

The Mustang Chronicles:

Caged Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Never in her wildest dreams would Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea have imagined winter in Italy would be cold. Growing up, she’d endured sub-freezing temperatures between October and April on her father’s Montana horse ranch and, after a series of soul-warping events, the bizarre, chilly wetness of the Loch Ness region.

She recalled hearing the statement, “There are two seasons in Scotland: June and winter,” time and again during her exile there.

But in these southern climes, when summers could melt flesh off bone with searing heat, she shuffled - practically a popsicle - through Assisi’s Piazza del Comune, trying not to slip on icy paving stones as she made her way toward the Cathedral San Rufino.

Her normally auburn tresses transformed to a nondescript ebony, she dodged the attention of local Carabinieri who, unfortunately, liked to harass foreigners in the off-season. The contacts she relied upon to notify her of opportunities as a multi-lingual tour guide - shopkeepers near the Basilica Santa Chiara, mostly - warned her how ex-patriot Americans and others who took up year-round residence in the hillside city were unjustly suspected of all sorts of crimes, from petty theft to murder.

If only they knew about her power! she mused, right hand on the slick stone wall as she ascended a winding lane. They’d be flummoxed by the fact she spoke only English, but those she led among the historic sites had no difficulty comprehending her descriptions in their native tongue. Conversely, their questions were automatically translated by her brain.

Perhaps the only positive aspect of an unwanted bequest from her grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons.

Far too often, she’d used the affinity with nature - or, rather, misused it - to create chaos and even death.

Her sneaker slid precariously as she veered right at a narrow intersection; a full-sized vehicle, like a Cadillac or SUV, couldn’t even navigate what passed here for streets. Yet, a succession of compacts, including taxis, could fit between the buildings, forcing pedestrians to press themselves into the nearest recessed doorway to avoid being crushed.

“Signorina!” a high-pitched voice hailed her from behind.

Turning carefully, she recognized young Carlos, son of a proprietor whose acquaintance she’d made weeks after arriving in Assisi. “Buon giorno!”

“My papa wanted me to find you...”

She smiled as his panting generated puffs of steam. “Surely, there’s not a group wanting a tour on a day like this?”

“Oh, no, Signorina. He wanted me to tell you about the Three Kings festival this afternoon in Santa Maria degli Angeli...”

That’s when she remembered the date: January 6.

Her birthday.

“Oh, hell!”

““Scusa, Signorina?” wondered the curly-haired cherub.

“Nothing, Carlos. Thank your papa for me. I may go down for the festival, if the sun comes out and melts this damned ice.”

“It’s warmer in the valley, Signorina.”

“Thanks.”

A wind gust caught her as she traversed the hill between ancient structures; she tugged the strings of her parka hood tighter but, without a scarf, her neck remained exposed. She’d be glad of the heat generated by the her modest flat’s wood stove, if she didn’t end up with a broken leg on what equated to a slanted hockey rink.

Three flights of narrow stairs brought her to a perch above the Piazza San Rufino where she shed her coat and prepared a steaming mug of hot cocoa. Settled on a battered love seat, she watched clouds gather beyond the window, harbingers of another snow.

Her bones would welcome even a couple hours’ respite...

A dented coffee can in the cupboard above the kitchenette sink held a stash of Euros - tips from outings as far back as October. Some pilgrims to the city where St. Francis of Assisi lived in the 13th century were quite generous with their guides.

Others were deliberately stingy, as if they were owed her courtesy and knowledge simply because they traveled from their home country.

Mustang calculated she could afford to spend 100 Euros on a bit of fun, including a taxi down Mount Subasio to the enclave of St. Mary of the Angels, where the basilica she’d almost destroyed more than a decade earlier remained a bastion of faith for those of particular spiritual leanings.

The repurposed soccer training facility, that would pass in the States as a community center, offered shelter from the elements, with vendors displaying their wares for sale indoors. Face painting, food and music rounded out the event - a marvelous diversion for the transplanted American.

