

The Mustang Chronicles:

Mobile Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Even in the midst of tourist season, Assisi's Piazza San Rufino fell silent by midnight during the week. So it happened, when Elizabeth "Mustang" Duryea ascended the hill after a very late dinner - dawn to dusk occupied by one pilgrim group after another seeking her insights on the historic sites - the sound confounded her.

"Pie Jesu Domine," chanted male voices, followed by a thump or smack. "Dona eis requiem," and another smack.

She recognized the sequence from the 1970s movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

But, why at that place, at that hour, and repeating over and over?

Stone walls surrounding the square creating a natural echo before the ancient cathedral made the woman's efforts to locate the source more difficult. She inched along the perimeter, concentrating as much as her tired brain allowed.

Nearly stepping on the mobile phone partially wedged in a gap between pavers.

Dropped by a traveler, she surmised, who wouldn't detect its absence from pocket or purse until well out of the city, or comfortable in one of the hotels.

The ringtone reverberated yet again, and Mustang fought a temptation to smash the device with her sneaker. Instead, she plucked it up and studied it in the gloomy moonlight.

She hadn't spoken on a phone in years; she couldn't remember exactly, for that matter. Technology held no appeal for this recluse, wishing to remain off the radar of local and international law enforcement, or those whose paths had crossed hers since her grandfather, Jack Parsons, bequeathed her a unique power over the natural elements.

None of the buttons she pressed on the mobiles' case silenced the recorded noise. The screen lit up with this activity, however, revealing tiny images with the names of what Mustang had heard referred to as "apps."

She tapped one resembling an old-style handset.

"Hello?" came an agitated masculine voice.

The screen displayed, "Unknown caller."

"Hello?" he almost bellowed. "Can you hear me, Emily?"

The best Mustang could do, if she wished to risk it, was turn in the lost asset at the Carabinieri office the next day - or, better still, ask the souvenir shopkeeper's young son to deliver it, for a generous tip.

She made to tuck it in the hip pocket of her jeans, when the baritone uttered a series of expletives, concluding, “Damned piece of shit!”

Her laughter must’ve been heard by the caller, who responded, “Emily? What game are you playing? I’ve been ringing you for three days!”

An almost desperate edge to the statement tore at Mustang’s heart. Against her better judgment, she brushed aside long auburn tresses and held the phone to her ear. “This isn’t Emily, but I can take a message and try to find her, if you know her full name.”

A pause, then, “Who is this?”

“Oh, hell...”

“Look. Emily Bauer is a sixteen-year-old runaway from Texas.”

To Mustang, that didn’t sound right, at all. “How’d a kid from Texas get to Europe?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but her father works for the government, and he’s very worried about her. He... overreacted when she turned up pregnant. Took her car away and grounded her. Her jock boyfriend dumped her. She hitchhiked to Dallas and bought a ticket with a stolen credit card on the first plane out of DFW.”

“But, what about a passport?”

“She grew up in Germany, if that matters.”

Something still smacked of falsehood. “If Emily came from the States, this phone shouldn’t have a signal...”

American travelers, Mustang had inadvertently learned, needed to rent phones that worked with Italian mobile carriers, or sign up for an international plan ahead of time.

A click signaled the disconnection.

Too late to fuss with the conundrum, she determined, trudging to the faded door of the structure that may once have housed a wealthy family, but now provided small apartments for students, scholars and other long-term residents of the ancient city.

The bogus scenario, nonetheless, kept the erstwhile American awake. She’d fled Montana years earlier, relocating in Scotland near Loch Ness to isolate herself from those wishing to take advantage of her power. She fled to Assisi when the burden of chance interactions drew too much attention to her presence in the Highlands. She had no intention of dealing with anyone beyond escorting them to the churches and historic sites, collecting fees in order to cover her minuscule expenses.

So what if Emily had run away from home? Lots of teenagers, fed up with being misunderstood by their parents, chose that option. Sure, the girl made it farther than most...

The call puzzled Mustang most. If Emily had run on the spur of the moment, she wouldn't have had time to set up international cell service. If she'd purchased a phone upon her arrival in Italy - Rome, most likely - none of her family would know the number...

Unless, her father initiated the international availability upon discovering his daughter's destination.

That, at least, made a little sense: the phone being on the elder Bauer's plan, rather than Emily having her own separate account...

This analysis of the situation made Mustang's head throb.

Sirens converging on the Piazza San Rufino in the wee hours redoubled the pain.

Rising reluctantly, Mustang shuffled to the main room, peering through grimy windows to the square three stories below. Uniformed Carabinieri milled about, seemingly directed by a tall, spare figure in a black Hugo Boss suit and Armani loafers.

Mustang had come to recognize the designers' styles, sitting almost daily near the Basilica Santa Chiara, watching crowds circulate in the shops.

Useless information, from a practical perspective, when compared to the knowledge that the individual seeking Emily had managed to track the phone to that location using nearby transmission towers.

"Oh, hell..." she yawned.

Why did she not abide by her instincts to shun involvement with others, even out of kindness?

When the cadre of officials failed to find the object of their search, the vehicles withdrew - but not before Mustang noticed the senior among them scold the civilian for misleading them.

She heard the tirade in English from her vantage point, though he yelled in fluent Italian. Her chuckle remained private, however, despite neighboring lights flickering to life in nearby windows, due to the clamor.

The lone figure paced the stones, frustrated, long enough for Mustang to slip into a doze on the warped sill. Then, that infernal ringtone jarred her awake.

"Alright, so you escaped again." Mustang saw the man clutching his own mobile, though he couldn't see her in the darkness.

She refused to divulge that she knew where he stood, or what he'd attempted to accomplish. "I told you earlier, this isn't Emily."

“Then, you’re her kidnapper.”

“When did kidnapping enter into this?” Mustang gasped. “You said she ran away...”

“She did, but the suitcase she took contains more than just clothes.”

