

The Mustang Chronicles:

Foreign Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

A half-dozen mares heavy with foal grazed the corral; Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea - perched on the white slat fence - marveled at the cycle of life.

She also marveled at the stupidity of some men.

The new crop of part-time ranch hands, mostly students earning extra credit during the busy season, had reported for their first shift - three dressed like television cowboys: fringed shirts, Stetsons and ornately stitched boots.

Brother, were they about to get a huge dose of reality! she chuckled mutely.

As the foreman called the roll, Mustang recognized a few names from Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, where she infrequently attended classes, moreso since inheriting mysterious powers from occultist Jack Parsons in Scotland the previous autumn. The rest came from as far as Helena, the Duryea ranch enjoying a reputation as top source for excellent stock in that part of Montana.

One, from even farther.

“Pietro Sellari!” an irritated bass shouted.

The jean and brown t-shirt clad figure leapt off the bed of a rusty pickup that had braked on the drive. “Here!”

“You’re late, boy!”

“Scusa, Signore,” the Italian apologized. “We took a wrong turn.”

Goosebumps on Mustang’s arms provided ample warning of something unusual in the foreign youth’s inclusion among this lot of misfits. Her father had a standing agreement with area schools...

“Where you from, Pete?” the foreman demanded, eying him suspiciously.

“He’s an exchange student from Perugia,” answered his companion, Warren Turner.

That issue resolved, Mustang studied the shaggy, russet-mane framing a wide forehead which tapered along a stubbly jaw to a narrow chin. Intense brown eyes beneath thick brows sat above a Romanesque nose and thin lips angled upward at the right corner. Height-wise, he came nowhere near the guys who must’ve played basketball and stood well over six feet. Yet, he appeared fit enough, trim and muscular.

He spoke English with a definite accent, she discovered, listening to his conversation with the others as they waited for orientation to begin. Sufficient for her not to invoke the mental translator she’d used to comprehend the languages spoken during an unexpected journey to his homeland months earlier.

An involuntary shudder at those memories nearly catapulted her off the fence. She clutched the wood until her respiration resumed a slower rate.

“Are you all right, Signorina?” Sellari queried.

That he’d noticed her reaction irked her. “Fine, thanks.”

“Would you like me to help you down?”

Hazel orbs rolled skyward. She’d learned European men believed all women weak and helpless and, to shake him from such antiquated notions, she bounced to the ground with a sarcastic grin. “No need.”

As she spun toward the barn, her auburn ponytail slapped his cheek.

He dogged her into the red-painted structure, where she poured oats into Heartbeat’s feed trough. “Do you work here?” he wondered.

“You won’t be working here, if you don’t get back to the meeting,” she chided.

“Ah, si.” He reversed course. “May I speak with you later?”

“Why?”

“Curiosity.”

“Curb it. You’ll be better off.”

With that, she brushed past him, bound for the house. She despised the idea of confining herself in her bedroom on weekends for the next month while these neophytes rambled the property - creating issues she’d be responsible for rectifying the following Monday. If it meant avoiding the prying Pietro Sellari, and quelling any adverse reaction on her part...

Under ordinary circumstances, as in the days before she’d traveled to Scotland, the girl shied away from strangers, absented herself from school in favor of roaming her father’s vast acreage on horseback. Since Parsons’ bizarre death at her hand, the willingness of nature to respond to her slightest word - even thought - exacerbated her timidity.

Those moments when she lowered her guard, believing she could trust another, the ensuing chaos mortified her.

The extra bodies made it possible for her to sequester herself, without Joe Duryea harping about chores she failed to complete. Climbing onto her twin bed, she retrieved a volume of Parsons’ journals from the night stand, rifling the pages for a passage that might catch her attention.

Advanced scientific concepts - penned by the man who experimented with solid fuel rocket boosters in California’s Arroyo Seco decades before the first space shuttle employed them to orbit Earth, co-founding the Jet Propulsion Laboratory - blended with occult scribbles on the yellowed sheets. In his exile at Boleskine House near Loch Ness, he’d welcomed few visitors and used an alias to

prevent being traced by those who might seek to benefit from his arcane knowledge.

Mustang wished she could do likewise.

A tapping on her door roused her from this reverie. “Hon, are you okay?” came Maggie’s soprano.

“Yeah, Mom.”

“We’re going to have a cookout for the hands tonight, and I’ll be needing your help to set up the tables and chairs.”

The teen exhaled loudly.

“I know you’d rather hide in there with your books and old movies, but it’s a tradition...”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Tucking the worn journal in the drawer, she tried to clear her mind of irritation. All it would take is one off-color remark during the meal, and every chair could crash to the ground...

Being the only girl among 34 males...

A total of 11 square and rectangular tables spread around the yard, Pietro Sellari managed to seat himself beside her at the one farthest from her parents. His plate heaped with baked beans, chips, cole slaw, two hot dogs and a hamburger, she speculated whether he had a hollow leg.

Then again, all these hirelings ate like pigs. Maybe they deserved to, after a hard day’s labor.

“Am I intruding?” Sellari ventured.

“What if you are?”

“I would remove myself to another place.”

Mustang bit into her cheeseburger. “Then, please do so.”

“Will you answer one question?”

“You just asked one.”

His cock-eyed smirk showed straight, white teeth.

She bit her lip. “Go ahead.”

“May I escort you to church tomorrow morning?”

The girl nearly choked on her food as the guffaw burst forth. She pivoted on her chair, spitting masticated meat onto the grass. Sellari offered her a cup of water; she sipped it gratefully before meeting his gaze.

“What makes you think I go to church?” she rasped.

“Where I live, it is the custom that the women attend Sunday services...”

“Is that the way it is with the family you’re staying with in Helena?”

“I... the mother participates in a bible study, but the children...”

“In America, I’d say the majority of people don’t go to church, except for Christmas and Easter.”

“And, you?” he pressed.

“I don’t go at all.”

“You do not believe in God?”

Her nose twitched. “I didn’t say that.” Still, the freshman comparative religion class had proven - in her estimation - the concept of God to be man-made.