A sausage sandwich in hand, she occupied a bench in the midst of the fray, smiling as children ran hither and yon. She’d never participated in such innocent

games; her own parents kept their distance from her even at an early age, as if they suspected her rather odd destiny. Joe, her father, always referred to her as “Girl,” instead of by name. Her mother, Maggie, inherently seemed nervous when she was around.

That was even before her initial trip to Scotland at her maternal grandmother’s behest...

A blob of strawberry gelato landed with a splat! on her sneaker. A tot of four or five stared at the empty sugar cone, ready to burst into tears. Her mother retrieved her with profuse apologies, passing Mustang a stack of paper napkins to soak up the mess.

Only so much could be accomplished with these materials, as the treat’s stickiness would require soap and water to dissolve. She also needed to wash her hands after dumping the damp wad in a trash bin.

She spun from the metal container, scanning for a public toilet when she glimpsed a shaggy white head towering above the Italians.

“No way,” she mumbled, sidling toward the sign with an arrow pointing left.

A colorful jewelry exhibit caught her eye en route toward the exit, her skin still moist. She surveyed her middle finger where, for a brief period, a silver Triskelion ring had served as a symbol of balance, and an unshakable bond with the MacDonough brothers. She missed Glenn - her only constant friend in Scotland - and his brother, Billy, an aging comedian.

In fact, the white-haired figure she’d sighted reminded her of the latter.

He’d be off on another tour, probably, to Canada, New Zealand or other English-speaking countries where his observational style of humor kept the audience rolling in the aisles.

She’d give the rest of her money - and a fortune she could raise by traveling to Monte Carlo on a lightning bolt to gamble in the casinos - for him to regale her with his stories for just an hour.

She’d roared so hard during his show at the Inverness fair one autumn Saturday, she could barely breathe.

What delighted her even more: the Glaswegian laughing at his own ramblings.

She’d accepted his gift of the ring primarily because he entertained no ulterior motives by the gesture. She’d saved him from a Navajo Skinwalker, his gratitude sincere.

Few those she’d encountered since... acquiring her power of whom she held such a high opinion.

In fact, many of them were dead by her own devising.

A wall clock above the entrance showed 4:15 - and sunset came early. If she didn't hurry, she'd find herself wandering Assisi's byways in the dark.

Not ideal circumstances.

She twirled right, and her nose bounced off the duffel-coated chest of a tall individual who'd been admiring the necklaces and earrings over her shoulder.

"Sorry," she croaked, retreating two steps, glancing up at him.

"Nae harm done."

God, it *was* Billy MacDonough!

Those sparkling hazel eyes didn't recognize her, though, and a rush of dismay engulfed her.

Then, she realized he would've never expected to cross paths with her hundreds of miles from where they'd last interacted, as well as sporting a black mop.

"Oh, hell..."

That's all it took. Tentative lips twitched between his grey mustache and goatee; his rimless spectacles slid down his slender nose. "Elizabeth?"

"Aye." How easily she reverted to the Highland lingo.

He blinked repeatedly, as if waking from a dream. "What on earth..."

"I could ask the same question!"

"M' plane from Hong Kong had engine trouble and made an emergency landing in Rome last night. The airlines ha' nae idea when a replacement craft will be available, so I decided t' see the sights..."

"In this weather?"

"Oh, aye. The beauty o' old monuments blanketed in snow..." He clasped her hand and led her to the bench where she'd previously been sitting. "So, tell me, why are ye here?"

"I... live here now."

"That's nae possible! Ye were so happy at Boleskine..."

Mustang stared at the diminishing crowds. "When I knew you there, yes. Since then..."

"Aye, Glenn ha' written me aboot some o' the incidents..." He twisted a lock of her hair around his index finger. "And, what about *this*?"

"I blend in better this way."

"It dinnae suit ye."

"It suits me to keep a low profile."

He deliberated. "Aye, ye may be right." He rose, again entwining thick digits with hers. "Come wi' me."

“Where?”