“Oh, hell...” The woman retreated from the window and sank on a battered love seat. “What is it: secret papers, stolen money?”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you. You can make a fortune, depending on which country bids highest...”

Her guffaw rattled glasses in the dish rack on the kitchenette counter. Ludicrous how she’d gone from an innocent third party to a kidnapper to an international profiteer in less than three hours.

“Just answer one question: is Emily already dead?” he growled.

“Already?”

“If you’ve cheated me out of the contract...”

This reminded Mustang of so many bad movie plots, she couldn’t contain her mirth. A hired assassin, chasing a runaway who - perhaps unknowingly - carried valuable information, being pursued by others anxious to gain access to her...

For the briefest moment, the transplanted American considered playing along.

“What if we split, fifty-fifty?”

Then, regretted the statement.

“Where can we meet?” he prodded.

But, Mustang had placed the mobile in a scratched skillet on the stove; she didn’t bother to summon nature to melt the components. The heat of the electric coils sufficed to destroy the case and its computer chips.

Two aspirin and a glass of chocolate milk preceded her return to bed. It being Sunday, tourists would spend the morning attending religious services in any of the dozens of churches, so sleeping until 11:00 didn’t deny her access to any income from eager groups.

She showered and dressed in a green tie-dye t-shirt and jeans, ate toast and bacon with orange juice. Descending narrow, dim stairs, she met Roberto, the 12-year-old son of her favorite trattoria owner.

“Signorina, I overheard a group of Ukrainians seeking a guide who speaks their language,” the dark-haired boy declared.

She garnered more trade from those breakfasting at the restaurant than any other source. She passed the lad a five Euro note. “Grazie, Roberto.”

That her jean pocket now contained only lint mattered not. By evening, she should have enough cash in hand to replenish her cupboards and visit the Gran Caffé bakery for a treat.

A wide-brimmed straw hat concealing her auburn ponytail, Mustang presented herself to the delegation of foreigners, who heard her in their native tongue, thanks to a command she had long since issued to the natural forces. She didn't need a bullhorn or other means of projection - even the stragglers could hear her descriptions of the buildings perfectly well.

That included, as they traversed the Piazza del Comune, a thin, ebony-crested gentleman in white silk shirt and Gucci slacks, his suit jacket slung over one shoulder.

As she waited at the entrance of the Chiesa Nuova, her charges browsing the interior at their leisure, she sensed a presence behind her.

"Don't turn," the vaguely familiar baritone advised. "I just want to know how you do that."

Mustang maneuvered to where she could view his angular, youthful features in the glass. "Do what?"

"You were speaking in English, and they were responding in Russian - without needing a translator."

"Ukrainian, actually."

"Still, a feat of linguistic legerdemain."

"They all have earpieces with simultaneous translation," she bluffed.

"I don't need to see your eyes to know you're not a very good liar."

She bristled, suppressing her temper. "You're not with them. Why don't you get lost?"

"I could use someone like you."

"For what?"

"Two days' work. Fifty thousand dollars."

She detected no humor in his tone. "I repeat: for what?"

"I need to... interrogate a few people about a recent incident. Not knowing the lingo..."

That kind of scratch would keep her well in food and lodging for two years, if not more, since she lived modestly. Still... "That's ridiculous."

"You don't believe I'm serious?"

She felt the pistol barrel wedged against her spine, yet remained calm. "There are two Carabinieri at eight o'clock," she murmured. "If I scream, you won't have a chance of escape."

His head never swiveled in that direction; the weapon retracted and she hadn't needed to melt the metal, raising more questions. A stream of visitors to the church built on the site of St. Francis' childhood home emerged into the afternoon swelter, and her assailant cut down an alley.

She'd seen his face, albeit slightly distorted - the mien of an assassin. He would pursue her, she knew, because her skill lent itself to his task. If she didn't comply, he would kill her for his own protection.

Except, she couldn't be killed.

Others had tried, and failed, losing their own lives in the process.

Mustang focused on the remainder of the tour, ending with the climb from San Damiano to the Porta Nuova as many were boarding busses en route to dinner. She didn't dare head back to her flat; with 200 Euros to her credit, she could dawdle awhile in the hope the armed enigma would give up his quest.

No such luck.

She'd just settled at a table in Roberto's parents' homey trattoria when his conniving, smiling countenance landed before her. He hadn't pulled out the chair, merely swung a lanky leg over the curved back and dropped on the uncushioned wood.

"Who the hell are you?" she grumbled as the waitress filled two goblets with water.

"Cy Cusack."

That he'd revealed his name brought the realization her fate was sealed. His profession would not permit him to leave anyone to identify him when he departed the precincts.

Placing her order for ravioli al forno, antipasto and chianti, Cusack selected linguini with clam sauce without browsing the menu. The bouncy, brunette waitress grinned at Mustang, muttered a phrase and winked approval of her companion.

"What'd she say?" Cusack queried.

Mustang sipped from the crystal glass, then scoffed, "She'd take you to bed in a second."

"And you wouldn't?"

Hazel eyes rolled ceilingward.

"Lesbian?" he pressed.

"None of your business."

"It might be my business that you're an oddity in these parts; no one knows your real name or how you come to be here."

"I thought you said you don't know the language."

“I have sources other than the locals.”

In fact, his mobile rang at that moment, and he left the table without a word.

Mustang enjoyed her salad in his absence, watching the cooks prepare pasta through the kitchen doors. She inhaled the rich aroma of garlic and spices, gnawing on a bread stick.

Cusack resumed his place in short order. Grey-flecked brown orbs twinkled; Mustang’s stomach twisted.

“I don’t want to know, but you’ll tell me anyway, right?” she taunted.

“You’ve got a very... colorful record, I’ll give you that.”

“Now, who’s lying? Every record of my existence has been obliterated...”

She bit her lip so hard, blood oozed onto the lettuce she slid between her teeth.

“Official, perhaps. That’s when my rather enterprising... associate digs through less... legitimate systems.” He offered her a paper napkin to soak up the red stream dripping on her chin. “Elizabeth Duryea.”