“Then, if you will be at home, may I take you to breakfast?” Sellari prodded.

“You’ve gone way beyond one question.” She waved him away, focusing on her meal.

He withdrew, but she felt those singular eyes upon her from across the expanse, even though ruddy Warren Turner tried to draw him into the debate with three other hands about the best way to break a stallion.

Washing dishes a moot point, thanks to paper plates and plastic utensils, a stack of oversized trash bags were hauled to the dumpster behind the bunkhouse. Mustang didn’t try to sleep until after every light in that building had been extinguished, Sellari unlikely to prowl unfamiliar grounds in the dark.

Sunday delivered its own surprise to the foreigner: the required duties allowed no break for attending church. Joe and Maggie departed around 9 a.m. for Canyon Creek to fulfill their weekly obligation, but the apprentices spent the entire day with the horses.

Mustang isolated herself with a collection of classic films, her favorite form of entertainment. She munched on jelly toast for breakfast and a peanut butter sandwich for lunch, content to be undisturbed.

Temporarily, at any rate.

Knocking barely penetrated the walls. She initially thought it was the water pipes vibrating. Pausing *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, she listened, then groaned.

Auburn tresses unbrushed, sweats askew, she shuffled down the hall and through the living room. The knob yanked inward with undue force, to see Warren Turner on the stoop.

“What’s up?” she barked.

“There’s been an accident.”

“Oh, hell..”

Having inexperienced helpers always wound up causing trouble, Mustang reflected. Every year, one of the kids managed to hurt himself, or another of the hands. Anything from getting tangled in the barbed wire to being kicked by a

skittish animal, she puzzled why her father continued to let these jokers putter around the ranch.

“What happened?” she queried.

“Pete was digging a post hole in the north pasture, and Fred was driving the Bobcat with the posts. He swung wide, and Pete got knocked cold with the bucket.”

“Pete?”

“Pietro Sellari. We’ve called him Pete since he came to live with us in March.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang jammed bare toes into her sneakers on the foyer mat. “Where is he now?”

“Still out there.”

“No one called an ambulance?”

“We weren’t sure...”

She bit back a scathing reprimand, jogging toward the barn. Without stopping to saddle Heartbeat, she swung on his back and set off at a gallop.

By the time Turner hoisted himself onto his mount, she’d covered the distance to the overgrown expanse. The cluster of ineffectual males and their equipment made it simple to find the incident site. Slowing to a trot, she dropped into the mud while her pinto was still in motion, shoving the chattering hands aside.

“Don’t you guys know anything?” she scolded. “Back the hell up!”

The dozen complied, leaving her to squat beside the lean, prone form, a sizable knot on his forehead already discolored. She visually assessed his limbs, detecting no obvious broken bones. Then, gentle digits lifted his eyelids and checked his pupils: right contracted, left dilated.

“He’s got a concussion,” she announced, straightening. “Warren, ride to the west pasture and have Dan or Tad drive the pickup here. We can load him in the bed and take him to the bunkhouse...”

“What about the hospital?” Turner countered.

“We’ll see what Dad says when he gets home.” She scanned the cadre of young faces. “The rest of you, be more careful!”

Riding beside the vehicle as it navigated a rutted track to the main compound, Mustang dreaded having to report to Joe. Then again, the ranch’s owner should have ensured the Bobcat’s driver possessed the necessary experience to handle the machinery. Just being 18 didn’t mean Fred could properly maneuver the small loader.

Mustang knew each of the students - or, their parents - signed a waiver preventing the Duryeas from facing legal action in the event of injuries, but that didn't mean sufficient supervision and training shouldn't be available while they completed the various projects and tended the stock.

Sellari settled on a narrow cot in the bunkhouse's main room, the teen shooed bystanders back to the fields. The Italian hadn't roused once during the bumpy journey, which didn't bode well. Depending on how hard his skull had been impacted, there might be bleeding inside his cranium...

Not able to be absolutely specific in her directive, she mumbled, "Heal all injuries caused by the metal striking his head."

Then, she flopped on a lumpy sofa that reeked of beer and cigarette smoke. The hands weren't allowed to drink or light up in the building, yet they did, she surmised. As she waited, she contemplated the decor, or lack thereof.

Men were such slobs.

Sellari moaned and almost rolled off the cot. Mustang clutched his shoulders and rearranged him on canvas stretched atop a sturdy frame. His musculature well defined, he must've been an athlete at his school across the Atlantic...

He babbled in his native tongue. Automatically, his attendant commanded her brain to translate the statements.

"Oh, God, it hurts!" he whined, trying to loose himself from her grip. "My head feels like it's bursting!"

Nature's healing may have remedied the physical damage; Mustang presumed he'd still have quite a headache.

"You'll be fine," she whispered. "Just rest."

Brown eyes, normal once more, shot open at the sound of her voice. "What the..."

"You took a hit to the noggin, but no damage done."

Dirt encrusted fingers ran across his forehead, the knot and bruising gone. "The last thing I remember..." Then, despite her hold on him, he lurched vertical. "How is it you're speaking to me in Italian?"

Mustang sank on the scuffed floorboards. She'd wanted to hear him in English, forgetting that he would hear her in his own language, as well.

"Oh, hell..."

II

Silently ordering the unconscious translation to cease, Mustang scowled at Pietro Sellari, his russet mop drenched in sweat, tanned features pinched.

“Your head got a bit rattled by the accident,” she bluffed. “You were hearing things.”

She exhaled loudly as he hesitated, then agreed with her logic.

“Would you like some aspirin?” she offered.

“No, grazie. I think I’ll be okay if I rest a few minutes.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” She shuffled toward the door. “Remember: keep your eyes and ears open next time.”

“I will, Signorina.”

Joe Duryea burst into the bunkhouse at that instant, anger seething. He eyed his daughter suspiciously. “What are you doing here, girl?”

“Waiting for you.”

He sniffed, gazing at Sellari. “Is that the dago who was so clumsy?”

Mustang couldn’t believe her ears. She knew her father was blunt and cantankerous, but she’d never suspected him to be racist. “Dad, c’mon! It wasn’t his fault Fred didn’t know how to steer the Bobcat...”