“We’ll find a nice restaurant and ha’ dinner...”

The woman resisted. “I’ve got to get back...”

“Get back t’ what?” Smoldering orbs met hers. “Neither o’ us ha’ home or family that requires us...”

She detected a lament in his accented baritone and acquiesced.

Not many bistros in the region opened during the off-season, except those run for generations by experts in preparing pasta. MacDonough angled the chosen establishment’s stout patriarch toward a corner table and ordered a bottle of chianti while they waited

“Tell me everythin’,” he insisted, nudging the straight-backed wooden chair beside her.

She fiddled with the silverware. “I’d... rather not.”

“Who... do ye confide in here?”

Her chin dipped. “No one.”

He stroked her chapped knuckles. “Oh, ye poor wee bairn!” Then, he noticed. “What happened t’ the ring?”

“I’m sorry to say, it fell off in the woods while I was riding the Arabian...”

“Ach, that magnificent beastie! Did ye sell it before ye...”

“I... didn’t have a chance. My departure was rather... sudden. Denis, your nephew, saved me from the clutches of the FBI...”

“Good lad, that.”

“Aye.”

“Ye are safe?”

“Aye.”

Bowls of pasta delivered, they fell silent while tasting the delicately spiced sauce. MacDonough washed his down with a gulp of red wine; Mustang sipped from her goblet.

“Do ye live comfortably?” he prodded. “Is your house as spacious as Boleskine?”

“Oh, no. I have a little apartment...”

“‘Tis shameful, when ye should ha’ all the luxuries...”

“I have a bed, a bathroom, and a kitchen. That’s all I need, really.”

He set aside his fork. “Come wi’ me. There’s plenty o’ room in m’ house...”

She patted his arm. “Thanks, but no, Billy. I can’t... ever...”

How she wanted him to amuse her, yet he’d brought tears to her eyes with a most generous suggestion.

“Ye are a fugitive, then?”

“Aye.”

He flipped her wrist and studied her scarred palm. “These dinnae heal?”

“I’ve... re-injured them so many times, the damage is permanent.”

“Ach, ye wee lass! There’s so much I dinnae know about ye...”

“In my case, ignorance improves your chances of staying alive.”

“Such an dire confession!”

Mustang resumed eating, intent on changing the subject. “What about you? Where did you perform this time out?”

“South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong...”

“How long have you been gone from Scotland?”

“Three months.”

“Wow.”

“‘Twas one o’ m’ shorter tours, actually. In my prime, I’d be on the road for six months or more at a go.”

“You were wise to never marry.”

He dabbed his mouth - and whiskers - with the creased linen. “Depends on one’s perspective. I ha’ been free t’... love who I pleased, when I pleased, wi’out any strings But, I would ha’ liked t’ be a husband and father.”

“Have you considered retiring?”

“T’ what end?”

“Find a woman, settle down... You’re not too old to... well...” Mustang bit her lip. To her own ears, she sounded like she was proposing to the much older man.

MacDonough smiled, but only for an instant.

A drone of sirens had commenced in the distance, steadily converging on their location. The couple stiffened simultaneously, as restaurant staff left their posts to gaze through an oversized front window.

“Ye are nae... wanted...” ventured the comedian.

“God, I hope not.”

Positioned near the glass, the pair saw dozens of men sprinting in all directions, Carabinieri on their heels. Mustang surmised their point of origin: an abandoned factory two blocks along the street.

Possibly, a drug smuggling operation, human trafficking depot...

When Billy MacDonough squeezed her forearm, she tensed.

“Oh, hell!”

II

“What’s wrong, Billy?” Mustang whispered as they returned to their table, the excitement of the police chase soon dwindling.

He sank on the chair, dazed.

The restaurant owner migrated from the kitchen, streaming apologies.

“This disruption... your pasta is cold now. Allow me to provide you with a suitable dessert to compensate...”

Distracted, the woman responded, “Tiramisu.”

“Si, Signora.”