II

“Sherlock Holmes has nothing on you,” Mustang praised. “Or, should I say, your associate?”

Cy Cusack’s response was preempted by the delivery of their entrees, which they paused to savor as the wine steward poured aromatic liquid.

“Thing is,” the woman continued between forkfuls once the employees withdrew, “we both have trust issues, for obvious reasons. Exposing our secrets in this manner means only one of us will survive this ordeal.”

Cusack’s smooth countenance wore a slight grin of contentment at the flavor of his linguini. “Aptly put,” he concurred. “Since I’ve got the gun...”

“Don’t rely too much on weapons, when I could easily explode your skull.”

His slender, straight nose crinkled in disdain. “Nonsense.”

“From whence did your associate glean the details about me?”

“Your high school, for starters.”

“What else, besides my name, were you told?”

“Some weird connection to a series of weather anomalies...”

“Ah, the Montana Meteorological Service.” Mustang dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “Anything from the state’s medical examiner?”

“Are you referring to a number of inexplicable deaths in your proximity?”

Her ponytail bobbed.

Their eyes met and Cusack blinked first after the stare-down.

“Tell me where Emily Bauer is, and I’ll make like we never crossed paths,” he drawled.

Silverware slammed on the table. “I don’t know where she is. I never saw her. I picked up her phone entirely by accident, just to shut off the damned ringer. It might have been jammed between those flagstones for an hour or a couple days.”

“You’re telling the truth.”

A pronouncement of fact.

She smirked.

“Then, I’ll be on my way.”

Or, not. As he rose, three uniformed Carabinieri entered the establishment, speaking in hushed tones to Roberto’s father at the bar.

“Stay put,” Mustang directed her companion. “They’re inquiring whether anyone saw a teenager who’s been found dead near the Rocca Maggiore.”

“The *what?*” Cusack echoed.

“The old fort built into the side of Mount Subasio. Kid had her brains bashed in, and no identification.”

“Shit! So much for the contract.”

“How much were you gonna be paid for killing her?” Mustang wondered.

“Ten.”

“Thousand?”

“Million.”

She choked on the ravioli, grasping desperately for the water glass. Whose demise merited that type of fee? she mused, glaring at Cusack across the board. What information had she carried in her luggage...

“Did they find the valise?” Cusack hissed as the trio exited

“They didn’t mention it.”

The chair slid backward. “Then, I might still rate the pay...”

“Who wants it, and why?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he snorted. “Then, I’d have to kill you.”

“Not if I kill you first.”

“The contract was exclusive...”

“On Emily, sure. What about the contract on *you?*”

Mustang lamented the tactic, but she succeeded in confounding this professional long enough to gain an advantage.

He leaned forward, his sharpish chin within inches of her nose. “Who wants me hit?”

Instead of answering, she playfully dabbed a smudge of clam sauce off his cheek before tossing the crumpled paper on her plate, laying 50 Euros on the table and whisking into the night.

Cusack's long legs quickly caught her up; he slipped her arm through his as she strode along the Via Giorgetti, with no intention of leading him to her flat.

"We can be civil about this," he ventured.

"Says the man who threatened me with a .357 Magnum this afternoon."

He countered, "It was a Glock."

"Whatever." She halted and leveled her gaze on his features. "What line did you feed the Carabinieri last night to get them to search the piazza?"

"The partial truth: that Emily was under age and missing."

"Why do you do it?"

Cusack led her onward. "I spent four years in the Army after high school, specializing in weapons. When the CIA tried to recruit me, I calculated - rightly - I could earn more working independently. So, I went into business for myself."

"So, you're what, 25?"

"Thereabouts."

"Given the rate you quoted me, a millionaire?"

"A few times over."

"Why not quit and enjoy life?"

He sniffed. "I do enjoy my life."

"The travel?"

"The killing."

"Shrinks have a name for that," Mustang spat.

"I know."

Pausing to view the pink marble of the Basilica San Francesco, illuminated by a full moon and well-placed spotlights, she sighed. "Just go away, would you?"

"I can't, until..."

"If I help you find the suitcase, will you leave?"

"What? A search in the dark?"

"No. In the morning."

"And, between now and then?" he prompted.

"Go back to your hotel and get some sleep."

She read his pinched expression, anticipated his reply. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Oh, hell..."

Mustang didn't require sunlight to find the missing luggage. A quiet utterance - or the mere thought - and nature would comply, landing the case at her feet.

Experience convinced her to be wary with the use of her power around this... threat. No more did he have the item in hand, a bullet would be aimed at her head.

And the Carabinieri would have another corpse to deal with on the late shift.

It wouldn't be hers, though.

"We can both go back to your hotel, watch television, play cards, or just talk," she hinted.

His attempt at humor rang hollow. "That's not very exciting."

"What *do* you consider exciting?"

He propped himself on the low stone wall running beside the walk, gazing at the stars. "You've killed people. Don't you find the build up to the deed stimulating? Researching the target's background, deciding on the best opportunity - the where and when - and selecting the weapon..."

"The deaths I caused... were more spur of the moment, in defense of self or... friends." She leaned against the cool surface, dejected.

"Pretty messy, eh?"

"Not in the tangible sense. No blood or the like, for the most part. But rectifying the mistakes that necessitated the deaths... Exhausting."

"You ever think of doing it... professionally?"

Hazel eyes flashed toward him. "What? Killing?"

"Sure." His white teeth shown brilliantly when he smiled, despite the gloom. "You must have a knack for it, or you'd be behind bars doing a life sentence, if not going stir crazy on death row."

"That's just... nuts."

"It's a matter of supply and demand, no differently than farmers planting corn or wheat each spring to harvest in the fall, Levis producing jeans by the millions, or breweries in Milwaukee shipping truckloads of beer across the country. There's always someone ready to pay - and pay well - to eliminate a rival, an ex-lover, or someone who knows too much about the wrong topic. You could buy your clothes in Paris, live on the Riviera if you chose, fly in private planes..."