“You saw it happen?”

“No, but Warren Turner and a bunch of the other guys did.”

“They’re just covering up for this... this...”

Sellari had raised himself on his elbow, squinting at the ranch owner. “You have a problem with foreigners, Signore?”

“Stupid ones, yes,” Joe replied.

Mustang gasped, “Dad!”

“Stay out of this, girl. I’ll not have my liability insurance rates hiked again.”

“Do you want me to go, Signore?” Sellari pressed.

“No!” Mustang barked. “If you fire him without a proper... review of the facts, I’ll...”

The elder Duryea growled, “Don’t you threaten me, girl!”

“Then don’t act like such an ass!”

A calloused hand raked her cheek; she stumbled into the wall. Sellari jolted off the cot, weaving briefly as his head cleared, then took up a protective position beside her.

“Oh, so it’s that way?” Joe spat. “Girl, get to the house, *now!*”

“If you will not treat your child with respect, Signore, I will defend her against your abuse,” Sellari proclaimed.

Mustang patted his arm. "It's... okay, Pete. You'd better get back to work, and I'll... handle this my own way."

"Are you sure, Signorina?"

She nodded tousled auburn curls.

"So be it." Raising her hand to his lips, he exited the bunkhouse.

Mustang fastened hazel eyes on her father's wrinkled mien. "Dad, you had no reason..."

"You insult me, and then act the innocent?" he stormed. "You're lucky I don't..."

"What?" She inched toward him. "What will you do?"

He pretended not to notice the tremors beneath his feet. "I'll thrash you within an inch of your life! No one dares mock my beliefs!"

"You believe we're better than people born in other countries?" his daughter croaked.

Thunder cracked beyond the open windows.

Joe stammered, "I... believe America should care for its own."

"Oh, hell..."

Her face still stinging, Mustang scurried outdoors. Tears flowed unchecked, not because of the pain, but because of this man's pathetic attitude toward other human beings. His blatantly offensive remarks twisted her stomach and contracted her muscles. Nerves on edge, she raced to the house, plowed inside and fell prostrate on her bed after closing the door.

Maggie remained in the kitchen, quartering a whole chicken in preparation for dinner.

Sobbing into her pillow, Mustang could not reconcile her connection with nature to her father's apathy and, worse, his physical violence. He'd never struck her before; she'd not so much as been spanked through her entire childhood.

Rolling upright, she studied her reflection in the mirror above the chest of drawers. A clear red hand print remained visible from her temple to her chin.

Window panes wobbled ominously. She'd experienced the tangible effects of her emotional turmoil enough, she bolted over the sill and across the lawn, not wishing nature to wreak havoc on the dwelling.

Blinded by panic, she crashed into Pietro Sellari, hauling a bale of straw.

He dropped his load and caught her before she collapsed on the gravel.

"Signorina, what's wrong?"

She wriggled free. "Nothing." Two paces separated them. "Everything."

The Italian steadied her, twirled her toward him. "If you are upset about what your father said..." He noticed the discoloration of her skin. "What he did..."

“Aren’t you?” she whimpered, trembling.

“It is... unfortunate that he views the world so, but it’s not the only time I’ve heard such...”

“Drivel?” she supplied.

“Si.” He guided her to the barn, depositing her on a bench near Heartbeat’s stall. “Where I’m from, in Italy, I grew up hearing about St. Francis of Assisi.”

Mustang gulped audibly.

“He taught that all people, all creation, are brothers and sisters, equally loved. It is difficult when so many on this planet see themselves as superior to others, whether by the color of their skin, the country where they are born, or the amount of money they amass.”

“I agree,” she murmured.

He crouched before her. “Then, don’t worry about what happened. Someday, hopefully, your father will see the flaw in his thoughts. You will not fall into the same trap of ignorance...”

“I hope not!”

“Then, I will be proud to consider you a friend.”

Fresh tears trickled along the teen’s nose. Her tendency to distrust others her own age, to keep them at a distance, left her with few to call friend.

Sellari untied the black bandana around his neck and dabbed her face. “I must finish my chores.”

“Thank you, Pete.”

“You are very welcome.” He retrieved the bale and added it to a stack near the tack room. “You are a very beautiful young woman, with a sensitive heart. Someday, you must visit my country, and I will show you where St. Francis lived, and the incredible sights in Rome, Florence, Naples...”

Touched by his kindness, she could not reveal that she had been to Rome and Assisi, and even met the humble man renowned as a saint before she understood how the slightest utterance spurred the natural elements to action, summoning him from his tomb.

“I... would like that,” she commented. “If I ever have that kind of money.”

“It is for the future, certainly,” Sellari acknowledged.

She watched him stride toward the corral, befuddled by the abrupt alteration of his expression. He’d been keenly observing her but, when she omitted telling him the truth, he lost interest.

Men! she sighed.

She would never fathom their motivations.

Warren Turner’s voice startled her. “He’s an odd duck, that one.”

She whirled on the Helena senior. "What do you mean?"

"Came over on a six-week exchange program, not even the whole semester, or a full year. You're the first person he's really spoken to since he got here."

"Maybe he's self-conscious about his accent."

"I don't know. He sleeps in my brother's old bedroom, and I hear him through the walls on his phone in the wee hours..."

"Speaking English?"

"Italian."

"Given the time difference between here and Europe, he could be talking to his parents..."

"They're dead. He told me that much. He lives with his grandmother in Perugia."

"Then, he's talking to her."

Turner shook his ashen head. "No, I took two years of Spanish, which is close enough to Italian I can understand words here and there. He's been talking about earthquakes, shrines... and criminals."

Mustang didn't like the implication of Turner's account. "Oh, hell..."

If Sellari was a criminal - a drug smuggler or jewel thief? - hiding from whoever might be pursuing him, what brought him to this remote locale?

"Have you checked with the exchange student organization about his... situation?" she prodded.

"I haven't mentioned his behavior to my mom, so it hasn't come up. Maybe I should..." Turner sneered. "How come you're so insightful?"

