

The Mustang Chronicles:

Gambling Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea didn’t abide with eavesdropping. Raised voices to her right as she traversed the lobby of the stylish Casino' di Sanremo on the Italian Riviera, however, drew her unwitting curiosity.

A pair protesting their detention with very midwestern American accents weren’t getting through to the Carabinieri spouting charges in their native tongue.

Her natural reticence to interact with strangers - especially during these jaunts to replenish funds that made living at Boleskine House on Loch Ness’ eastern shore possible - fell to the wayside due to not only the contrast between the two languages, but also because of the contrast between the couple themselves.

The woman as light as her companion dark, her trim figure offsetting his bull neck, broad shoulders and barrel chest, she coy as he menaced in a full, grey-flecked beard, Mustang suppressed her laughter as she veered in their direction.

“Can I be of assistance?” she queried.

Both parties, hearing her in their own language - thanks to the power bequeathed to her by her late grandfather, occultist and scientist Jack Parsons - shifted their attention to a young woman who could have passed as an embassy intern or apprentice translator, in the gold, scoop-necked blouse and brown pinstriped trousers, auburn tresses flowing to her narrow waist. They babbled at her incoherently.

She raised her blackened, scarred palms to silence them and, once they complied, pointed to the middle-aged tourists.

Not too complicated to ensure positive results: she muttered the command under her breath for all ears to hear Italian, as intended, or English at the proper moment.

“So?” she directed to the foreigners.

“If you can find out what’s wrong,” pleaded the blonde.

Mustang addressed the police contingent. “Signore and Signora...”

She glanced at the pair, hazel eyes squinting.

“Smith,” supplied the man.

Mustang, dubious, challenged, “Really?”

They nodded in unison.

Back to the Carabinieri. “Signore and Signora Smith wish to know why they’ve been detained.”

The Smiths heard the heated exchange, then their volunteer advocate joined them. "It's not good, I'll be frank," she stated. "Casino security reported you two were loitering near the entrance to the counting rooms, where employees punch in their access codes on a keypad. They suspect you meant to appropriate one of these codes for illegal purposes."

The reputed Mrs. Smith tittered ingenuously. "That's not what happened at all! This is our first time in Europe, and we weren't sure where we should go, or if we were properly dressed..."

Mustang coughed into the crook of her arm, muffling a "Bullshit!" comment, given Smith's blue Armani suit, white silk shirt and red polka-dot tie, and his wife's Paris original belted mauve chiffon frock. Nonetheless, she repeated the tale to the sergeant, who scrutinized the Americans, then shrugged and dismissed his men.

The exonerated pair's expressions conveyed relief when Mustang confronted them. "All right, into the restaurant," she decreed.

"Why?" retorted Smith. "We're not hungry."

"I just vouched for you, so you're going to unload the truth."

Husband and wife gazed at each other for a prolonged moment, then consented.

A frescoed dining room quiet in mid-afternoon, the trio sat at a secluded, linen-draped table. The server delivered ice-filled tumblers; they chatted while sipping the soft drinks.

"Let's start with your real names," prompted Mustang. "Show me your passports."

"What are you, some undercover agent?" barked Smith.

His companion signaled for restraint. "We've nothing to fear, dearest. Show her our papers."

From the inside pocket of his jacket, he presented two blue-covered booklets for a thorough inspection.

The Smiths grew edgy at Mustang's protracted review. Finally, she slammed the elaborate forgeries on a china butter plate beside her place setting, spontaneously lighting them afire.

"What the..." Smith roared.

She smiled broadly. "I say again: let's start with your real names."

The couple eyed each other, guilt well in evidence.

"I must admit, those were pretty good fakes, and I'd love to know where you got them, in case I..."

Smith responded, "What makes you think..."

“I’m not going to argue with you. I can always call the Carabinieri at their headquarters...”

“All right, all right!” the woman conceded. “I arranged to have them made by a distant cousin who runs a printing operation in Chicago. I’m Jean King, and this is Reid Church.”

“From?”

“Indiana. We work at a prestigious private university I prefer not to name...”

“Because your antics would reflect badly on that institution’s reputation?” Church’s hard-lipped smirk transformed his countenance to stone.

“What positions do you hold?” pressed Mustang.

“I’m an associate professor of mechanical engineering. Jane is chief internal auditor for the accounting department.”

The Mistress of Boleskine deliberated briefly. “Then, how come...”

“Our salaries suck,” Jean blurted. “As do all those in non-administrative posts. I’ve got 20 years’ seniority, and can barely make ends meet.”

“So, your bright idea was to rob a casino?” croaked their grudging confidant.

“A piece of cake, using the keypad scrambler device Reid invented. We wait until most of the crew is at lunch or dinner, waltz in and leave with bags of cash.”

Mustang rose, solemn. “Go back to the States, you fools. Neither of you would last a week if you were sentenced to an extended stay in an Italian prison.”

“We’ve got this worked out to the smallest detail,” Church asserted.

She chided, “If you believe searching the internet sufficient, you’re so out of touch with reality, you make me want to puke.”

“Don’t contradict me, you insignificant...” he threatened.

Jean dug red lacquered nails into his sleeve, maintaining a semi-pleasant simper. “You’ll have to forgive Reid, Miss... He gets rather...”

“Violent?” Mustang grunted. “I can guess you concocted this ploy from watching *Oceans 11*, or one of the modern sequels. You have no clue how the owners protect their ill-gotten gains...”

“But, gambling is legal here...”

“Legal, when it’s not... how should I say it.... rigged?”

Two astonished jaws dropped.

“The best thing you can do is finish your drinks, leave the casino, and book yourselves on the next flight home.”

“But, our room is paid through Saturday!” Jean lamented.

“The money lost isn’t worth your lives, ma’am,” Mustang added the respectful touch to emphasize her point.

Church brusquely raised his partner from her seat, snarling, “Next time you wish to assist your countrymen, I recommend you keep your opinions to yourself, Miss...”

