had frozen, and he hit some black ice on a curve. The Suburban rolled and...”

“Oh, hell.”

“I came to tell you: the President is agreeable to you returning to the States and living on the ranch, if you’re willing to... lend your talents to certain enterprises.”

“You told the President about me?”

“He’s a... very thorough chief executive. He had members of his national security team audit the FBI file archives. Though yours was not in the database, they questioned why your mother’s was still open after fifty years. I... had no choice.”

“I suppose the meeting was held in the Oval Office, under tight security?” Mustang chortled.

“The matter surpasses Top Secret. The only other person attending was the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

“The damned military knows?”

“You... could be considered a weapon.” He drew a blue booklet from his hip pocket.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Your new passport. Your previous one has expired.”

“You expect me to go with you? Like this?”

“A military C-130 hospital plane has accommodations for... disabled patients.”

The passport spontaneously combusted. Espinoza dropped it, but only ashes dusted the floor. Beneath his polished shoes, boards jolted and bucked; tiles ripped from their glue, cracked and sprayed fragments around the room. While Espinoza’s arms shielded his face, the walls split and windows shattered. Along the ward, alarms sounded when equipment malfunctioned as electricity arced across frayed wires.

A panicked voice crackled over loudspeakers in the corridors, ordering ambulatory patients to evacuate using the nearest staircases. Staff members were directed to assist those who could not reach emergency exits on their own.

Denis Sommers sprinted into Mustang’s ICU suite, a scrub-clad nurse on his heels. Glimpsing Espinoza cowering in the chair, they halted, uncertain.

“Get him out,” Sommers instructed his companion.

She dodged flying debris and tugged the FBI deputy director off the cushion, shoving him toward the door. With them out of earshot, Sommers glared at his patient. “Did you cause this?”

“He betrayed me!” she sobbed. “I’ve spent the last eight years in hiding, because he told me I must, and then he exposes my secret to the government!”

“Mustang, calm down. You’re going to compound the damage if you don’t rest both your body and your mind. I’ve rung some colleagues who treat athletes on the Continent. They’re flying over to examine you and recommend treatments...”

“To hell with your treatment! Don’t you understand? They’re considering me part of their battle strategy!”

“Mustang, stop it! You’re endangering the lives of hundreds of innocent people, as well as your own future! Please, believe me. If you promise to rest and submit to the tests we’ll be giving, I’ll make sure Espinoza and his kind never get their hands on you.”

She gazed into his blue eyes and forced her breathing to slow. “I’ll hold you to that, Doc.”

A rapid succession of tissues wiped the dampness from her cheeks. “You can trust me, my lady.”

“I’ve told you before: don’t call me that.”

“Fine, but would you please... repair the hospital?”

Less intense vibrations commenced, restoring walls, windows and floors within a matter of minutes. On the street, sirens signaled the arrival of fire and police brigades, who inspected every level of the structure prior to allowing

patients back indoors. Veteran officers commented among themselves how the incident mirrored the Inverness jail's destruction ten years earlier.

To the day.

IV

Mustang, not one to consult a daily calendar, paid little heed to comments regarding the anniversary reported on the local news. She assumed Espinoza had been escorted from the premises, and banned from re-entry. FBI or no, he was out of his jurisdiction, and trying to obtain needed permissions from British authorities would mean revealing sensitive facts he was obliged to keep confidential. The Mistress of Boleskine assumed he would wait for her discharge, then resume efforts to win her to his cause.

It might be weeks, or months.

She didn't care. Remnants of the general anesthesia, and the exertion wrought by her temper, caused her to doze fitfully through the afternoon.

Denis Sommers materialized from the shadows as the sun set beyond the window. He'd shed the lab coat for street clothes.

"You heading home?" queried Mustang.

"I wanted to stop in before leaving. How are you feeling?"

"I... don't *feel* much of anything," she stated.

"Physically, that's normal right now, though you may experience some phantom sensations, like itchy legs, when you're half awake. It's... the brain playing tricks on the body. Mentally... you're not depressed or... or..."

"Ticked?"

The orthopedic surgeon grinned. "You really *do* horrible things when you're angry, don't you?"

"Ben Espinoza's lucky to still be alive. If I'd had use of my hands, I would've strangled him after what he told me."