She wasn’t going to bother correcting his misconception about her relationship with MacDonough.

“Billy, what did you see?” Their prior interaction confirmed he was sensitive to the likes of fairies from Scottish lore and other ethereal beings. Had something... been out there with the suspects being pursued...

He swallowed deliberately before speaking. “‘Twas m’self when I was young, maybe twenty or so.”

“One of the guys running?”

“Aye.”

“Were you ever in a position to be wanted by the police?”

He guffawed, “Oh, aye! A bunch o’ us would go campin’ at the weekend... well, ye remember those hippies on Glenn’s land?”

“Aye.”

“Much the same.”

Mind-altering substances of an illegal sort, she mused.

Still, to project himself onto a scene in the middle of Italy, decades later...

Or, had one of the miscreants resembled him so closely, his mind made a subliminal connection?

They consumed the concoction of lady fingers and other delectable ingredients; MacDonough paid the bill, calmer as the sweetness eased his nerves. Emerging into overcast night, they contemplated trash swirling in a miniature cyclone.

“Where are you staying?” queried Mustang.

“I ha’ nae clue. I’d rented a car and just started drivin’...”

“There are hotels here, or up in Assisi. There should be plenty of rooms available.”

“Let me drive ye home, and I’ll worry about it then.”

She advised, “Best to park outside the gates and walk...”

Which is what MacDonough did. He would have climbed the stairs to Mustang's flat, but she adamantly refused. At his age...

"Will I see ye tomorrow?" he hinted.

"I can meet you for breakfast in the Piazza del Comune at ten."

"Aye." He kissed her forehead. "Good night, dear."

She'd recommended two upscale hotels that catered to affluent tourists; she trusted he'd find his way to one of them.

The wood stove needed attention when she trudged over the threshold; dying embers would, at least, spark the kindling she inserted, followed by a pair of substantial logs to burn until morning.

She couldn't sleep, though. Not that she had appointed herself protector of Assisi and its environs - including Santa Maria degli Angeli, where the saint popularly known as the Little Poor Man had dwelt among the lepers near a tiny chapel that his followers enshrined within a massive church after his death - but if crimes that attracted the Carabinieri occurred, how would businesses relying on visitors from other countries be impacted?

Or, her own wallet, since the Euros slipped into her mitt by grateful pilgrims during the warmer months kept her in room and board?

Curiosity aroused, she planned to fulfill her obligation to Billy MacDonough, send him on his way, and meander down to the town near the railroad, discovering the secrets of that decrepit compound.

"Is that wise, Signorina?" came the voice from the gloom.

She grunted, "No."

"Then, why embark on such a futile mission?" asked the very tangible St. Francis.

"Because others - law-abiding citizens - are at risk, and I can stop whatever... whoever..."

"Since coming to Italy, you've made it a policy to live quietly. Why, abruptly, revert to your impulsive tendencies?"

She sniffed. "Maybe I'm bored."

"That's no reason..." The emaciated figure could barely be distinguished in the shadows of the tiny bedroom. "Or, are your emotions churned up by the proximity of Billy MacDonough?"

"You... don't like him?"

"I implied nothing of the kind, Signorina. He is a man of integrity, as you've rightly determined. What he may or may not have seen..."

“What *did* he see, Francis?” She righted herself on the lumpy twin mattress. “A hallucination of himself as a teenager, on the lam for assorted misdemeanors... or something - someone - real?”

“Well you know, I cannot divulge...”

“Well I know, you *won't* divulge any pertinent insights, dammit. From our conversation, though, I can make a reasonable guess... In his travels, making love to assorted women, he sired a child who strongly resembles him and is involved in whatever escapades took place in that old factory.”

Francis smiled, impressed. “Exceptionally shrewd, Signorina.”

“I’ll take that as a yes, then.”

“You intend to reunite the father with his son?”

She shrugged. “Hell if I know. A lot would depend on who the kid’s mother is, and if Billy cared about her at all...”

“As he cares for you.”

“That’s neither here nor there.”