“Best you don’t know, that way you can’t implicate me in your ludicrous plan if somebody tries to ask you more questions.”

“As if they’d try, you wisp...”

She watched them linger a moment in the lobby, reconsidering a crack at baccarat, black jack or roulette, then divert toward the exit.

Mustang knew all too well what it was like to be short of savings. Perhaps a modest nest egg...

“Hold on a minute!” she hailed, waving them to join her among the gamblers.

She hesitated beneath the magnificent arch, unbidden memories exploding from her subconscious. In fact, she could not enter a casino anywhere in the world without recalling her first such experience in Las Vegas.

Jim Neville, a Montana State Police officer, had been killed by overzealous FBI agents outside a convenience store in southern California while attempting to help her prevent the federal authorities from obtaining Jack Parsons’ anti-gravity formula. In her grief, she’d made some impulsive decisions while lacking cash to secure room and board. She’d conjured a limousine for a trip to the gambling capital of the States, where the one-armed bandits spilled their riches into her pockets.

Too easy, she discovered, to draw the suspicions of the shills and security staff, who’d seen every imaginable tactic used to beat the slot machines - especially since they’d been mostly computerized. She’d moved on to other forms of betting, trying Texas hold ‘em once, faro, and roulette - not without success, but with surly suits poised near her seat to assess her “system.”

Church puzzled at this delay. “What’s the deal? Just because you’re underage...”

“Says who?” she retorted.

“You can’t be more than 16, and could get us banned.”

“You wanna see *my* I.D?”

Not that she carried any legal documents on these jaunts.

“What I.D?” he grumped. “You probably don’t even have a learner’s permit.”

Mustang exhaled, subduing her irritation. "I'm always astounded at the attitudes of idiots who project their fear of the unknown on total strangers. First, you think I'm a fed, and then a juvenile delinquent. If I leveled with you, you'd be shaking in your shoes."

"The only thing I'm projecting on you is an abiding hatred of undisciplined twerps who think they know it all, when they haven't a clue."

Jean intervened. "Reid, let her alone. She's done us a good turn..."

"And, knowing our secret, would like nothing better than to rat us out to the locals pigs and collect whatever reward they'd offer."

Mustang flashed a look capable of freezing most men's blood. Church ignored her escalating rage, patting her cheek like some errant child.

She brushed away his fingers. "I don't need any reward to do what's right."

"Then, you *are* considering..."

"Push me more," she coaxed. "It'd be simpler to fry you to a crisp than wait for the cops to snap the cuffs on you."

"Stop talking nonsense, kid," Jean chided. "If we're going to make any kind of money out of this fiasco, let's get on with it."

Mustang hissed, "So much for being nice."

Her preference craps, she'd taken to periodically visiting random establishments along the Mediterranean coast - far enough from Scotland to not be traced once she vanished via lightning bolt - and using her power over the natural elements to control the dice for a few passes (not that any of the croupiers or their supervisors were bright enough to detect the unusual streak of luck).

The three approached an active table where the latest shooter managed to lose the last of his stake after rolling snake eyes. Shifting into the vacant space, Mustang placed the cubes in Church's massive paw, compelling their cooperation as her fingers encompassed his.

Church's chaperone would've presumed him afraid of nothing with his intense aquamarine eyes, square jowls, general bulk and arrogant demeanor. Yet, his first roll barely hit the backboard.

He frowned at the chuckles from the onlookers, rising anger all too apparent - and familiar - to Mustang.

"Pay them no heed," she cautioned. "Ever play baseball?"

He glowered. "Huh?"

"If you've ever thrown a pitch, or had to reach home plate from center field, you'll understand how you need to calculate the distance and strength to do this correctly."

The tautness of his features eased as he made the connection. “Ah!”

“Now, calm down, and focus on making an easy point.”

He did as advised - not that the point he tossed mattered. He threw seven straight nines, letting the winnings ride each time. Each successive triumph reinforced the tight-jawed sneer resembling a slash across his rugged mien.

One by one, badged individuals in black suits gravitated toward the scene. Trained orbs monitored the delivery and retrieval of the dice, waiting to detect a furtive switch.

They came up empty. Jane enthusiastically cheered on her colleague, not even trying to block the employees’ view of the proceedings.

In less than an hour, the Americans walked from the building with over 50,000 Euros in crisp bills.

Jean couldn’t believe the results. Still, “That’s just a fraction of what we planned to grab from the back room.”

“Be content with this much,” chided Mustang. “It’ll help for the immediate future.”

“That it will,” Church reluctantly agreed. “If I didn’t know it was a parlor trick, I’d chalk it up as a bona fide miracle.”

“Nothing of the sort,” she remonstrated. “Good-bye, good riddance, I hope to never see either of you again.”

“What about when you fly back to the States?”

“When I fly, it won’t be to the States,” she corrected him, self-consciously massaging the fresh wounds on her palms.

On that stern note, she bowed them through the door to the bustling thoroughfare beyond.

II

Mustang’s excursions to the casinos usually lasted only a few hours. This one had already consumed most of the day, and she hadn’t yet taken dice in hand on her own behalf.

Fairly certain Sanremo Casino security personnel had noticed her with Reid Church and Jean King, she opted to snag some ready cash from a neighboring operation and browse the upscale shops. Besides changing into a newly purchased yellow satin blouse and tan slacks, she altered her hair from its original auburn to ebony. Then, she approached the liberty-style structure to complete the task she’d set for herself.

Still, a niggling anxiety knotted her stomach. As if nature mirrored this emotional distress, waves double their usual size crashed on nearby beaches, driving late afternoon sunbathers away from the water line.

Her confusion abruptly cleared as she passed the cloak room. Just as the Americans had lied to the Carabinieri, they had lied to her. They had no intention of abandoning their nefarious scheme - and possibly getting themselves arrested, or worse.

One of the craps tables in the bustling hall offered a full view of the counting room security doors; Mustang took up a position to shoot at that vantage point. Those placing bets on whether she would make her point or roll a seven muttered about her youthful appearance, and whether she - at 24, but maintaining the complexion of a teenager - was of legal age to be in the building.