She swallowed and strode away. The term she would have used: suspicious.

Maggie had set the table and was serving Joe broiled chicken, baked potatoes and corn on the cob when the teen sidled through the kitchen door. "I've been calling you, Hon. I thought you were in your room."

"I... forgot to feed Heartbeat." No lie. She still owed the pinto a bucket of oats.

The meal a tense ordeal, as per usual, Mustang ate quickly and excused herself.

"You've got dishes to do!" Maggie prompted.

"Later."

"Now, girl!" scolded her father.

Rubbing her sore cheek, she veered toward the sink, squirting dish soap into a stream of hot water from the tap.

The heat didn't bother her as much as the wounds on her palms, burned when a lightning bolt transported her to Rome.

She could eradicate the damage, with the same minimal effort she used to heal Sellari's concussion. The constant reminder of her impulsiveness, though... perhaps it would foil similar mishaps in the future.

Not really paying attention to this task, or her surroundings, a chance remark from her father over coffee about catching Pietro Sellari rummaging through the Chevy Suburban's glove box that morning before they'd left for church, coupled with the accident - warranting his dismissal from the spring program - jerked her back to reality.

Plates, glasses and silverware drying in the molded plastic rack, she wiped her hands on her jeans and slipped outside.

Their weekend duties concluded, the students were loading duffels in vans that would drive them home in time to complete any unfinished homework and get a night's sleep before school on Monday. Not difficult to single out Sellari, the shortest of the bunch, and drag him behind the bunkhouse.

"What's your game, Pete?" she growled.

"Non capisco, Signorina."

"Don't play innocent with me." Trees budding above them rustled with an unbeckoned breeze. "What were you hoping to find in my dad's car? Money? Credit cards?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then, what?"

"It is not your concern."

"Bullshit." Behind him, a chasm opened; she maneuvered him toward it. "You talk about St. Francis, but I don't think he'd condone stealing."

"You know nothing about him..."

"I know him better than anybody on the planet!" The pronouncement slipped out before she could restrain herself - despite contemplating not a quarter-hour earlier how she needed to reign in her reckless tendencies.

The vehemence with which she spoke spurred his retreat, and he would've pitched into the deep hole had she not caught his wrist at the last second. A tug, reinforced by nature's own strength, propelled him away from the edge and into an awkward embrace with the girl.

He shuddered, staring over his shoulder at the dark abyss. "Dio santo! That was not there..."

"Pete! Hey, Pete!" Turner's nasal tenor shouted from the drive. "We're leaving!"

Sellari composed himself quickly, meeting Mustang's annoyance with wide eyes. "You... saved me."

"In the spirit of St. Francis?" she quipped.

He retained his hold on her waist. "Have you read of him?"

"No."

"Have you invoked him in prayer?"

"No." The truth. Her invocation... while standing near the tiny Porziuncola in the midst of the basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, had definitely not been a prayer.

"Then, why allege as much?"

"Pete!" Turner again.

"You'd better go," Mustang admonished.

"Not until you bare your soul to me!"

She chuckled. "Not happening, brother!"

Remnants of fear seemed to unhinge his mind. "I will swear I've seen you before, in Assisi... and St. Francis, too, in a tattered t-shirt and jeans..."

"Oh, hell," she gulped.

So, that explained his presence in Montana. He'd come to find her, after being present when news media captured the saint of Assisi preaching to the crowds...

Damn her red hair!

Damn Jack Parsons for bequeathing her this power she'd so misused in recent months...

"It's your concussion," she ventured. "You're not thinking clearly, hallucinating..."

"I'm not hallucinating about something that happened before I even came here!"

Turner's voice conveyed urgency. "Pete! We're pulling out *right now!*"

"Go on without me! I'll catch up!" countered the Italian.

His host would have none of it. Rushing around the corner, he grabbed Sellari's shirt collar. "C'mon, Pete! This is no time to get distracted by a girl!"

Jerked away from Mustang, he stumbled after his companion, those brown orbs never leaving her face.

For her part, the pit sealed itself and she strolled toward the house. Joe would be notifying the school that Sellari's presence was no longer required, and he would fly home at the end of the semester, his fantasy about a regrettable incident in Assisi consigned to the realm of delusion.

Did she regret it, though? she deliberated while changing into the sweats that doubled as pajamas. Walking side-by-side with the essence of wisdom, a man respected throughout the world regardless of an individual's religious practices, she'd learned much in a short period about humility, honesty... and the lack thereof, as exhibited by Francis' own followers after his death, when they embellished his memory with stories of miraculous visions and events, "promoting" his cause for canonization, then erecting a huge, four-level basilica of pink marble to honor him.

The fame Francis gained, post mortem, drew millions of tourists, and brought prosperity to what had previously been an isolated hill settlement in the heart of Umbria.

None of which he sanctioned.

She settled into bed, exhausted by the day's turmoil. Her lids did not close, however, because the niggling sensation about Sellari's true intentions swirled in her skull: was he a criminal hoping to make use of her power, as other men had already attempted? Or, was he merely a curiosity seeker?

Neither alternative made sense, really, she admitted in the silence of the chamber. Tracing her from Assisi would have been impossible, with no flight manifests containing her name, no passport verifications or visa paperwork to substantiate her travels...

"Oh, hell..." She jolted off the mattress.

The only means by which she could be traced from point A to point B was a lightning bolt. For Sellari to accomplish that feat, he would need to be... a cop, a government official or...

She might be at a loss for answers, but she realized the young foreigner was definitely not a high school exchange student.

III

Monday and Tuesday passed in relative quietude, Mustang pretending to catch the school bus each morning. Instead, she tucked her backpack in a dense evergreen, sneaking back to saddle Heartbeat and meander the property.

Classes would soon dismiss for the summer, as it was; neither the teachers nor administrators really cared if the students occupied their assigned seats.

Not that Elizabeth Duryea, as her name was listed, had been assigned a seat in any classroom for what should have been her junior year. The initial plan her parents devised had sent her to Massachusetts to live with her grandmother. She was supposed to enroll there, but Sylvia Matthys died weeks after the girl's arrival.