Assisi’s renowned saint clucked his tongue. “Do not try to deceive me, Signorina, or yourself. You were quite... brazen in your approach over dinner, and crave the relief from your inner turmoil he is capable of providing.”

“Bullshit! He makes me laugh. Is that a sin by your standards?”

Francis dissipated without further comment.

Mustang flopped on the pillows, annoyed.

Bleak daylight signaling dawn, she showered and dressed in a brown flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers, pulling on her parka for the trek to the city’s central square. As she tucked ebony strands inside the fur-trimmed hood, she recalled the haircut MacDonough gave her after Scottish fae solicited lengths of auburn to be incorporated into a magickal barrier erected around their fairy mound.

Frankly, his gentle ministrations would be appreciated in the absence of a trained stylist. Six years without a decent trim was far too long.

Maybe, if she invited him to the apartment after breakfast - taking the stairs incrementally - they could extend their discussion of his amorous escapades in Europe while he made use of the scissors from the kitchen junk drawer.

“Did ye rest well?” he greeted as she led him to the Gran Caffè bakery, where they could browse delicious pastries and coffee.

“Actually, no. You?”

“Nae. I ha’ ne’er been able to accustom m’self t’ beds on the Continent. Too hard, too soft... and the pillows...” He threw up his hands in despair.

“I’m so sorry.” Their order on a plastic tray, they selected scrolled wrought iron chairs at a round table in the otherwise empty establishment. “Under other circumstances...”

“Aye?”

“It’s just... I had a thought about what happened last night.”

“Oh, aye?”

She explained her - now ridiculous sounding - deduction, before biting her lip and averting her gaze in embarrassment.

MacDonough didn’t scold her for such bluntness. “There might be some logic t’ it, after all,” he acknowledged. “T’ m’ shame, though, I dinnae keep dates or names o’ m’... partners in a diary.”

“Would it be likely that’s what you saw, though?” Mustang pressed.

He smirked. “Oh, aye. Lust overrode logic sometimes, shaggin’ wi’out protection...”

Mustang shuddered, the subject not to her liking on the best of days. MacDonough included such topics in his performances on stage, and worse. His detractors chastised him - in public and via the media - for his crudeness, accusing him of negatively influencing an impressionable generation.

He rarely lashed out; she’d read about one such debacle during his sold-out stint in London, on a scrap of newsprint packed in the box of groceries from the Dores market delivered bi-weekly to Boleskine House.

The only updates about the outside world she received, not owning a phone, computer, radio or television.

When confronted by a fundamentalist evangelical minister about the subject matter and preponderance of expletives in his anecdotes, Billy had retorted, “If ‘fuck’ is the worst the weans say after listenin’ t’ m’ stuff, ye should be damned grateful. Ye should be more concerned aboot the drug dealers they meet outside their schools, the guns, the racism and hatred o’ those who are different than aboot anything that comes outta m’ mouth, ye right numpty.”

Of course, Mustang had to replace the dashes, because the editor printed the four-letter word as “f--k,” but she had no doubt what it meant.

“What if we paid a call on the local constabulary and viewed the mug shots o’ the lads they were tryin’ t’ arrest?” suggested MacDonough.

“Not me, Billy.”

His head tilted slightly left. “Then, ye *are* wanted...”

“There *are* some in the States - and other countries - who’d like to get hold of me.”

“Ye poor dear.” He rubbed powdered sugar from his cheeks, missing a spot on his chin.

Mustang reached across and dabbed it lightly with her napkin.

He kissed her fingertips. “Ye could do wi’ a haircut.”

“Precisely what I was thinking,” she chuckled.

“Right.” He rose. “Let’s go.”

The sun peeked through ominous clouds as they ascended the deserted lane to the Piazza San Rufino. From beneath the cathedral’s bell tower, the sound of running footsteps echoed between stone walls; the couple had to jump aside as an agile youth, wild hair a spectrum of colors, hurdled a parked Fiat and barreled past them, ducking around a corner as cries of “Thief!” wafted on the breeze.