"I don't need a plane to fly."

It slipped out so fast, she couldn't curb her tongue.

She didn't add how, if she needed money, she could pop over to Cannes and shoot craps for an hour, bringing home thousands.

A debate on ethics did not appeal to her at the moment.

“Do you have a home, a family?” she wondered.

He sniffed the breeze. “I have an office, where my associate handles the business end of the contracts. I designed a house a few years ago and hired a construction crew for the job, but I’ve never set foot inside it.”

“The demand for your services that... good?”

“So good, I could use a partner.” He drew his Glock from an ankle holster, offering it to her. “How are you with one of these?”

“I’ve... never used one.”

“You prefer knives?”

Her auburn tresses shook in the negative.

“What? Bare hands?” Awe tinged his baritone as he restored the gun and adjusted his trousers.

“You act like this is an audition.”

He eased off the wall. “*You* act like it’s beneath your consideration.”

“Put it this way: if you were offered a contract to hit every low life on the planet - at a million per - would you take it?”

“That would take forever.”

“If you had a weapon that could accomplish the feat in one fell swoop...”

He squinted at her. “What are you saying?”

“I have the means to do just that - and worse - but I purposely refuse.”

“You’re just a kid!”

She snickered, aware she - physically - hadn’t aged since the day she’d killed Jack Parsons at Boleskine House more than ten years earlier. “I’m older than you.”

With that, Mustang moved onto the grassy expanse, where a set of bushes facing the basilica spelled PAX. Cusack dogged her steps, clutching her tie-dye shirt sleeve.

“What about a trial period?” he queried.

She stopped, rather than have him rip the cloth. “How so?”

“We find Emily’s bag in the morning, I return it to its... owner and collect on the contract...”

“Even though you didn’t actually kill her?”

“Point is, she’s dead. As long as the result is positive, how it occurred is irrelevant.”

Mustang shook free of his grasp. “You’re amoral, mercenary and just plain disgusting.”

“I won’t deny it.”

A familiar sensation led the woman to retreat. “Be careful, Cy. You don’t want to make me angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I’m wrong. You’re too overly-sensitive to be good in this line of work.”

“Oh, I’d be very good in this line of work,” she snorted.

Aggravation overwhelmed her; a second later, the manicured greenery erupted in flames.

Cusack recoiled, terrified.

As smoke curled skyward, Mustang sauntered toward the Via San Francesco, vanishing from his view - with a little assistance from nature.

For that matter, he jogged past her in an effort to make chase, giving up upon reaching the deserted Piazza del Comune. He diverted along the Corso Giuseppe Mazzini to the Hotel Dei Priori where, once he mounted the stairs, she left him to his own resources.

Again, she slept until noon, Monday being an off day for tourism in Assisi. Weekend guests had departed, and those with weekday bookings usually didn’t arrive until late afternoon on the train from Rome, or by bus.

To be on the safe side, Mustang darkened her hair to black - as she had previously in Scotland - before she set out to the grocery store for supplies, and the Gran Caffé for a breakfast of pastries and coffee.

Without behaving surreptitiously, she descended from the Piazza San Rufino to the Piazza Santa Chiara, breathing the humid summer air. She passed within inches of Cy Cusack - climbing to the Rocca Maggiore, she imagined, in search of the suitcase - and he never gave her a second glance.

A chance to mess with his head appealed to her; she resisted. Since coming to Assisi from Scotland, she’d maintained an anonymity which suited her desire for peace and quiet. To destroy that on a whim...

How many times had she ruined her chances for a tranquil existence because her impulsive tendencies ran amok? she recalled as she observed Cusack’s Ralph Lauren polo shirt and slacks shrink with distance. He had a precision, a logic, a discipline she lacked - or, had lacked. She wanted to believe she’d improved with age and learned from her mistakes...

Shopkeepers’ babblings about the overnight fire on the basilica lawn, though, dashed her hopes.

“Signorina!” hailed Giorgio, who operated a push-cart gelatto stand near the Porta Nuova. “What do you think of the news?”

“Sad, of course.”

“Indeed. The friars will have to replant the entire lawn, which will disappoint the tourists who like to snap photos of the design.”

“The entire lawn?”

“The fire burned, unchecked, until it extinguished itself.”

“Oh, hell...”

“Yes, it is disappointing.”

“What about the statue?” A horse and rider, resembling a knight, depicted St. Francis’ ignoble return from the Crusade, prior to his conversion to a life of simplicity and penance.

“Scorched, only. It will need a thorough cleaning.”

“At least, the metal didn’t melt.”

“The Carabinieri are actively seeking the arsonist.”

“Eh?” Mustang gasped.

“A man was seen fleeing the scene after the fire started.”

Unable to stifle her laughter, Mustang waved to Giorgio as she proceeded along the lane. Ironic justice if Cusack was arrested and imprisoned for arson, after killing so many...

He’d never collect on his contract for Emily Bauer, never retrieve her luggage.

The vintage tan leather Samsonite overnight case materialized and toppled at her feet as she resumed the trek to the grocer’s.

Retracing her route to the third floor apartment, she tucked the bag behind the love seat once she’d inspected the contents: a few shirts, jeans and undergarments, with a portfolio marked “Ultra Top Secret” and “U.S. Army” stuffed in the expanding pocket: a terrorist’s detailed plans for the destruction of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and all personnel on the premises.

“Oh, hell...”

III

Mustang Duryea ruminated on her predicament as she tramped uphill with two sacks of groceries an hour later. Her stomach in knots, she’d skipped the side-trip to the Gran Caffé, planning to hole up in the apartment until she could calculate a solution to this problem.

Anyone caught with stolen government files could be sentenced to a firing squad, or other form of execution, she speculated. Why Emily Bauer had filched the documents, she couldn’t guess - unless the teen intended to sell them to the highest bidder, thus financing her continued independence...

Why did it always come down to money?