Echoes of Church's prejudice, she mused.

The spectators' objections fell to the wayside when they started winning due to her control of the spotted cubes.

Distracted by an exodus of staff from the locked chamber - ostensibly for their dinner hour - the Mistress of Boleskine surrendered her place to a withered retiree, requesting her ample piles of chips be transformed into British pounds. Migrating toward the cage, she glimpsed Reid and Jean executing their strategy.

A split second too late, the keypad's numbered plastic faceplate - and the components beneath - congealed in a gelatinous mass.

The thieves had penetrated their target.

They both carried briefcases, quite the professionals. Mustang slipped in through the closing gap, pondering what tale they'd devised to gain the skeleton crew's trust.

A whopper, to be sure. Jean pretended to be a government-sanctioned auditor, with Church her bodyguard. Rather than moving to where printouts of the day's take were stacked, Jean began a review of the counting procedures, and the need to calibrate the machines. While the staff gathered around her for a demonstration, Church began scooping up 5,000 Euro bundles.

"I wouldn't," Mustang whispered at his elbow.

He stiffened. "What the fuck..."

"Put it back, now."

He didn't obey.

"Put it back or face the consequences."

"What consequences?" he grumbled. "You won't turn stoolie, because you'd be just as guilty for being here without authorization."

“I’m not worried about the Carabinieri. It’s the others who’ll come down on you like a load of bricks.”

“What others?”

“I mentioned them earlier. The ones with certain connections...”

“You mean, the mob?”

She shrugged.

“They don’t have any influence in a legitimate business like this.”

“If they own the company that insures this legitimate business, or the property where it operates...”

She saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “You’re serious?”

“In such instances, I don’t have a sense of humor - and neither do they.”

Church stopped stuffing the molded faux-leather case with money, snapping the lid shut. “So, we don’t get as much as Jean calculated. No one will miss such a pittance.”

“Guess again,” Mustang snickered.

Jean finished her tutorial and, with a wink to her accomplice, sidled toward the door. She feigned receiving an urgent text from her office, and promised the bemused employees to return and finish the audit once the emergency had been rectified.

Another lie.

They whisked across the threshold without a care, but Mustang detected Church’s discomfiture beneath the show of bravado. For her part, she ducked unseen through the gap before the panel latched.

She dogged the couple’s steps outdoors; unhurried, they strolled along the walkway to their hotel a half-mile from the beach - inexpensive in comparison to those on the main drag. Before they reached the revolving glass, sirens converged on the casino, and Mustang realized no further gambling would take place that evening while the investigation proceeded.

Having deposited the ill-gotten gains in their suite, Reid and Jean emerged once more, clothes casual, smiling like Cheshire cats. He had shaved off his facial hair, not altering his menacing cast in the least. Her short brunette curls made Mustang wonder if the blonde locks had been a wig, or she’d managed to stuff the length inside the cap of this tangled coiffure.

They parked themselves at an open air café within view of the Sanremo Casino, reveling in the sight of plain clothes and uniformed officials streaming in and out, some with firearms drawn.

Mustang monitored their meal from a discreet distance, awaiting the inevitable. She could have erased the counting room’s security camera footage - as

she'd ordered the frames showing her to be scrambled - but she refused to assist these crooks any further.

Cops being cops, though, none of them recognized the culprits not 50 yards from the crime scene. Others observing the action, however, were more attentive.

Jean excused herself from the table to use the facilities and, no more had she entered the tiny bistro than two toughs in black suits seized her arms while a third efficiently gagged her. Church never realized she'd been hustled out to the alley and an idling black limousine until she'd been absent 15 minutes.

The proprietor claimed ignorance, even when Church roughly collared him. He knew better than to reveal any knowledge of underworld methods.

Thrusting aside the arthritic entrepreneur, Church almost knocked over the wicker chair when he flopped onto the seat in dismay. Head buried in his hands, he didn't see Mustang hovering over his shoulder until she spoke.

"You may think it cruel, but I told you so."

"Fuck off."

She ignored the expletive, easing onto the seat across the checked tablecloth. "Once she tells them where you're staying, you'll receive a ransom demand or, more precisely, orders to surrender the entire amount you stole."

"If I refuse?"

"They'll kill her."

Church softened. "Now who's watched too many old movies?"

"In this instance, fiction mirrors fact. Don't underestimate these guys' desire for vengeance against anyone who crosses them."

He glared at her beneath hooded lids. "What happened to your hair?"

She twirled a stray black strand around her index finger. "A parlor trick."

"Impossible."

"Fine," she exhaled. "It's a wig."

"You hiding from the cops yourself?"

"None of your business."

Church drained his wine glass. "It is, if you're going to convince me you're on top of what's going on around here."

The memory brought a chuckle to her lips. "I... used to have dealings with some ambitious sorts in the FBI and Interpol."

"What if you're wrong about all this, and the kidnapers don't call?"

"Oh, they'll call. She'd be insane not to spill everything when they're holding a gun to her head."

He flinched. "Is that what..."

“No doubt about it.” Time to change the subject. “How’d you get roped into this, anyway?”

He welcomed the diversion. “Jean was married to a high school buddy of mine. He died of cancer six years ago. She’s been hurting ever since, trying to pay off medical bills, the mortgage on the house, that sort of garbage.”

“So, when you told her about your little invention...”

“She devised the perfect crime.”

“And you went for it because you’re in love with her, even though it wasn’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination.” She clucked her tongue.

Church resented the accusation. “Oh, God, no. She’s... she’s...”

“A nag?”

“To say the least.”

“I sensed as much. Tries to be flighty and cute in public - even though she’s too old to play those games - and a real piece of work in private.”

Those unblinking aquamarine orbs gazed at her, a disconcerting effect. He spoke quietly. “Pretty perceptive for a kid.”

“For someone your age, the question is: why didn’t you tell *her* to fuck off?”