“That’s him!” MacDonough bellowed, drawing away from Mustang.

She chided, “You won’t catch him, Billy.”

“But...”

“Trust me.”

Removing his spectacles, he gazed down at her; two sets of hazel eyes transmitted unspoken truths. Arm in arm, they continued to her flat.

When brushing her own hair, Mustang Duryea fought the tangles, making the act an outright chore. Billy MacDonough’s technique - perhaps because he’d endeavored not to upset his younger brother and sister as he manipulated the scissors decades prior - amounted to a tender massage of her scalp, relaxing her troubled soul.

She could count on her fingers how many occasions she’d felt so at ease.

“This is better than any birthday present I’ve ever been given,” she let slip, viewing the results in the bathroom mirror.

“Birthday?”

“Yesterday, actually.”

“Why dinnae ye...”

“I don’t... celebrate...”

“Ye should.” He set aside the scissors and scanned the tiny space for a broom. “We *shall*.”

“Don’t you have to get back to Rome for your flight...”

“The earliest available is a booking on Sunday.”

Through clenched teeth, “Oh, aye.”

“Do ye mind me batherin’ ye this way?”

“You’re no bother, Billy. You’re a blessing.”

“Right. We’ll get cleaned up, go to dinner and a movie...”

She snickered, “Only if you like Italian language films.”

“Ach, nothin’ in English in these parts?”

Her expertly crafted, shoulder-length style swished when she shook her head.

“Then, we’ll take a drive in the moonlight.”

If the sky cleared, she added interiorly. Or, poke around that mysterious factory in search of a would-be MacDonough heir.

“I’ll meet ye below at five,” he pledged, jerking his tan duffel coat over a red polo shirt and jeans and striding out the door.

Mustang didn’t own much in the way of nice clothes; she’d left the few fancy outfits her mother bought in a musty Montana bedroom closet, and the rest in Scotland, given her hasty departure. A blue collared dress shirt and black slacks would be adequate...

MacDonough cut quite the dashing figure in a tailored grey suit, white mane cascading down his spine. She steered him to an inexpensive café, ordering antipasto, wedding soup, seafood and pasta.

The moon did peek through wispy clouds as they finished the meal, so they navigated winding lanes to the lot where MacDonough’s rented Toyota stood alone. Down a steep incline to the valley, the car stopped at an intersection near the deteriorated industrial park in Santa Maria degli Angeli, lights glinting through shattered casements.

“What goes on there, do ye think?” wondered MacDonough.

His passenger responded, “I think we need to investigate.”

The comedian glared at her. “Why?”

“There’ve been fires that ravaged entire complexes, set by homeless folk trying to keep warm. Historic landmarks have been destroyed...”

“So, ye are the fire marshal now?”

“You don’t have to come.”

The compact veered toward the curb. “I’m nae lettin’ ye go in alone!”

“Good man.”

An eight-foot chain link fence around the property presented no challenge for Mustang. She didn’t even need to flick her wrist before the heavy-duty padlock opened and tumbled into the dirt.

“If I dinnae know better, I’d swear I smoked some seriously good gear and ‘twas all a figment o’ m’ imagination,” MacDonough hissed as the gate swung inward on creaking hinges.

“It’s dead easy - for me, anyway.”

“Aye, better dead easy than dead.”

She preceded him along a cracked cement walkway, snorting, “You’ve said that before.”

“Ha’ I?”

“Last time we...”

“Oh, aye. I ha’ said it a lot o’er the years.”

“Along with the swear words?”

“Aye.”

A former security shack, by the vague outline in the dimness, abutted against the bricks near double doors. Mustang raised her hand to push aside rusty steel panels, when two sets of arms reached from the hut and seized MacDonough’s biceps.

“Elizabeth!” he screeched before disappearing into the structure.

She froze. “Oh, hell!”

III

Carabinieri babbled at Billy MacDonough in rapid Italian. Transfixed, he neither understood nor replied to what must’ve been grave allegations.