Cy Cusack committed murder for money. Some years hence, dozens of agents from various countries converged on Boleskine to capture her - for a sizeable reward. How many trespassers at Boleskine sought her power for their own personal financial gain?

No more had Mustang unpacked the milk, cereal, peanut butter and bread, than she snatched up the thick file and shoved it in the corner wood stove. Heat generated when she applied a match to the papers increased the already high temperature, but better to have done with it than risk more violations of her privacy.

Like smoke signals employed by native tribes in centuries past, a white plume rising from the rusted metal chimney summoned an unwelcome visitor.

Cusack burst across the threshold, black mane disheveled, shirt askew and sweat drenched from exertion, rage contorting his countenance. "I knew you'd rob me of my due," he grumbled, pistol raised.

She maintained her composure. "You know as well as I do: the minute you turned over that file to whoever initiated the contract, you'd be killed."

"You think I'm that stupid?" he chortled. "I'd arrange the drop and be well away before they had a chance..."

"Once you named the place, they'd be waiting for you. Those... plans weren't marked Ultra Top Secret as a joke."

"You read them?" Cusack slumped on the love seat, dropping the weapon on his lap and burying his face in his hands.

"The first two paragraphs were enough to scare me witless. Why anyone believes murdering hundreds of innocent people..."

"You call those Pentagon flunkies innocent?"

"Innocent or guilty... one group setting itself up as judge, jury and executioner isn't..." She swallowed a memory, the accusation of herself as judge, jury and executioner in regard to Andre Desrosiers. That mobster had brutalized Kathleen Fitzwalter, a friend of Mustang's cousin Rachel Duryea, leading the young woman to Boleskine seeking aid. "Besides, you were in the Army, yourself."

"That's neither here nor there," he hedged. "Without that file, Emily's father will be court-martialed for espionage."

"What is that to you?"

Cusack lifted his chin. "He's my uncle, dammit!"

Mustang crossed to the kitchenette, pouring herself a glass of milk. "Ah, so you *do* have family ties that... compromise your professional integrity."

“And, you don’t?”

“Nope.”

No tiger could have leapt at her more fiercely. “Then, no one will mourn you when you’re dead.”

Years of kung fu practice might have enabled her to defeat the younger man in hand-to-hand combat; Mustang didn’t waste her energy. A charge of electrical current - equivalent to a lightning bolt - propelled Cusack across the chamber, toppling the love seat and coffee table, and sending the Glock skidding across the floor. She had scooped it up and pointed it at her unwanted guest before he regained his footing.

“What the hell was that?” he croaked, shaking off the effects of the jolt, in vain.

“Too many people who’ve asked that very question are six feet under.”

“You’re saying, if you tell me, you’ll have to kill me?”

She smirked.

Cusack studied her intently for a prolonged moment. “What about a truce?”

“You promise not to kill me, and I do likewise?”

“We can discuss it over dinner.”

“You’re paying this time.”

“Sure.”

Then, she laughed. “You’d better look at yourself in the mirror first.”

He ducked into the tiny bathroom off her bedroom, and she heard a stream of expletives. Emerging while trying to smooth his shock-straight hair, he proposed, “Meet me in an hour at that little café near the fountain in the Piazza del Commune.”

“Okay.”

He reached for the pistol; she tucked it in the waistband of her jeans. “I’ll keep it, if you don’t mind, until we agree on the details.”

“You don’t think I have others?”

“I’m sure you do.”

He spun beneath the lintel. “You know, if I intended to kill you, you’d never hear the bullet.”

“Ditto, only I don’t use bullets.”

He shivered anew. “I... get that.”

She closed and bolted the door once Cusack started down the stairs, a chill claiming her spine. Flopping on the love seat, she debated options.

To assuage his greed, she could create an illusion of two million dollars in the suitcase, and he'd never realize the subterfuge until he reached the States.

She could reconstitute the file from ashes in the wood stove, substituting the actual narrative with gibberish, or really bad poetry - no one the wiser until Pentagon officials inspected the contents in the distant future.

If he requested, she could partner with him in his enterprise, limiting her contracts to those guilty of serious crimes...

She'd never have to leave her residence - wherever she chose to live - just issue the command to nature and collect the cash.

None of these thoughts appealed to her. She did have a conscience, after all, while Cusack could be diagnosed as a psychopath.

Rolling off the cushions, she retired to the bedroom, stripping off her orange tank top and cut-off shorts, showering and donning a scoop-neck mauve blouse, black dress slacks and flat sandals.

Crowds in the piazza meant waiting for a table as the sun set over the Umbrian valley. They sat on the steps of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, the ancient temple converted into a Catholic church, watching the mass of bodies move through the city's main square.

Abruptly, Cusack stiffened.

"What is it?" Mustang whispered.

"See the guy with the bad toupee and red jacket?"

"Uh-huh."

"He's... one of my competitors."

"What do you mean..."

"He's probably the one who hit Emily, and now he's after me."

"Why?"

"Like you said earlier: whoever has the file is as good as dead, and since he didn't find it when he killed her, he thinks I've got it."

Cusack started to rise; Mustang restrained him.

"Don't you see, we've got to get out of here." He glared at her. "Unless you want a lot of innocent people killed in the street."

"Nobody's gonna be killed," she exhaled. "Relax."

"I can't..."

"You're always on the defensive," she chided. "He won't even recognize you."

"How can you say..."

"Look. I plan to enjoy a sumptuous dinner, especially since it's on you. I guarantee, nothing will happen to disturb us."

“Prove it.”

“Come here.” She practically dragged him to the ancient fountain. “Check out your reflection.”

He gazed into the rippling water and croaked, “That’s... not me.”

“On the outside only.” Mustang heard their number called by the maitre d’ of the outdoor café. “C’mon. I’m hungry.”

As the courses were devoured, Cusack adjusted to his temporary respite. He imbibed the chianti liberally, soon slurring his words.