The aging matriarch first instructed her progeny to seek out Jack Parsons in Scotland, leaving an airline ticket for that purpose.

From there... Mustang quivered.

She let her pinto graze at the edge of the northernmost pasture, well away from the ranch hands and her father. She reveled in this unmarred beauty, as she had been astounded by the elements' response after - blindfolded during an incomprehensible, arcane ritual - she'd plunged a knife into Parsons' heart.

Stomping into the house before dinner, her sneakers damp from the moist earth that had yet to completely absorb remnants of winter's snows, she ached for a warming shower. No more had she grabbed towels from the linen closet than the phone rang. She paid no heed, calls for her rare.

"Hon, it's for you!" Maggie shouted from the kitchen.

"Who is it, Mom?"

"A very polite boy."

Her daughter accepted the handset with a sideways grin. "Hello?"

"Signorina?"

"Oh, hell..." Glimpsing Maggie's concerned squint, Mustang spun toward the door. "What do you want?"

"I tried to find you at school today, but you weren't there."

"What were you doing in Canyon Creek? Didn't you have class?"

"It was what they call 'Senior Skip Day,'" Pietro Sellari stated.

"Why were you trying to find me?"

"I wish to speak with you."

"We can... talk on Saturday."

"Your father has... released me from that obligation."

She grunted. "I can't help you, there. When he makes up his mind..."

"It is not that about which I wish to talk."

"Where are you?"

"Warren drove me over from Helena. I'm at the diner..."

There was only one way to get this guy off her neck, Mustang knew. "I'll meet you behind the bunkhouse in fifteen minutes."

"Si, Signorina."

The receiver in its cradle, Maggie glared at her daughter. "Who was that?"

No reason to lie. "Pietro Sellari."

"That Italian boy?"

"Yup."

"What did he want?"

"Just to talk."

Maggie opened the refrigerator, extracting a package of ground beef. “You know you’re not allowed to date until you turn 18.”

“I have no desire to date, ever!” Mustang snapped, bound for her room.

She changed her wet jeans and shoes, raised the window screen and crawled over the sill. The ranch hands still engaged in their labors, no one saw her round the rustic structure and unfold a lawn chair in anticipation of this unwelcome rendezvous.

Turner evidently dropped Sellari on the road; clad in a tight red polo shirt and black Dockers, he came hiking through the trees minutes later, sinking on the deck’s rough-hewn steps.

He greeted her in Italian, adding a few sentences she didn’t comprehend.

“Don’t do that,” she advised. “I don’t get your lingo.”

“All evidence to the contrary,” he retorted. “You’ve spoken to me in my own tongue...”

“I told you: you were hallucinating.”

“I might’ve been, before you healed me.”

She croaked, “Healed?”

“Warren told me he feared for my life after the Bobcat hit me, especially when you told him I had a concussion. Yet, less than a hour later, I’m on my feet...”

“Oh, hell...”

Brown orbs seemed to pierce her soul. “Are you a visionary?”

“A what?”

“Ah, scusa. You are not familiar with my faith...” He rose. “Over the centuries, we believe that certain holy individuals have seen visions...”

She knew where he was trying to lead her, and balked. “What, like angels?”

“At Lourdes and Fatima, the blessed saw the Virgin Mary.” He leaned over her, his hands on the arm rests, russet strands dangling over that wide forehead. “I think you’ve had visions of St. Francis, and are gifted with healing powers.”

Mustang squirmed, feeling quite trapped. “These visions are... intangible, correct?”

“Yes. Seen only by the person who is worthy, unable to be touched or seen by others.”

“Then, no, I’m not a visionary.”

“But, you can heal?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because, if you saved my life, I owe you a debt...”

Firmly, she shoved Sellari backward, scrambling off the mesh, standing nose-to-Romanesque nose with him. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“You defended me against your father...”

“As I would anyone at whom he vented his... prejudices.”

“But, you claim to know St. Francis...” He pondered. “Have you studied his writings and life?”

“I told you before: no. I...”

Frustrated, she strode from the deck; he trailed her, grasping her shoulders, mouth near her ear.

“You are a singular woman, shining like a beacon...”

She’d heard that before.

Sudden gusts rustled the trees overhead; rain buffeted their faces.

“If you tell me all, I’ll leave you in peace,” he swore, a near shout above the wind.

“Tell you what?”

“Your deepest secrets.”

She dared not rotate toward him, fearing his eyes would read the truth in hers. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because, you have secrets of your own.”

This discussion would have to wait, given the startling interruption.

“Get your hands off my daughter, you dago bastard!”

Joe Duryea marched toward the pair, fury contorting his weathered features. To Mustang, it appeared his hair stood on end in rage, despite being soaked.

Cautiously, Sellari retreated. “I meant no disrespect, Signore.”

“You’ve no business here!” the ranch owner growled. “I told your principal...”

“I know what you told him: a pure fabrication.” The young man asserted himself honorably, Mustang thought.

Joe bristled. “Fabrication? Are you calling me a liar?”

“Yes, Dad. He’s calling you out, and I agree with him.”

“Get back to the house, girl!”

“No.” She planted herself solidly. “You need to see yourself for the shallow man you are, resenting a kid from another country when, generations ago, your own family came here from Europe...”

Joe reddened her cheek anew; she knew calm discourse would serve no purpose. Sellari caught her before the blow’s force drove her to the ground.

The older man wrenched her from the intruder's grasp. "I said, get your hands off my daughter!"

Mustang tumbled across patchy grass, slamming into a tree trunk. Sellari rushed to her; she managed a weak smile.

"I'm fine, Pete." Her tone didn't match the words. The rain redoubled in severity, no clouds in the sky. An ancient oak on the clearing's edge cracked at its base, toppling toward her father...

"Don't!" hissed Sellari. "You'll regret it the rest of your life!"

Just prior to impact, the falling behemoth veered slightly right, missing Joe, except for scraping his jacket with thin branches.

"What the devil!" he bellowed.

Sellari supported Mustang as she regained her footing, glaring at the man. "Consider yourself lucky, *Dad*."