"Well, he'll go back to Washington without you. There's nothing he can do to change fate."

"He knows I can change it, though."

"*Can* you?" Sommers gazed at the rainbow hues painting the dusky sky. "Will you?"

Mustang sighed. "I don't know. I don't know if I want to. Being... like this would mean no one would bother me anymore..."

"But, you'd need 'round the clock care."

"I can afford it."

“You remember, after your accident during the May Day festivities, how you reacted when I told you not to ride your horses for a few days, until your concussion healed?”

“You’ve got me there, Doc. I... couldn’t go through life without my horses. I wouldn’t want to live if I couldn’t...”

She saw him pat her shoulder, but felt no contact. “Do me a favor and rest. I’ll be back in the morning. The others are due in town by late afternoon. Their poking and prodding won’t be pleasant, still, if they can devise a strategy...”

He strode toward the exit; she called to him, and he paused.

“How did you stop the bleeding and keep me alive out there?”

“I opened the wound with my pocket knife, reached in and used my fingers as a clamp, pinching off the blood flow. I held it like that until Uncle Glenn ran to the house, called the ambulance and brought my medical bag.”

“Without scrubbing up first? I hope you hadn’t been planting flowers or cleaning stalls...”

“Would you rather have died?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll tell you in a week.”

He suspected she had more to say. “What else will you tell me?”

“Nothing. I’ll need *you* to tell me everything that’s wrong with me, in minute detail. With pictures, if possible. Tomorrow.”

“Good, because I’m exhausted, and you must be, as well. Good night.”

“Thank Glenn for tending the horses, will you?”

“You can tell him yourself, if you don’t mind him visiting.”

Mustang Duryea never thought she’d utter the words: “I’d... enjoy the company.”

She didn’t enjoy the leather-textured chicken, bland potatoes and mushy vegetables served for dinner, the breakfast porridge, or the mystery stew lunch. Nonetheless, the nurse wouldn’t allow her to refuse the sustenance, forcing a fork between her resistant lips.

Nor did Mustang appreciate having three pompous physicians huddled around her bed, viewing x-ray and MRI films Sommers displayed while discussing her case. “I can translate Italian, even Chinese,” she lamented. “But I don’t comprehend medecalese.”

“There’s no easy way to explain without...” retorted Sommers.

“Try, please.”

He pointed to a series of scans, similar to slices of bread, except they were of a three-inch section of Mustang’s spine. “You see the cracked vertebrae, where the bullet penetrated?”

She nodded.

“This is the spinal cord.” His fingers progressed to the next frame. “This is where it’s severed.”

“Can’t you stitch it together?”

“We’ve already done that. The lost fluid, however, doesn’t regenerate.”

“There’s been encouraging research in lab rats using specific stem cell lines at the University of Madrid,” offered the ruddy Spanish doctor. “In five or ten years, we should be ready for human trials.”

“Five or ten years?” Mustang echoed. “Do you know how long that is?”

“You’re still young. You’d salvage a long, productive life, if the technique works.”

“Stuff that.” Her eyes shifted toward Sommers. “Doc, I think this consultation is done.”

He detected mounting tension in her voice, and politely escorted his colleagues from the suite. He spun on the threshold. “What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about me. I suppose my clothes were tossed in the trash after...”

“Correct.”

“What about my house keys?”

“I gave them to Uncle Glenn, so he could keep an eye on things.”

“Good. Ring him, and ask him to bring me some sweats from the chest in my bedroom.”

Tentatively, Sommers agreed. “And, then?”

“I’ll need to grab a few things at the house before I... leave.”

“Where will you go?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Not back to Montana?”

“No. Somewhere Ben Espinoza and his ilk will never find me.”

“Not to mention the world-wide medical community. You walking will be deemed a miracle, and they’ll queue up to pay millions...”

“They’ll never know, if you don’t tell them.”

“If you travel by conventional means, your passport will be tracked.”

“Even if I travel by unconventional means” - referring to the rogue lightning bolts - “the weather services can track me. This time, I’ll walk if I must.”

“You won’t get far, this being an island.”

“I’ll figure that out when I reach the coast.”

Sommers approached, leaning toward her ear confidentially. “One of the Manchester players has a yacht he cruises around the Mediterranean during the

off-season. He owes me a favor after I treated his daughter's broken arm last month. The boat could drop you wherever you choose."