Mustang responded mirthfully, not quite certain how to deal with a man constantly on guard, suddenly dropping his defenses.

Tiramisu for dessert delighted her palate, the final bit of tranquility before she would need to transport Cusack to his lodgings. He did manage to pay the check, though she jumped from her own seat to catch him when he plunged sideways off the chair.

“Bedtime for you,” she announced, guiding him toward the Hotel Dei Priori.

“I need some sleep.”

“I can imagine. You constantly run on adrenaline, to the point you’ll be dead before you’re 30.”

“There’s always someone...”

“There doesn’t have to be.”

He stumbled, wrapping his arms around her waist for support. Their eyes met.

“What are you saying?” he burbled.

“Stay here with me. Live simply. Enjoy the world’s wonders.”

Not among her original set of parameters, Mustang steadied her companion and inched forward.

He started singing, off-key nonsense drawing the attention of those passing.

They squeezed through the hotel entrance, traversing the lobby. Weaving as he was, Mustang doubted they would survive the flight of stairs. Nonetheless, she accepted a key from the desk clerk and steered Cusack along, clutching the railing with her left hand.

Unlocking the door another successful challenge, she aimed him at the king-sized bed, content to leave him fully clothed in expensive suit and shoes. She considered removing the spare pistol from its shoulder holster, a preventative measure in case he rolled off the mattress in his sleep.

When she drew aside his coat, he seized her fingers in a surprisingly iron grip.

“What are you about?” he rumbled.

“Why would I save you from being killed by another assassin, only to do it myself?”

“Competition. The one who fulfills the contract gets the dough.”

“I’m not in your business.”

“You play the amateur, but I know how capable you are. You wouldn’t hesitate about ending me if I tried to...”

He yanked her onto the quilt yet, when he leaned in to kiss her, the alcohol got the better of him and he passed out, head on her chest.

She nudged him off, leaving him sprawled with his neck at an angle, knowing he’d awaken sore in the morning.

They hadn’t discussed the truce, so she’d keep the Glock handy.

En route to the ground level exit, Mustang recognized the ruddy figure with the bad salt-and-pepper toupee and red windbreaker chatting up the desk clerk. Snatching a daily newspaper off the sideboard, she pretended to scan the headlines, instead eavesdropping on the conversation.

Red tried to explain to the man he sought a friend who’d gotten separated from the group in Rome, but had indicated he’d be stopping at this hotel. The clerk feigned ignorance, waiting for the man to tip him sufficiently for the desired information.

Language proved a barrier, too. Red spoke what sounded like Polish - when Mustang briefly suspended her power of automatic translation - with only a name ringing clear, possibly Cusack’s alias.

“May I be of service?” she offered, approaching the pair, newspaper tucked beneath her arm.

“I’m trying to explain to this dolt...” Red barked.

The desk clerk complained, “If this idiot thinks I’m going to tell him anything without a minimum of ten Euros in hand, he’s nuts.”

“Have you tried any of the other hotels?” Mustang queried.

Red demurred, “My friend texted me he’d booked a room here.”

“This gentleman,” she indicated the employee, “is trying to tell you there haven’t been any vacancies for a week, here or elsewhere in Assisi at the height of the season, so your friend must be either somewhere in Santa Maria degli Angeli or, more likely, Perugia.”

“Ah, thank you, Miss.”

Red had no cause to doubt her, apologized for his surliness to the clerk, and departed the historic building.

Befuddled, the clerk waited for clarification from the woman. She tucked five Euros in his shirt pocket, smiled and left.

Not until she crashed on the love seat 20 minutes later did she remember the publication she hadn't read. She ignored current news overall, but a large font headline on the front page, written in Italian but translated into English by her brain, declared the death of Emily Bauer to have been an accident after she'd mounted an unstable stone parapet at the Rocca Maggiore - ignoring posted warnings.

That would quash any chance Cusack had for collecting on the contract.

Up late for the third night in a row, Mustang did something rare: she set the alarm clock on her night stand before collapsing on the twin bed. She swore to make herself scarce come dawn, spending the day with a herd of wild horses living up Mount Subasio she'd discovered years prior.

The hike - a sack of apples and carrots slung on her back - refreshed her spirit. The animals, descendants of those that escaped the confines of the nobility's stables during the many armed conflicts Assisi endured throughout history, greeted her with enthusiasm. They bent and permitted her to stroke their noses and shaggy manes.

She spoke in soothing tones, unburdening her mind of its turmoil, though they did not answer. They could have, if she'd so instructed nature, but she'd given her pinto Heartbeat the power of articulation, back on her parents' ranch in Montana, and he soon tired of it.

Instinct, reading their behavior, conveyed their message louder than any words.

The sun reached its apex before she tramped along the hidden trail to a paved road. Passing beneath the Cathedral of San Rufino bell tower, the press of humanity in the piazza - and the heat - enveloped her like a heavy pall. She dodged children in strollers, religious in habits, and those typing on their mobiles, when she sensed something amiss.

Hazel orbs scanned her surroundings.

There! Perched on the wall jutting outward from the church, a black ball cap shielding much of his face, Ray Ban sunglasses hiding his eyes, Cy Cusack resembled a cat eager to pounce on a mouse: Mustang.

"Oh, hell..."

Squatting amidst the assembly on a ruse to tie an unlaced sneaker, the distracted passersby never noticed her hair change from auburn to blonde. She'd never liked that color, though it blended well with those circulating in the square.

Cusack lost sight of his prey and, when she slipped into the structure in which she lived, he'd settled on his haunches, his vigil persisting.

For him to display such dedication to a task meant he'd first verified she wasn't in the apartment - at whatever hour that had transpired. She guessed it was after noon; sleeping off his intoxication would've taken that long.

He'd managed to jimmy the deadbolt, as well. The love seat cushions had been removed and switched. Tea towels in the kitchen drawers were rumped together, cookware upended in the cupboard. He'd rifled her bedsheets and clothes in the dresser.