Trekking toward the house, Sellari in pursuit, the downpour ceased. She knew her stomach wouldn't tolerate whatever Maggie had decided to cook for dinner.

She halted on the gravel drive, the young man nearly colliding with her. "Take off, Pete," she directed. "I'll see you Saturday."

"You mean..."

"I'll square things with Dad, once I... calm down."

"Then, it was you?"

She patted his muscular arm. "Don't push me. I'm already angry, and I can do horrible things when I'm angry."

"Capisco, Signorina. Arrivederci."

"Ciao, amico."

Mustang caught the mistake too late, especially when Sellari - who'd started toward the road - paused and glanced at her. She recognized enlightenment in his eyes.

"Oh, hell..."

This delay allowed Joe to reach the dwelling before her; she heard his tirade - aimed at Maggie - before her palm touched the door knob.

"That child has no respect for her elders!" he declared. "She should be grounded until she turns 21!"

"Joe, be reasonable," his wife cajoled. "Grounding wouldn't serve any practical purpose, since she never goes anywhere, as it is."

"Then, take away her horse!"

The wooden panel crashed inward. "You can forget about that right now, Dad!"

Both her parents shocked by the outburst, neither spoke for a prolonged interval. Then, the oven timer chimed, distracting Maggie, who resumed her meal preparation.

Joe, having never previously confronted his daughter in this way, displayed an uncertainty of how to proceed. Mustang could have taken advantage of it, could have muted him permanently with a word - or, without one, for that matter.

“You need to rethink how you view others, Dad,” she counseled. “Every human being is equal, regardless of where they come from, the color of their skin, or their background.”

“Such an attitude smacks of ignorance, girl,” he countered. “Those... foreigners come over and steal jobs from honest American citizens...”

“Now, *that’s* ignorant, Dad. I never thought you would fall for such... crap.”

“Why, you insolent...”

Maggie placed the roast on the kitchen table. “Joe, come and eat.”

“Not until I set this girl straight!”

“There’s only one thing to get straight,” Mustang drawled. “Pietro Sellari will be here with the others on Saturday, and you’re not to make any calls or do anything to stop him.”

She shuffled to her room, closing the door, as Joe gaped.

Prone on the mattress, muscles twitched and her entire body trembled. She’d never risked standing up to her father in such a fashion, but he deserved no deference when he expressed asinine prejudices.

The fact she’d nearly killed him sparked a fresh wave of jitters. Her lack of self-control, coupled with the command of nature, could bring about death.

A host of possibilities congealed before her mind’s eye. With a single utterance, she could wipe the planet clean of criminals, power-hungry tyrants... the weapons used to foment wars and murder the innocent.

Without needing money or the popular vote, she could rule the nations indefinitely, bringing peace and food to all...

Again, she physically shook off this notion, the mere concept being a precursor to the deed itself.

The idea of apologizing to her father, she rejected. She could not condone his behavior, and would not enable him to persist on that path.

His complaint, after all, was that Sellari had been less than attentive to his duties, because of his nationality. In years past, other spring program participants had been injured, but none had received the slightest reprimand or criticism, because they were American.

That stupidity would not fly.

As she relaxed, Mustang recalled Joe boasting how he'd never attended college, hadn't graduated high school. He'd gotten a job at 16, financially supporting his mother after his own father died of lung cancer. He'd inherited the horse ranch from his sole uncle, who'd never married. Rather than sell it, Joe saw the potential for profit.

He'd planned to raise his son to take over, except Maggie gave birth to a girl, after which she was advised to bear no more children for her own health.

Mustang felt her father's angst every time he looked at her. While she was skilled with the horses, even breaking the odd stallion of a season, she would never be good enough to replace the son Joe wanted.

He might nag her on occasion about her truancy - if he even noticed it - but he had little room to talk, cognizant of his own intellectual shortcomings. At a point when she should be applying to colleges, he never raised the subject of higher education.

Her future, in the practical sense, lay on this very acreage, where she might sour and grow old, as her parents had.

She awoke past midnight, a coyote howling in the distance, owls hooting outside her window. Her stomach growled; she tip-toed to the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of milk to go with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

The rest of the week, she avoided Joe - not difficult on the vast property. He didn't seek her out, either, and when they shared a meal, the only noise was the sound of silverware on china.

For no apparent reason, she snickered as she washed the dishes Friday evening. The recollection popped into her head of St. Francis' relationship with his father. Once the break between them took place, they'd never reconciled.

Mustang envisioned a similar fate for herself. The break might be her high school graduation, or her marriage - a prospect she didn't relish. After that, she'd never speak to her father again.

Saturday dawned bright and warm, vans depositing their passengers before 6:00. Grooming Heartbeat in the barn, Mustang watched the students disperse to their respective supervisors; Sellari spotted her, touching the brim of his University of Montana ballcap in salute, then jogging to catch his team.

Anticipating where and when he might intercept her raised goosebumps on her arms.

She decided to hide in her room, catching up on much-needed sleep.

IV

The navy blue Toyota Corolla rental that crunched along the drive befuddled a groggy Mustang. Joe and Maggie had driven into Helena to shop - or, Maggie to browse the mall stores and Joe to wander aimlessly, a ritual enacted each month to keep the woman from perpetually carping at her spouse.

No visitors were expected; the ranch hands, part-timers included, had long since headed toward far-lying pastures to inspect the stock and mend damaged fences.

Pulling a yellow terry bathrobe over her purple tank top and blue gym shorts, the teenager drew open the front door. She gasped at the sight of Peter O'Donnell on the stoop.

She made no attempt to restrain this impulse. The screen door flew open and she fell into the embrace of her cousin Rachel's step-father.

"It's so good to see you!" she almost wept, finally retreating and signaling him across the threshold. "But, what are you doing here?"

"You just get up, at this hour?" the Irish-accented baritone quipped, glancing around the living room.

"With a full complement of hands, I'm a lady of leisure."

The towering blond documentary film producer took Mustang's hand and led her to the sofa. They sat together, his blue eyes smoldering.