“Hey,” he spat defensively, “I got screwed over by my parents, who wouldn’t pay for my college, then I got screwed over by the Marines, who refused to honor the G.I. Bill benefits I earned, so I had to go deep in debt to complete my education. I figured the world owes me for all the shit I’ve been through.”

“I can imagine how your parents treated you, if they were anything like mine,” Mustang remarked. “I thought a guy could get away with almost anything - even murder - in the Marines.”

“Too many people believe that. In my case, I got hammered on leave in Boston and bloodied a couple of Hell’s Angels who didn’t like the look of the gal I’d latched onto for the evening. I lost my stripes and got the boot.”

“The last in a series of infractions?” she ventured, studying a nose clearly broken in more than one altercation.

“If there weren’t so much at stake, I’d take you over my knee and teach you proper respect...”

Disgusted, Mustang rose. “You’d better get back to the hotel, in case they’re trying to get hold of you.”

“When they do?”

“Give them what they want.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Then, you’ll be out one partner.”

Church made an unsuccessful grab for her. “You’d be an ideal replacement.”

She snorted, “In your dreams. I have no interest in criminal activities.”

“You seem familiar with... other things, too.”

“I’m just here for the day.” Stuffing a 50 Euro note in the leather portfolio to cover Church’s account, she trekked toward the setting sun.

He caught her up with long strides. “Come with me, please. If we get Jane off unscathed, I promise we’ll book the next flight home.”

Mustang altered her direction, quipping, “What’ll we do in the meantime?”

“Do you play cribbage?”

“Hell, no.”

“We can watch television.”

“Everything’s in Italian.”

He sighed, “I brought a portable chess board.”

“You’re on.”

Church had no way of knowing the young woman had matched wits with some of the best tacticians in history: General Erwin Rommel, Mahatma Gandhi, Mark Twain and even St. Francis of Assisi. Once settled in the modest two-bedroom suite, he unwrapped the folded case from his underwear drawer and arranged the white and black plastic pieces.

“You ever play Truth or Dare chess?” Mustang prodded from a faded armchair near a bricked up fireplace.

“Never heard of it.”

“Every time you take one of my pieces, you get to ask a personal question. If I don’t answer, I have to complete some task...”

Intrigued, he inched his knight’s pawn forward. “Sounds good.”

Not for him, though. Within minutes, she’d plucked four pawns, a bishop and both knights from the squares.

She gained keen insights into Church’s character.

His age: 42

Jean’s age: 51

“Why did your buddy, if he was classmate, marry her?” asked Mustang.

“He had a mother complex, I think.”

“What did you learn from the Marines?”

That hard-jawed sneer anchored his face; a set of long-healed scars created a geometric pattern on his left cheek. “The drill sergeants did their job well. They taught me to kill the enemy without a second thought, to keep myself alive, and to do a horizontal handstand.”

“A what?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he leapt from the floral print sofa, grabbing the edges of the round dinette table and hoisting himself off the floor. Arms bent at the elbows, he supported his considerable body weight stretched parallel to the floor.

“Oh, hell...” gasped Mustang.

Lowering himself, he grinned - a rather pleasant expression. “Earned me a considerable amount of cash at the clubs to cover my bar tabs.”

“So, you were a drinker?”

“I don’t know a Marine who isn’t. When things get tough, too many turn to the bottle.”

The phone jangled on the sideboard, jarring them from this levity. Both stared at the European-style instrument. Thick digits snatched it from the cradle on the fourth ring.

Church smoldered at Mustang throughout the conversation. “Hello?”

The voice masculine and loud, she could hear the clipped Italian accent from where she loitered, pretending to admire a Degas print.

“Signore Church, we have your associate and will make an example of her if you do not return our money.”

“How do you want it done?” he inquired.

“Bring it to the north pier of the marina on the hour, and leave it at the second pylon. Do not contact the police, and come alone.”

He blurted the last before Mustang could shush him. “If I refuse?”

A raucous beeping signaled the disconnection. Church slowly lowered the device.

“That wasn’t very wise,” she scolded.

He crossed to the open window, a light breeze rustling his dark mop. “I wanted that bastard to know I’m not the kind who rolls over at the drop of a hat.”

“Neither do they. Nor do they grant mercy, even to family or intimate friends.” She laid her hand on his muscular arm. “Where’s the stash?”

“Why?”

“I’ll take it for you. If they see the gesture of good faith, perhaps they’ll still release Jean.”

“You’re saying, because I dared stand up to them, they might... off her anyway?”

“No question.”

“I thought that kind ascribed to some antiquated code of honor.”

She sniffed. “Oh, they do, but it’s pretty one-sided, in their favor.”

“Shit!”

Church extracted the briefcase from a gap between the sofa and the wall. He placed it on the heavy oak coffee table; Mustang popped the latches and opened it, seeing more than 100 stacks of banded Euros tucked within

“Half a million?” she estimated.

“More than twice that.”

“You’re absolutely nuts.”

“If I let them have it back, sure.”

She gawked at him. “Look, you’ve got to be sensible. A woman’s life is at stake!”

“So?”

“You don’t care one whit if she lives or dies!”

“With her out of the way, there’s more for me.”

Her palm erupted in anguish when she slapped his cheek. “You’re a heartless ass!”

“Thank the Marines for that,” he proclaimed.

She closed the case and carried it toward the door. He tried to block her egress; she halted, not needing to assume a defensive posture.

“Out of my way, Reid,” she declared. “You don’t want to make me angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.” As an addendum, “And people die.”

“You? Kill me? That’s a hoot.”

Rather than decimate the entire hotel, she confined her emotional outburst to framed artwork flying off the walls.

Church mocked, “Another of your parlor tricks, prepped while we were out.”

“You see any wires?” The very table where he’d performed his own trick handstand toppled, as did a Tiffany stained-glass floor lamp, shattering in colorful shards. “Get out of my way.”