Mustang peered at him from the window, clicking her tongue. He wanted his Glock so badly, yet he hadn't thought to check in the laundry bin.

Freeing the weapon from a tangle of socks, she noticed the message scrawled in soap on the bathroom mirror: "Be in the piazza at 7:00 or ur dead."

IV

Mustang tucked the pistol beneath her loose-fitting U2 t-shirt and stormed from the flat. By the time she reached ground level, the cathedral plaza had been vacated - except for Cy Cusack.

Thanks to a directive by which nature instilled a sudden, overwhelming hunger in every tourist.

She strode toward him; he slid off the stones, brushed the backside of his khaki Dockers and matched her gait.

"Neat trick," he praised stopping ten feet distant. "Still concerned about innocent bystanders?"

"Of course."

"You got me tanked last night, on purpose."

"No one forced the glass to your lips." The woman grit her teeth. "Not only did I get you safely to your hotel, I saved you a visit from that jerk with the bad toupee."

Cusack's confident expression altered immediately. "Eh?"

She related the exchange with the assassin in the red jacket.

"Your conscience will be the death of you," he scoffed. "Despite your low opinion of my... career, you couldn't tolerate someone killing me."

“I don’t need another death weighing me down, when it was simple enough to send him on a wild goose chase.”

“How many?”

“Deaths?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve lost count.”

“Or, you choose not to remember.”

Mustang gulped. “Pretty much. What about you?”

“They’re all recorded in a notebook - a page each. Last tabulation was 42.”

“Oh, hell...”

“You saw the papers?”

“Emily’s death ruled accidental?”

His ball cap bobbed in the affirmative.

“Nothing I can do about that.”

“I think there is.”

“I’m not bringing her back...” Mustang murmured, chin quivering.

Cusack’s brow furrowed. “Who said anything about...” Then, trembling fingers removed his shades, grey-flecked bloodshot eyes wide. “What the hell...”

“I... thought you knew, with all the research your... associate provided.”

“Not about some depraved necrophilia.”

“Oh, hell...” she snorted. “It’s not necrophilia. I’ve just... manifested the dead a few times.”

He stumbled sideways, as if dizzy or about to faint. He dropped onto the stones, legs crossed, head resting on his knees, respiration measured. She squatted beside him, auburn tresses rustled by the breeze, brushing his ear.

Irritated digits slapped the hair away. “Quit! That tickles.”

Mustang parked on the pavement. “Well, that’s a shock. You, ticklish.”

His scowl only amused her more.

“That’s because no one ever touches me,” he lamented.

“I touched you last night.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“If I hadn’t, you would’ve face-planted on the Corso Giuseppe Mazzini.”

“That’s... different.”

“Oh, you mean, a friendly touch, an affectionate touch,” she chuckled.

“Yeah.”

“Then, you don’t remember trying to kiss me?”

His countenance tightened. “I... don’t remember... anything after the pasta.”

“Damn!”

“What?”

“The tiramisu was, basically, wasted on you.”

He raised his hand, intending to slap her, then let it sink on his lap. “Were you serious?”

“About what?”

“Manifesting the dead?”

“To my shame, yes.”

“Who, for instance?”

“In this very city, over a decade ago, St. Francis. Mark Twain, Mahatma Gandhi, Erwin Rommel.”

“You got any witnesses?”

“With St. Francis, millions. The news media broadcast his appearance. For the others, not so much.”

“Then, you *could* bring Emily back...”

“Are you kidding? The coroner has already gutted her. I’d hate to imagine her father’s reaction when the body is shipped to the States.”

“Gandhi was burned on a funeral pyre, yet you managed *that*.”

“An accident, pure and simple.”

A few deep breaths and Cusack swung to his knees. “I’d like to see what you do when it’s deliberate!”

She matched his posture. “Why did you call me out - even though it’s not seven o’clock yet?”

“One: you have my Glock. Two: we never discussed the truce. Three...”

Had he been the protagonist in a classic Western film, the youthful assassin would’ve sparked cheers from the audience at the speed of his draw. The semi-automatic emptied its clip, bullets bouncing off an invisible barrier and mingling with shell casings on the stones.

Undeterred, he deftly freed a second magazine from his hip pocket, having no chance to insert it into the grip when Mustang’s roundhouse kick sent him airborne.

Stunned, he lay in a crumpled heap near the arched cathedral door. His opponent marched the distance, drawing the Glock from its concealment. She yanked him up by his monogrammed shirt collar and shoved the barrel against his temple.

“Have you got it through that thick skull of yours now?” she raged.

“Sure, sure. You’re... a figment of my imagination.”

Agile fingers encircled his wrist, wrenching to pin it against his shoulder blade. “Does this feel like your imagination?”

“God, no!” He squirmed to ease the anguish coursing through his limbs, to no avail.

She released him and retreated two paces, allowing him to recover a bit of his balance and dignity, tucking the Glock into the impromptu holster. “Now, we’re going to talk this out like adults, before the Carabinieri swarm the place and arrest us both.”

“Why would they arrest *you*?” Cusack massaged his right arm, visually searching for his weapon.

“They know I’m a foreigner - a red-head, no less, and easily identifiable - who’s... bending the rules. My passport is expired and I don’t have a visa. Every time they try to haul me in on a deportation warrant, I disappear.”

“Then, you could make us both disappear.”

“I’ve already done that.”

“Eh?”

“Last night, so your competitor wouldn’t recognize you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Right.”

Mustang shuffled toward the object of her companion’s attention. “I don’t suppose you’d accept my offer of a quiet dinner and cordial farewell, with a promise to forget we ever met?”

Aware she could wipe his memory of all recollection of the past three days, she awaited his refusal. Only to be startled by his remark.

“I don’t think I could ever forget you, kid. Maybe we can go our separate ways, if you swear to never get into this... business.”

For him to carry knowledge of her beyond the city’s walls, with his extreme lack of compunction, would end in disaster - sooner or later - she grasped. Planning to deal with that issue after a tasty meal, they descended to the Piazza Santa Chiara and slipped inside a pleasant bistro.