"What's going on?" she pressed.

"Is one of those hands using the name Pietro Sellari?" he whispered.

"Yeah, he claims to be an exchange student..."

"He's not."

The teen wrenched from O'Donnell's grip and inched away. "How do *you* know?"

He launched into a rather disjointed narrative. "I'd heard rumors about... a situation in these parts, so I flew to Boise on the pretense of finalizing details of Bryan's estate on Rachel's behalf..."

"Why didn't Rachel come?"

"She's in class at Trinity College."

"I thought Thomas bought the house, and all the paperwork was in order..."

"Kristi decided she didn't like the furniture, and there are pieces Rachel wishes to keep."

"Ah!" Mustang glared at him. "You've shipped them back to Ireland?"

"Most of them."

She rose, staring out the picture window. "Peter, please!"

Within moments, he stood behind her, the top of her head touching his chin. "Pietro Sellari isn't his real name."

Rising anger made her nerves tingle. "I thought something was fishy..."

"He's an Interpol agent - no less than 25 years old - sent to investigate an incident from a few months ago..."

"What incident?"

"Don't be coy with me, Mustang," Peter stated. Firm hands on her shoulders, he twirled her, scrutinizing tanned features.

She could not avert her gaze from this near-clairvoyant, his ESP surprisingly accurate. "I manifested St. Francis of Assisi," she confessed.

"Amidst earthquakes and lightning strikes?"

She explained how the phenomena generated by her careless remark had nearly destroyed Santa Maria degli Angeli when Assisi's most renowned son emerged from the Porziuncola. "But, I repaired the damage!"

"Come, sit," Peter instructed, depositing her, once more, on the cushions. "That's not the half of it. News channels carried reports; I watched some of them, myself, while working on a film in Galway. I suspect Interpol connected the lightning bolt that transported you from Assisi to... here?"

She nodded reluctantly.

He sighed, fixing her with a scowl. "Now, you will listen closely, and do as I say. Hurry to your room and pack some clothes in a bag. We'll fly to Dublin, and I'll find a way to keep you off their radar..."

"There's no need for that, Peter. One word, and this Pietro will forget ever having been in the States." She ruminated. "Why did he think it necessary to use a fake name?"

"Politics. Interpol didn't want the FBI knowing they were in country." He chuckled. "Think about it, Mustang. Pietro Sellari. With your love of old movies..."

Hazel orbs widened. "Peter Sellers!"

"I'm really surprised you didn't call him out on the ruse."

"I hadn't figured out his game..."

"His real name is Rudolfo Conti."

"How..."

"Years ago, before I met and married Gina, I dated Rudy's sister, Bella, in Florence. She'd served as my assistant director on a travelogue..."

"That still doesn't..."

O'Donnell laughed outright. "You're really clueless, aren't you?"

She shrugged.

“Joe posts a lot of photos on social media, primarily the horses for sale, but also some of the events he’s organized.”

“Like, the ranch hands.”

“Exactly. I saw the snap of this year’s group, and recognized Rudy instantly. When I rang Bella, she told me he was on assignment...”

“Oh, hell...”

“Best get your stuff together.”

Mustang remained motionless. “No.”

“But, if you don’t...”

“Peter, don’t you see? If I run, it’ll only be worse, and you’ll be implicated.” Again at the window, she scanned the yard. “Fortunately, no one will know you’ve been here, if you leave now.”

He crossed to her. “Mustang, any action you take against Rudy will... have a ripple effect.”

“Oh, I won’t hurt him.” Her tone had deepened, and O’Donnell recoiled. “But, he’ll learn that trifling with the likes of me is far more dangerous than confronting a hardened criminal!”

“You promised to use your power in positive ways!” he protested.

“A broken promise, I’m afraid, dear Peter.” She caressed his cheek as she strode toward the kitchen. “And, if I don’t get out of here quick, the roof will rain down on our heads!”

O’Donnell heard, rather than witnessed, the microburst of wind that bent decades-old trees nearly double as the girl whisked into the mid-day chill. He followed at a distance when she veered into the barn, saddling Heartbeat and spurring him to a gallop, northbound.

The Irishman sank on a pile of firewood, no choice but to loiter until his next opportunity to convince Mustang she required the protection only he could provide, far from this remote locale.

An hour later, she reappeared at a trot, her companion the bogus Sellari. Sighting O’Donnell, the latter leapt off his bay gelding. The pair embraced.

“It’s been such a long time!” Conti gushed. “Bella still refers to you as the finest man who ever breathed!”

“I have fond recollections of her, too,” the elder bluffed, casting a stunned expression toward Mustang.

“I told Pietro I needed his help to fix the broken mirror in the bathroom,” she cringed at the lie. “I thought you’d have headed out.”

“This is magnificent surprise!” the Italian persisted, whirling toward the teen. “How did you know I was acquainted with the delightful O’Donnell?”

His spine slammed against the barn wall, Mustang’s own strength pinning him immobile. “The same way I know you’re *not* Pietro Sellari, you bastard!”

The ground lurched beneath their feet.

“Mustang, calm yourself!” O’Donnell warned.

“Too late, Peter!” she retorted, chest heaving. “Hoof it to your car and get out of here before I create a sinkhole that consumes the entire property!”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Watch me!”

“Just because he pretended to be a kid...”

The fear in Conti’s brown eyes belied such a simple explanation. His lips moved; no sound escaped the angled mouth.

“Mustang...” O’Donnell urged.

“Tell him, Rudy!” she prompted. “Tell him how you tried to con me into an admission...”

The Interpol agent pleaded, “Peter! Stop her! She’s crazy!”

A deluge - blue skies overhead - drenched their clothes and skin.

The filmmaker’s shoulders sagged, defeated. “Rudy, I recommend you lay your cards on the table. Only then...”

“All right, all right!” he squealed. “Let me go!”

O’Donnell breathed, “Mustang...”

Conti dropped to the dirt, a limp rag. He glared at the girl, teeth clenched. “When my superiors read the report I’ve filed about your... activities, I’ll be promoted to the Rome office, rather than some outlying province.”