In the end, their dispute didn’t accomplish anything, neither capitulating. Mustang sidestepped Church and left the suite with the briefcase; he pursued her down a wide marble staircase.

Both froze at the sight of a squad of Carabinieri near the entrance.

Church retreated up the steps.

“Chicken,” muttered Mustang, resuming her descent. “What’s wrong?” she asked one of the underlings.

He didn’t need to answer. Between the men, the barely recognizable corpse of Jean King lay jammed in the revolving door. Her brunette mop was stained red

with blood; they'd severely beaten her, then finished the deed with a gunshot - execution-style - to the back of her skull.

Mustang's neck swiveled toward where Church should have been standing, viewing empty space. "Oh, hell..."

III

Taking the stairs by twos, Mustang burst into Church's suite, jolting to a stop as he contemplated the chess board.

"I just remembered," he rumbled. "I don't know your name."

Not that she would divulge either her legal moniker - Elizabeth Duryea - or the pseudonym by which the Scottish Highlanders praised or vilified her: Lady Elizabeth Neville. The last thing she craved was him seeking her at Boleskine House at some later date.

"My friends call me Mustang."

"Is that because you're a wild filly?"

"No one's ever broken me, if that's what you mean."

"I could, and I would, just to prove how wrong you've been about everything." When he lifted that blockish head, she saw the tears. So, his protestations of indifference regarding Jean's fate had been all bluff and bluster.

She shuffled toward him, stroking his arm. "Seeing a woman dead isn't the same as some man designated as a foe."

"Not just dead, but brutalized," he clarified. "I can't imagine the pain they inflicted, her screams..."

"Like I said: these guys don't fathom the concept of mercy."

"Nor do I, when push comes to shove." His jowls constricted; a killer towered over her. No rage dominated the transformation, just an unyielding determination. If he'd possessed a weapon, Mustang couldn't have predicted the extent of the carnage.

"Reid, you need to pack and leave immediately," she stated. "They'll be coming for you next."

The ploy failed. "Let them come. I'll be waiting right here."

"And, when they point a dozen pistols at you?"

He raised his hands, wordlessly scrutinizing the long, thick digits.

Oh, hell, Mustang mused. He doesn't need any weapon besides those.

"How 'bout a drink?" she suggested.

"You mean alcohol?"

"Why not?"

“You’re not old enough.”

She bristled. “Are you gonna start that again?”

“Even if you are legal, one shot of whiskey would put you on the floor,” he remarked.

“Wanna bet?”

He peered at her. “How much?”

“What’s in that briefcase against what’s in my pocket.”

“Which is?”

“A good quarter million pounds.”

His teeth clenched. “Four to one odds?”

“That I can drain a bottle of Jameson and still be on my feet.”

“You’re such a lightweight, you’ll be puking after the second shot.”

She grinned, her secret intact. “Only one way to find out.”

And, when she won the wager, she would see him to the airport, then return the money to the casino.

“How do we get past the cops?” he prodded.

“Down the service elevator.”

“There isn’t one.”

“Trust me.”

Drawing the door inward, Mustang peeked along the corridor. A clamor of voices drifted from the lobby below; she clasped Church’s hand and guided him toward the rear of the structure where a utilitarian lift was concealed behind what appeared to be a janitor’s closet door.

His bulk filled most of the space; she squeezed against a dented metal bulkhead, the heat of his body penetrating white cotton fabric and unwittingly warming her torso. The car descended to ground level, the cage-like screen retracted, and they hustled out the emergency exit.

Ambling along a maze of side streets, Church selected a less-than-reputable dive well off the tourist beat. The exterior brickwork bore painted graffiti and filthy porthole-style windows, the interior a gloomy haze, a smattering of wall sconces providing limited illumination.

Raucous conversation gave way to an uncomfortable lull as wary eyes followed the pair to the warped, stained bar. An amply tattooed bartender in a grimy sleeveless t-shirt glared at them.

“What’s yours?” he snarled in Italian.

Mustang replied, “Whiskey, two bottles.”

“You got the price?”

She peeled a 100 Euro note from the roll in her slacks and tossed it at him.

Bloodshot orbs widened in awe. “Any particular brand?”

“Jameson.”

“No distributor for it here.”

“Then, the best you have.”

Liter bottles of Dewar’s appeared from a low shelf, with two streaked shot glasses. Mustang consulted Church. “You good with this?”

“When you’ve hollered uncle, I’ll finish what’s left.”

He never suspected, as she gulped each portion and the amber liquor hit her palate, nature diluted it into pure water.

Not so for him.

Mustang couldn’t suppress her amusement as the volume of his basso profundo increased exponentially with each shot. She ignored the insults he hurled at her, criticizing her clothes for not complimenting her figure, her hair for hanging loose over her shoulders, and proving himself an unmitigated jerk.

A bleach-haired leather-clad youngster on the next barstool objected to Church’s tirade. He created a barrier in front of Mustang, as if that would protect her from the stream of vitriol.

Nimble hands lifted the trim youth off the floor, tossing him like a bag of trash into the juke box.

It didn’t matter that damage to the strobing lights was minimal. Church had crossed a line within this informal brotherhood...

A dozen drunks attacked him, fists flailing. Though he rendered a good account of himself, decking four of the behemoths, the mob soon had him on the boards, wailing on him without pity.

Not that he begged for respite. He managed to grab two of the assailants and slam their skulls together before his nose was bloodied, his left eye swelling shut.

Mustang watched the pummeling with a bizarre detachment, as if facilitating a scientific experiment with mice induced to violence. When he heard bones crack, however, she intervened.

Utilizing martial arts training acquired during her global travels, she yanked thugs one by one from the melee, rendering them unconscious with precise blows. Cognizant that Church wouldn’t appreciate his strength put in doubt, she left him to finish off the last three.

Blood splattered his shirt and trousers as he righted himself. A fresh gash on his left cheek would add another dimension to the geometric alignment of scars embedded in his flesh. The knuckles of both hands dripped red, and a stream of semi-congealed fluid confirmed his split lower lip.