"Thanks, Doc."

"If Uncle Glenn comes before supper, will that be all right?"

"Perfect."

"I'll request the discharge papers, in the meantime."

"No. Wait. Ben may have bribed some secretary to notify him when the computer records are updated. If he knows I've been cut loose, he'll stalk me like an eagle hunting a lame rabbit. Glenn can pick me up at the service entrance, or something, after he brings the clothes. Then, if you'll be kind enough to meet me at Boleskine around ten, you can drive me south. I'll be long gone before the FBI picks up the trail."

"You've put great thought into... escaping undetected," Sommers remarked.

"Not consciously in recent years. It's always been filed away as a possibility, if... something like this happened."

"What about your horses?"

"Glenn can have them. Two of the three which are left came from his stock originally, anyway. And he's always admired the Arabian."

"Three? I thought you had six."

"Horses don't live forever, Doc."

"Neither do humans." With a squeeze of her motionless hand, he departed.

Left alone, Mustang guessed she had fifteen minutes before nosy nurses or curious interns wandered in to check her pulse and blood pressure. She closed her eyes and called upon nature to repair the damage wrought by cold lead. Beyond the window, an autumn breeze accelerated to a howling gale, and rain clouds obscured the afternoon sun, pelting pedestrians and cars with golf-ball sized hail.

The prim, middle-aged woman, sandy hair swept off her severe face into a tight bun, placed two fingers on Mustang's left wrist.

Hazel eyes shot open. "Damn, you keep those in an ice bucket?"

Recoiling, the nurse's jaw sagged. "You... felt that?"

The patient inhaled slowly, remembering what had transpired. "I... must've been dreaming," she lied.

Vital signs recorded on the chart, rubber-soled shoes squeaked from the room. Mustang bent her neck to focus on her hands. As if she'd sustained no injury at all, her arm rose and she scratched an irritating itch on her nose.

Glenn MacDonough arrived with a bouquet of flowers and a brown paper bag, his wispy hair disheveled when he removed his black fedora. “We were that worried for ye, lass,” he greeted. “I’m glad ye feel up t’ a visit.”

“I feel well enough to go home,” she responded, taking the sack and inspecting the green sweat shirt and pants. Glenn had even thought to add socks, underwear and sneakers.

“Has Denis released ye, then?”

“He will, shortly. You don’t mind giving me a ride, do you?”

“Nae at all.”

“There’s a loading dock on the hospital’s north side,” Sommers directed, joining them. “The staff is busy delivering supper trays now. If we hurry, you’ll be gone before they miss you.”

The men waited outside the ICU suite, pretending to discuss the case, while Mustang dressed. Fortunately, unlike other patients on that wing, she had not been hooked up to intravenous tubes or catheters once she regained consciousness. She despised needles, as it was, and just seeing the marks where they’d fed her fluids while comatose made her nauseous..

“Ready,” she whispered when the glass panel slid aside.

“I’ll meet you on the ground floor,” hissed Sommers, pointing the pair toward a service elevator.

Emerging near the gift shop, Glenn crossed the lobby and continued to the parking lot. Sommers signaled Mustang from the opposite direction, guiding her through the hospital’s massive stock room to where trucks could back their trailers to unload.

The escape in a construction company pickup made good, Mustang breathed easier, slumping on the passenger seat. “I want to thank you for saving my life,” she told the driver.

“‘Twas nothin’, lass. Ye would ha’ done the same for me, hearin’ so many shots that close.”

“I’ve one more favor to ask.”

“Anythin’.”

“The use of your phone.”

“We can stop at the house before I drop ye at Boleskine.”

The call she made might be traced, Mustang knew, but her mother’s death warranted the contact. Roy Talltrees, the Duryea’s attorney for decades, undoubtedly would have taken charge of the ranch following the funeral. She wanted him to know she was not willing to inherit the property.

She learned, to her shock, and consequent relief, Joe and Maggie had changed their wills after her disappearance, stipulating the stock and ranch be sold, with proceeds donated to wildlife conservation efforts.

“They were willing to set up a small trust to cover your expenses, if you requested,” the lawyer concluded.

“No need. I won’t contest their wishes.”

The connection broken, Mustang smiled at Glenn.