Italians known for eating late, the dining room boasted only four occupied tables. Cusack dropped onto a square-backed wooden chair, against the wall with an unobstructed view of the street through the window.

“Is paranoia a perk of your job?” Mustang quipped, unfolding the linen napkin.

“Neither of us is big on trusting others,” he retorted.

“What’s your next step, after you leave here?”

“Since I... have nothing to show for this fiasco, I move on to the next contract.”

“Which is...”

“A certain gambler in Monte Carlo has refused to make good his markers.”

The raucous laugh burst from Mustang’s throat, and she didn’t care that all eyes turned toward her.

“What?” Cusack puzzled.

“Small guy. Kinda chunky. Balding with a dark fringe. Likes to wear houndstooth jackets and Converse sneakers.”

“How in hell...”

“I’ve been there. Seen him every trip. Prefers the blackjack tables, never knows when to stay with a pat hand.”

“He’s owes six figures to the...”

“Loan shark?”

Cusack remained silent, the waiter presenting a menu. He didn’t peruse the listings, reaching to caress Mustang’s forearm. “You’ve got to come with me. We’d have a blast, and could... make one hell of a reputation for ourselves.”

“Partners with... benefits?” she hinted.

“Why not? You’re gorgeous, and I’ve seen you sizing me up when you didn’t think I was looking.”

“You’d lose your ruthless edge in a matter of weeks. You’ve already let yourself be distracted and put yourself at risk.”

“You’re as heartless as I am. We belong together. So, we share a bed and enjoy a bit of casual sex. There’d be no ties, on either of us.”

“And, the first time you sensed I was in danger?”

“You, in danger?” He grinned broadly. “I wasted good ammo trying to be done with you, and you never even got scratched.”

“Glad you finally got the point.”

“That you’re something special? The ultimate destructive weapon? The proverbial cash-cow?”

She didn’t appreciate the sarcasm, extracting herself from his grip. “Gee, thanks.”

“Sorry, kid. It’s just...”

“Don’t call me ‘kid’.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re older than me, but not by much. What should I call you? Lizzie? Beth?”

“The last fool who called me that is dead.”

His hands raised in apologetic surrender.

She mimicked the gesture, exposing her scarred palms.

Cusack blinked in horror. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I said I didn’t need a plane to fly, remember?”

“What...”

“Lightning.”

“Damn!”

She’d revealed too much, leaving her limited choices to resolve this conundrum: accompany him on his random journeys dictated by the contract of the moment or...

He seized her bicep, dragging her beneath the table as a hail of bullets shattered the plaster behind them.

“What the...” Mustang puffed.

Cusack burred, “Jasiewicz.”

“The Pole?”

“Correct.”

Everybody on the floor in the establishment - customers and staff - the sound of boots crunching broken glass raised shrieks and wails from terrified souls.

“You got the Glock?” Cusack hissed.

“You’re not gonna...”

The approach of the assailant precluded discussion. Mustang raised her t-shirt; he jerked it from the waistband and, without looking or aiming, began firing over the table top.

“No good, Cy,” came the thickly accented bass.

A second and third clip emptied, with none of the projectiles finding their target.

“For Pete’s sake, let me!” Mustang urged, rising.

Cusack tried to restrain her, unsuccessfully. Jasiewicz held a .357 Magnum, squeezing off one round at her head.

The bullet seemed to orbit her before returning to its source, piercing his chest. He dropped like a rock, his features frozen by shock.

“You saved my life, er...”

“Mustang.”

“Mustang?” he echoed.

“Long story.”

“We can... scope out a different restaurant, and I’ll be glad to listen.”

Sirens announced the approach of the authorities. “Good idea.”

Others barely moving, in fear of their existence, the couple slunk through the kitchen and out the rear door. They watched the investigation from across the piazza, two among many spectators.

“That’s twice you’ve done me a good turn,” Cusack muttered in her ear as an ambulance arrived to collect Jasiewicz’s body. “I owe you an eternal debt.”

The knife made a squishing noise when it penetrated his lung from the rear. He stiffened in agony; Mustang spun to see a furtive male attired in black reclaim the blade. She concentrated on supporting Cusack when his knees buckled, the thought requiring no more than a millisecond.

The assassin melted into a puddle, his clothes atop the gelatinous mound.

“Help me!” the dying man gurgled. “If you can raise the dead...”

“Would you be content to stay here with me, to give up your... career?”

Sheer determination amplified his “No!”

Conflicted emotions rent Mustang’s sanity. Yes, Cy Cusack qualified as handsome, intelligent. His outlook on life would never mesh with hers, and if she healed him now, he’d just die in pursuit of another contract months hence.

“There’s nothing I care to do,” she proclaimed, easing him onto a bench built into the wall overlooking the lush valley. “As they like to say in the churches hereabouts: God have mercy on you.”

Jostling a teen when she straightened, the girl glanced over and saw blood on her hands. She screamed, causing a ripple effect, with the crowd spinning like some highly-trained chorus line toward the deceased.

All the second Carabinieri squad found at the scene was Cusack, expired, a set of garments coated in an unidentifiable pulp and a blood-encrusted switchblade.

Mustang had vanished.

Or, better, she’d blended with the throng and edged toward an alley, meandering through the city until nightfall.

She collapsed on her bed after washing the dried red crust off her skin, staring at the ceiling. When she rolled left, a bulge in her jeans poked her. She dug in the pocket, feeling a small velveteen case.

Sitting upright, she examined the blue jeweler’s box. A lingering suspicion generated a reluctance to open it - an expertly wired explosive could kill her, completing Cusack’s chosen task.

Protected by the natural forces, however, she lifted the lid. A silver filigree chain bracelet lay within, a disk engraved with a pair of crossed pistols its lone adornment.

On the opposite side, tiny plain script read, “If only.”

Stupid men! Mustang lamented before flushing the gift down the toilet.