She knew he'd never acknowledge the agony he suffered in that instant, and she wasn't necessarily amenable to exercising her power over nature to heal his wounds. He wouldn't thank her for the effort, anyway.

The whine of distinctly Italian sirens spurred her to clutch his arm and drag him, limping, toward the storeroom. They burst through the back door as uniformed officials raided the premises - having been summoned by the bartender.

Church yanked free as they crept toward the nearest intersection. "Who the hell do you think you are?" he groaned. "I was perfectly capable..."

"Bullshit," she countered. "You might be capable when you're sober, but drunk... they would've killed you."

"And, you're not tipsy?"

"Not at all."

"Liar."

Mustang acceded the matter, steering him toward the hotel. "Let's get you cleaned up and on the next plane home."

Their first stop: an after-hours clinic to assess his injuries. Fortunately, five cracked ribs would mend; two jagged lacerations were sutured and bandaged. The nurse recommended ice packs for the black eye and assorted bruises.

Accessing Church's suite via the same route as they'd departed - police cars still present at the front entrance - she lingered near the windows while he changed clothes, listening to a series of expletives as his sore muscles rebelled at the motion.

Night descended beyond the balcony, the Mediterranean's blue darkening ominously. A mere utterance could bring this entire fiasco to a rapid - and rather unsatisfying - conclusion. She knew Church would welsh on their bet, the bar fight negating the legitimacy of their contest, in his mind. The risk of torture by those men with certain connections in no way diminished because of his failure to surrender the cash to her, she could prevent the additional anguish by simply ending him. When the enforcers searched the room, they'd retrieve their stolen money and go.

She'd left too many corpses in her wake, including more than a dozen choir members on a field trip to Loch Ness, after they broke into the Boleskine House to have sex in the bedrooms. Her self-control still imperfect, she let impulses get the better of her, wreaking wholesale havoc.

She would not repeat that mistake.

Church staggered across the threshold, blue dress shirt half-buttoned, belt dangling from missed loops.

"Let me help you." She supported him at the waist. "Come. Sit."

He had no chance. Pounding on the door drew him in that direction; six of the Carabinieri who had responded to the call about Jean King, firearms in hand, waited to be invited into the sitting room.

“We require you to accompany us to headquarters,” the sergeant - thin in comparison to Church - announced in clipped English.

He groused, “Why?”

“The deceased, she was your wife, no?”

“No.”

“But, you were booked in the same accommodations...”

“It was cheaper than reserving separate rooms,” explained Church.

The official stared past him at Mustang. He jeered, “And, this is?”

“His sister.” The Mistress of Boleskine did not regret the blatant fib. “I arrived from Florence only a few hours ago.”

Church’s astonishment transformed his appearance, and she had to bite her lip to muffle the snigger.

“Your name, Signorina?”

“Shelly,” Church interspersed. “Shelly Windom.”

Mustang’s turn to be stunned.

“Your papers, please,” the sergeant demanded.

“That shouldn’t be necessary,” objected Church.

His companion consented innocently. “No problem, brother.” From her slacks, she drew a blue U.S. passport folder - actually a receipt from the shop where she’d earlier bought her outfit - and presented it to the tanned local.

After reviewing the documentation, the booklet was surrendered. “You will attest to being with this man the entire afternoon?”

He read her tranquility as an affirmation and summarily saluted. “And these injuries, Signore?”

Mustang bumbled, “My rolling luggage lost a wheel, tipped over and he fell over it.”

“Ah, a hazard, those things,” concurred the Carabinieri. “You will be available, should we need to question you formally?”

“Of course,” Church stammered.

The men marched toward the stairs as he closed and locked the panel, whirling on Mustang.

“What the hell...”

“So, your sister’s name is Shelly?” she chuckled.

He slumped on the sofa and pulled her down beside him. “I don’t have a sister. Only four brothers.”

“You thought up the name pretty quick.”

“My graduate assistant at the university.”

“Ah! She has a crush on you?”

“Probably.” His arrogance rapidly reasserted itself. “It’s against the code of conduct to fraternize with students or employees.”

“That doesn’t stop it from happening, does it?”

“Nope.” He reached for her; she dodged his grasp. “How did you come up with that passport?”

“Just a parlor trick.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“Wait until the coroner collects Jean’s body and the cops are gone, then take off.”

His ruddy complexion suddenly paled. “I... can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Jean. Someone has to make arrangements for her...”

“That’s up to her family.”

“She has none. Her parents are deceased; she was an only child.”

“What about her in-laws?”

“After my buddy died, they cut her off.”

“Then, she can be buried, or cremated, at the public expense.”

“That’s not... honorable.”

Mustang’s teeth clenched. “First, you say there’s nothing between you two, and you don’t care if she’s whacked as long as you can keep the money. While you hold with this stubborn sentimentality about what is little more than an empty shell, your life remains in danger.”

“It’s how I was brought up.”

She snorted, “It was how I was brought up, too, but coming into adulthood, it’s expected that a person forms their own view of what’s important in life - like self-preservation.”

“How old are you, anyway?” he queried.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“If the cops find out who you really are, and you’re under age and in my room...”

“Then, you’ll be prosecuted for theft and harboring a fugitive from justice.”

IV

Church's instantaneous grip on Mustang's shoulders brooked no resistance. Unlinking aquamarine orbs bored into her skull. "Spill everything, now!"

A minor electrical charge caused his digits to retract. "God, you're a gullible sod," she chided, fleeing the sofa. "If you must know: yes, there are agencies who would like nothing more than to take me into custody - a feat they know to be an exercise in futility. And, no, I'm not a minor; I'm 24."

"This is too much," he drawled. "I never should've agreed..."

"You're right, there." Gazing down at the street, she observed the last of the Carabinieri vehicles pull away from the curb. "Time to go."

"Go? Where?"

She hoisted him upright and guided him toward the door. "You, back to the States and your dull but secure existence. Me? Home."

"Where's home?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"But, not the States."

"Correct."