“What report?” She seized his shirt collar and lifted him so they were nose-to-Romanesque nose. “How did you file it?”

Suspended in mid-air, Ponti’s defiance evaporated. “By email!”

Mustang uttered no words; every Interpol inbox around the globe summarily emptied.

“Why?” she hissed. “Why pick on me?”

“Because of what you did, and how you did it!”

“I’m not in the mood for riddles...”

Nails and screws popped from their planks as the barn creaked ominously.

“The day you... caused the earthquake at Santa Maria degli Angeli, there were tourists filming, and they turned over their recordings to the Carabinieri in Assisi. Your red hair... was unmistakable, especially after you were seen again - for less than five seconds - in the footage from the news broadcasts. The lightning

strike there... and another here, almost simultaneous, no weather patterns justifying such anomalies...”

Easing behind her, O’Donnell managed to unbend Mustang’s fingers, permitting Conti to stand on his own two feet. “What he’s saying is: even if you repaired the damage to the basilica, you left a lot of evidence in your wake.”

“Well, it’ll never happen again!” she snarled, marching toward the house.

Dripping wet, the men watched her slam the door, then evaluated each other.

“Would you like a ride back to Helena?” O’Donnell offered.

“I... think it might be best.”

From her bedroom, Mustang watched the Toyota execute a U-turn on the gravel and steer east along the country road. Thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean, Interpol computers melted into useless puddles of plastic and metal. Filing cabinet drawers sloshed with multi-colored pulp.

Employing similar tactics on news websites and broadcast equipment would serve no purpose, Mustang grasped. Too many people had viewed the clips; those who might have noticed her on the periphery of the frame would attribute no significance to her presence near the saintly poor man who’d preached a message of love to the crowds.

She wished, with every fiber of her being, that she’d been able to comply with O’Donnell’s request... someday, perhaps, she would attain the required self-control to confront idiots like Rudolfo Conti without spawning destruction.

She also lamented not bidding O’Donnell a proper farewell; who knew when - or if - she’d see that marvelous Irishman again?

Sooner than she expected, as it transpired.

Joe and Maggie unloaded their parcels well past 5:00, mud cleaned from the Chevy Suburban’s tire wells and bumpers. A familiar Toyota swung in behind them...

“We crossed paths with Peter at the gas station near the mall,” Maggie recounted. “Since he doesn’t fly out ‘til tomorrow, I invited him to dinner.”

At least, with a guest, her parents would be on their best behavior. The repast could be enjoyed without arguments; O’Donnell kept them laughing with his stories of filming throughout Ireland, Great Britain and the Continent.

Encouraged to sleep in the spare bedroom, he declined. Joe excused himself after discovering the baseball game he’d planned to watch had been cancelled due to storms. Maggie finished the dishes and left Mustang to entertain their guest...

“Did you finagle this?” O’Donnell inquired, sipping his coffee on the front steps as the sun set.

“I may have,” the girl acknowledged. “I didn’t want you to leave angry, and I did want to say good-bye.”

“Indirectly, then.”

“I suppose.”

“Well, I’m glad. I wanted to find a reason to come back, to beg you to accompany me to Ireland...”

“You know I can’t, Peter. I... wouldn’t be safe anywhere, given how I react to... to...”

“Certain stimuli?” he snickered.

“Right.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “And I wouldn’t consciously place you in danger for anything in the world.”

“Doing it unconsciously being another matter?”

“I really do apologize about that. I thought I had... erased all proof of the Assisi disaster, covered my tracks...”

He flipped her palms upward. “Until you quit doing *this*...”

”It’s not intentional, you know.”

“None of it is, eh?” He drained the ceramic mug and set it on the cement. “Until you take responsibility for your actions - be they mistakes or willful - you’ll never acquire the discipline you need to live in peace, with yourself and others.”

“I know, Peter.” She mustered a feeble grin. “I *am* trying.”

He hugged her. “I’ve every confidence in you.” Inhaling the crisp air, he rose. “I’ve got to be off, if I’m to get to Boise for my flight.”

Mustang escorted him to the rental. “What will happen to Rudy?”

“That’s pretty much up to you.” Slipping behind the steering wheel, he flashed a resigned smile. “He isn’t going to bother continuing his impersonation of a high school student, that’s for sure. When I dropped him at the mall, he was already trying to ring his boss...”

“He didn’t get through, did he?”

“I don’t suspect so.” Blue eyes blinked. “If you make him forget...”

“That’s... been handled. He’ll be summoned back to Italy and be reassigned - to a drug task force, maybe. Going forward, Interpol will be too distracted by more important cases to worry about the likes of me!”

“Until the next time a rogue lightning bolt confounds the weather service.”

“You really are the finest man who ever breathed!” Mustang concluded, backing from the vehicle. “Say hello to Rachel for me!”

“I will.” He reached out the window as the engine hummed, clasping her fingers one last time. “Take care of yourself.”

He vanished in the dusky gloom, and she trudged toward the house, ready for a night’s sleep.

The ranch hands traipsed in from the fields, unsaddling their horses, bound for the bunkhouse.

Warren Turner rode directly up to the stoop. “Where’s Pete?” he hailed.

“Gone.”

“Why?” The Helena senior dismounted. “Your dad get riled at him again?”

“No. He... thought it best.”

Leading his animal toward the corral, Turner hesitated. “I’ll see him, then, when I get home tomorrow.”

“He’s on his way back to Perugia.”

Turner blinked, then shrugged as he continued across the gravel.

Mustang dismissed the exchange from her mind, until she glimpsed Sunday morning’s paper. A headline atop the international section declared mysterious circumstances surrounding an Interpol agent’s death in Umbria.

Her parents attending church services, she snatched up the sheets and devoured the text. Rudolfo Conti had been found around midnight near Perugia’s central piazza after a random lightning strike, 60 percent of his body covered with third degree burns.

“Oh, hell...” the teen breathed.

A nonchalant remark had sent the impostor home via lightning bolt, killing him in the process.

The paper sailed toward the wall; she slumped on the sofa, wondering when she’d learn to think before she spoke.