“Good news?” he ventured.

“In a way. Next time you’re in Dores, will you tell Ben MacPherson and the grocer to stop my bi-weekly orders?”

“O’ course.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’ll walk from here.”

“Are ye strong enough?”

“Never better.” She took his hands and kissed his bulbous nose. “You’ve been so generous and kind since I came here. I wish I could do something for you.”

“Havin’ ye as a neighbor has been an improvement over Jock White, or that musician long since. Will ye be sellin’ the place?”

Not hers to sell, but Mustang didn’t admit it. Nor did she admit her fear Espinoza had ordered a stake out near the winding gravel drive to the main house. MacDonough passed her the keyring; she set off at a slow pace - even a week’s inactivity had made her muscles stiff and sore.

Despite spending an exorbitant amount on refurbishing the old Georgian mansion, Mustang had never bothered to buy herself a new backpack. Granted, she’d only used it a few times since coming to Boleskine, but it showed its age in the frayed cloth and missing stitches. She managed to jam three pairs of jeans, some t-shirts and other necessities into the main compartment, tucking Jack Parsons’ journals into the side pocket.

The refrigerator emptied of perishables, she switched off the electricity at the fuse box. The house dark when Denis Sommers’ silver Mercedes braked near the front door, he speculated she’d already fled. Mustang had been watching for him from the living room, though, and paused to lock the steel-reinforced door before joining him on the heated bucket seats.

“You’re not sad to go?” he puzzled.

“Sure, I am. Every few months, I convinced myself this was my corner of heaven - then someone disrupted the tranquility. Still, I could tolerate that. I don’t know what the future holds.”

“Do any of us?”

“Maybe not.”

The Mercedes turned south on B852, along Loch Ness’ eastern shore. In the rear view mirror, Mustang noticed headlights from six black SUVs approach and turn between the tilted gate posts.

It hadn’t taken Ben Espinoza long to figure out her ruse.

“Before you vanish from my life, you need to know something,” Sommers was saying while she was thus distracted.

“Eh?”

“Your heart stopped beating three times in the operating room.”

That statement merited her full attention. “What?”

“You died. The first time for around three minutes, the others for less than one.”

“Nice to know.”

“Did you... go anywhere?”

“I couldn’t explain if I tried,” she conceded. “I thought it was real, because when I stubbed my toe, I felt pain...”

“You stubbed your toe?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“When the gurney was being wheeled into the O.R., the door hit your foot. If that was the pain you felt...”

“We’ll never know for sure, will we?”

Sommers concentrated on the roads for awhile. “I’m glad I won’t know where you’ll be living,” he said eventually.

“Why?”

“Because, I’d be first in line, wanting to drag you into a lab and pick you apart. You’re... quite extraordinary.”

“So are you. You save lives. I... haven’t always been that careful.”

The rest of the journey passed in silence. On a remote pier on England’s west coast, a huge yacht - reminiscent of the *Ultimate Escape* used by Rolf and Greta Steckling - awaited its lone passenger.

Mustang leaned across the stick shift and kissed Sommers’ cheek.

“Thanks.”

The surgeon swallowed hard. “If you ever need anything, you know where to find Uncle Glenn, and he can always ring me.”

Each morning, a placard appeared on the Via San Francesco in the Italian village of Assisi, high on Mount Subasio. In eight languages, the sign read, “Multilingual Tour Guide.” For whatever fee small groups considered fair, a dark

haired woman clad in t-shirt and jeans would guide them through narrow lanes and alleys - even down the steep incline to the church of San Damiano - in the footsteps of the world's most famous saint.

She never spoke of religion, only of Francis' gentleness, compassion and wisdom. She related intimate tales of conversations as if she'd witnessed them personally.

Her patrons never realized she spoke only English, and through a unique power she'd inherited years earlier from her grandfather, they heard her in their native tongue.

Every afternoon, she climbed the mountain to a grove occupied by wild horses, descendants of those which had migrated away from civilization with the coming of the automobile. She reveled in their beauty, fed them treats of apples or carrots, and they welcomed her as a friend.

None of the shopkeepers or residents of the ancient village knew her name. Nor did they realize, on quiet evenings, she enjoyed lively conversation in the cramped upstairs apartment near the Church of San Rufino, and a game of chess with old friends.