"Wouldn't I be safer if..."

Mustang favored him with a stern glance. "Not on your life."

"Just for a week or two, until the heat dies down."

Oh, hell...

She shoved him onto the armchair, her nose inches from what resembled a mound of misshapen putty. "Listen, Reid. By... sparking the interest of those... men with certain connections... a week or two won't mean you're safe. Wherever you go, they'll track you: across oceans, over international borders, even to the tops of mountains. You can choose to live constantly looking behind you, or simply cycle through your normal routine and keel over when they put two in your head."

The terror emanating from his eyes did not surprise her. She meant to scare him straight.

"Furthermore, I won't have you tagging along with me, putting me on their radar. I try to keep a low profile..."

"And haven't done a very good job of it, if what you said about being a fugitive is true."

"I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, I admit. So far, I've avoided these particular idiots, and I don't intend on letting down my guard." She shoed him

toward his bedroom; he took the briefcase with him. “Get packed, but quick.” As he lumbered off, she added, “And give me that contraption you invented.”

He spun, livid. “What are you going to do, use it yourself?”

“Believe me, I have no need for such... technology.”

Befuddled, he delivered a small rectangular plastic box with a toggle switch and short antenna, before gathering his belongings into a monogrammed duffel. He caught Mustang at the desk, monitoring the device’s disintegration into a pile of dust.

“What’d you do that for?” he groaned. “It took me four years to get the frequency calibration just right...”

“I just spared you a long prison sentence.” She snatched the bag from him. “Without that, the law can’t implicate you in the theft. Where’s the money?”

“But, how...”

She repeated the mocking explanation. “A parlor trick. The money, if you please.”

“You going to scatter it out the window?”

“You going to try to keep it?”

“Sure.”

“Fine. If you escape the guys who wasted Jean, try to get it through customs when you land at JFK in New York.”

“O’Hare in Chicago, actually.”

“Whatever. It’d be tough to lie about how you obtained such a load of foreign currency...”

He gave her his back. “Oh, yeah...” Then, “Can’t it be converted into dollars?”

“Naturally. Just walk into any bank and watch the reaction.”

“I... never thought of that.”

“Even if you could convert such a sum, do you honestly believe you could waltz into your local branch and deposit such a sum in your checking account? The cops, not to mention the IRS, would be on you like flies on honey.”

“Shit.”

“That, too.”

He debated options, none viable except for chartering an aircraft to fly him to a secluded landing strip, thus eluding the authorities...

“All planes arriving from outside U.S. airspace are required to submit to immigration regulations.”

“You know this personally?” he grumbled.

“That’s why I never spend more than a day on this... errand.”

“Even though you have your own forged papers?”

Facetiously, she remarked, “What forged papers?”

He seized her and thrust his fist in her pocket, coming up with the crumpled receipt.

“What the...” He scowled at her levity. “Don’t say it. Just figure out how I can get out of here without getting arrested or killed, and with the cash.”

She prolonged the suspense, relishing the frustration of a man who had little use for women beyond their physical attributes or when they could save his bacon in a pinch. She approached the window, pointing toward the marina along the coastline. “Hire yourself a yacht and have it put you off on some deserted stretch of sand...”

“Cross the ocean in something that small?”

“At this distance, their size is deceiving. A few are large enough to double as a cruise ship.”

“With a cost to match.”

She shook her restored auburn tresses at him. “You can’t have it both ways.”

An idea struck him. “How’d you get here?”

“None of your business,” she muttered, averting her gaze.

He confronted her, hands clamped on her biceps so she couldn’t wriggle loose. “A very private sort, aren’t you?”

She raised her singed, mangled palms. “You wanna go for this kind of ride?”

Church cringed. “I don’t...”

“If you dare me, I’ll take you, but the money stays here.”

“So, you’re saying...”

“Your life, or your wealth. You can’t have both.”

Beyond his bulk, Mustang saw a silver Mercedes brake at the curb below. She shook free, assisted by an electrical current. “Time to go!”

“Why the rush?”

“The boys are here.”

His innate arrogance almost faltered. “If you’re right about this, they’ll surround the building. There’s no way out.”

“Says who?” She tugged his sleeve; he paused to scoop up both the duffel and the briefcase - to her dismay. Into the corridor, they bolted right, jogging toward an open window.

Mustang hurdled the sill, swinging over the wrought iron railing of a spiral fire escape overlooking what must’ve once been a monastery cloister, with its

arched stone colonnade shielding contemplative walkways bordering an overgrown garden. She scrambled up hand-forged steps, Church on her heels.

On the roof, the young woman trod delicately over terracotta tiles laid on a slight incline atop rusty tin.

“This is insane!” Church beefed.

Near the ledge, their approach disturbed a flock of pigeons. Going airborne, they flew at Church, who tripped, dropped his load and tumbled down the sloped surface.

Mustang dove after him, clamping both hands around his flailing right arm as her feet wedged between two exposed beams. She halted his fall, lungs heaving.

His true colors finally shone. “Let go, for Christ’s sake. You can’t hold my weight, and there’s no sense both of us dying.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“Must you always contradict me? I’m older...”

“But not necessarily wiser, Reid. Shut up and relax.”

“Relax?” he echoed.

Calming her own respiration, the Mistress of Boleskine summoned natural forces to augment her strength. She easily pulled the much heavier man back onto the roof, where they sat side-by-side, recovering from the mishap.

Middle finger and thumb resembling a set of calipers, his face a perplexed mask, he took the measure of her tissue. “You’re stronger than you look.”

“You have no idea.”

Composed once more, they shinnied down a rain pipe. Emerging in a debris-cluttered alley, they slunk toward the lane that led away from the sea into a more residential neighborhood. Mustang’s brain churned, nothing she devised would feasibly get Reid Church to the States with over a half million dollars in his wallet.

Unless...

A jeweler’s graced the next junction, tempting those with good fortune in the casinos to splurge on themselves or their loved ones. Elegant storefront displays of pendants, bracelets, tiaras and rings boasted price tags that made the young woman gag.

She steered Church toward the frosted glass entrance, close to the end of their business day, confiding, “Pretend we just got engaged, and you want to buy me a token of your love...”

For once, he picked up on the strategy immediately, contemplating his reflection in the casement. “In this condition, no one would believe...”

“Leave that to me.”

The florid store manager effusively welcomed the sophisticated couple and, all too ready to make a sale, escorted them to his office, where purple velvet-lined trays were brought in at intervals - for security purposes, so read a multilingual posting on the wall.

Mustang blushed at the authenticity of Church's performance. As she admired various settings - from art nouveau to classic - and viewed how they looked when worn in a large oval mirror, he exhibited genuine pleasure with flashes of his straight white teeth. She gushed over a 12-karat baguette; he raised her fingers to his lips, planting a delicate kiss. Comparing an emerald brooch to her eyes, he caressed her cheek.

Eventually selecting diamond earrings - though her ears weren't pierced - a pearl and ruby choker and other trifles, Church walked away with less than 30,000 Euros in his pocket, and items small enough to conceal from customs agents at O'Hare International Airport.

"I... appreciate what you've done," the professor praised as they strolled toward the bustling restaurant district. "Without resorting to parlor tricks."

She wasn't about to confess that, via her power, she'd projected an image of him in full health to the posh store's staff. "My compliments on your acting. I'd ask who she was and why she dumped you, but remember when I said I never wanted to see you again, and good riddance? This seals the deal. Besides, you could never have spent that score on a new house, or fancy car without arousing suspicion..."

"The stash wasn't for now," he commented. "It's for the retirement years."

"There are plenty of other - honest - ways to save for your future."

"Not when bills are piling up and collection agents harass you on the phone."

Mustang conceded she didn't understand the needs of ordinary folk - not since inheriting her grandfather's command over nature. She'd heard her parents arguing about expenses periodically while living on the Montana horse ranch, but such mundane preoccupations seemed far distant in her present circumstances.

Her sole outlay amounted to bi-weekly food orders along with oats, hay and straw for the horses she kept in Boleskine's barn.

"I'm... sorry," she apologized. "I guess our priorities are quite different."

"You can say that again."

"Grab yourself a taxi to the airport, and fly a selection of illogical routes to throw off any of the hired guns who might be on your tail." She extended her hand in parting.

He clasped it, masterfully executing his own parlor trick. A black pearl suspended from a delicate silver chain blended with the scorch mark on her palm.

“What’s this?” she queried.

“A small keepsake from one black sheep to another.”

“Stolen?”

She detected heightened color in his cheeks, even in the shadows. “Once a thief, always a thief,” he purported, drawing her close. “We pretended to be engaged. Don’t you owe me a last kiss?”

“Last?” she croaked mirthfully, aware a struggle would only prolong the encounter. “We never had a first.”

“We can remedy that, too. There’s any number of hotels...”

She couldn’t deny his warmth enticed her, though his current physical appearance as a result of the fight tempered that attraction. To indulge a fleeting passion, though - causing nature to react to her emotions with high winds, earthquakes and spontaneous rainstorms - would benefit neither of them.

At least, she’d learned that much.

Her perplexity remained, though: why random men who crossed her path fixated on taking her to bed. Maybe if her father had shown more tenderness toward her mother, or she’d had an older brother, she might’ve been able to plumb the depths of the male psyche.

Those she’d known who had defied the stereotype of being driven primarily by sex could be counted on her fingers, despite her vast travels.

Pathetic.

In this instance, a single, platonic expression of feigned affection would suffice to rid her of this unwanted affiliation. Except, his rippling muscles pressed her so tightly to that barrel chest, she wound up unable to breathe.

Sucking in a lungful of air, she thrust Church backward, onto the pavement where he was nearly struck by a passing *motorini*.

“Wow!” he exclaimed.

Mustang didn’t care if he meant the kiss or the near miss. “Off with you,” she advised. “And don’t forget to tuck those jewels in your dirty socks before you go through passport control.”

“Come with me,” he urged as late traffic made hailing a cab difficult.

A sweet gesture, but... “Reid, think about the last few hours. We’ve gone from being at loggerheads to you wanting to sleep with me. You’re too... volatile a personality, too set in your opinion about the real worth of women... any long-term relationship between us would be a disaster of volcanic proportions.”

He studied her determined features. “You’re right, of course. I can’t abide headstrong women for more than short periods, even if they are beautiful and let me have my way with them.”

His bluntness raised a chuckle in her throat.

The roared, “Taxi!” finally secured him transportation with a squeal of brakes.

Mustang retreated into a recessed doorway as he slid onto the white compact’s rear seat and the vehicle merged with the swift flow along the road. The elements responded to subsequent dual commands: she tossed the black pearl skyward to dissipate on the breeze; Reid Church’s recent injuries healed.

Secure in her isolation once more, she hiked to the settlement’s perimeter, where the lightning strike would cause no damage.

She weighed crashing the aircraft which Church would soon board, rejecting the notion. While she might anonymously tip off the U.S. Customs Service about the smuggled baubles and find a way to track news reports of his apprehension and conviction in the international court, killing 200 people in addition to one misguided academic could not be justified.

Knocking two underworld flunkies senseless when they ambushed her along the dark byway moments later, however, ranked as self-defense.

Her next journey to refill depleted coffers would not be to the Italian Riviera.

A few sober patrons of an outdoor café peered over their wine glasses toward where a random flare connected sky and earth. In some sturdy facility miles north, meteorologists noted the inexplicable phenomenon, while their Scottish colleagues registered a similar spectacle less than a minute later.

Stars twinkling in the humid sky, Mustang trudged from the hillock where the decimated picnic table that had served as Jack Parsons’ ritual altar lay in a rotting heap.

Being home, she couldn’t yet rest. Wads of British pounds were stashed behind rows of books in the Georgian mansion’s locked study before she slogged to the barn. Her horses needed food and water.