Three grown men stuffed in the corrugated shanty exceeded its capacity, and the welded seams split, tumbling on the ground.

Only through Mustang’s instinctive reflexes did the slanted roof not crush the trio, instead lofted clear to the fence line on a microburst of wind.

“Hush, you idiots!” she gushed at the befuddled uniformed officers, who heard her in their native tongue. “You’ve got the wrong man!”

“He may have dyed his hair, but we’ve had a squad surveilling him all day,” trumpeted the sergeant.

“Then, they’re a squad of *idiots!*” Without hesitating, she wrenched the duo away from MacDonough, yanking a wallet from his hip pocket and passport from inside his suit jacket. “Is this the name on that warrant in your coat?”

They examined the documents, muttering about forgeries, then admitted their mistake. “We still must take him to headquarters, process his fingerprints and verify his identity.”

“‘Tis a violation of m’ rights!” objected the comedian.

Mustang concurred. “Damn straight!”

Only to find herself restrained by another member of the cadre.

“Don’t make me angry,” she growled. “I do awful things when I’m angry...”

MacDonough's terrified expression spoke volumes. He'd witnessed her decimate the Skinwalker who'd escaped confinement in the Scottish countryside after they'd first met, and couldn't be sure such horrors wouldn't be repeated.

The foundation beneath their shoes jolted two meters left. Mortar and dust from displaced materials rained upon them and, the Carabinieri's jaws agape, drifted into their mouths, causing them to cough and choke.

That was enough for Mustang to shove her companion indoors.

"Is it safe?" he heaved, their surroundings pitch black.

A diffused glow illuminated the path forward. "Sure."

"Is that your doin'?"

"Nope. There are others here - the ones those flatfoots *should* be arresting, instead of innocent people."

"Aye, we saw the light from the road..."

"Exactly."

Creeping into the bowels of the edifice, a cacophony of shouts and oaths grew louder. The sound of rats scuttling from room to room brought Mustang up short; she suppressed a scream.

"Are ye okay, dear?" murmured MacDonough.

She wheezed an uncertain, "Aye."

"Tell me: how were ye able t' understand those... bottles when they were nae yellin' in English?"

"Bottles?"

"Police," he clarified. "Rhyming slang. Bottle and stopper means copper."

Her brain definitely wouldn't translate such idioms. "This is neither the time nor the place for me to answer."

"Promise me ye will, once we get this sorted."

"I promise."

A peeling, warped door hung askew ahead. Deafening noise penetrated the metal, and what must've been an overhead bulb created weird patterns through the gaps as objects moved beneath it. Mustang peered through a waist-high rift; MacDonough positioned himself with a view through a fissure higher on the surface.

The activities beyond sickened them both.

A freestanding prison cell in the middle of broken machinery held two sweaty combatants, hammering each other with their bare fists. In one of the classic films Mustang favored as a teenager - *His Girl Friday*, starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell - a similar set had been used to house a prisoner awaiting

execution. Amongst a grubby crowd, money changed hands as bets were placed, and spectators yowled encouragement to their champion.

“Oh, God!” exhaled MacDonough, removing his spectacles to dab perspiration from his brow.

Mustang sputtered, “Well, that explains the police interest in this gang.” She straightened, back muscles cramping. “You think they’d have security to warn them about a raid...”

That’s when a behemoth lifted them both off their feet by their collars and rammed them through the door.

The action ceased for a fraction of a second while the horde assessed these intruders. Then, the decibel level escalated afresh, the trespassers dragged toward a rotund, loudly attired, cigar-chomping promoter.

“You a couple of informants?” he spat.

Mustang squinted at MacDonough. “Is he speaking English?”

“German, I think.”

“What the fuck’s goin’ on?” snapped the boss. “You two crazy?”

A skull audibly cracked when it crashed against the iron grid, and the blood-splattered loser slid to the floor. Howls of rage reverberated from those who’d wagered their cash at 10-to-1 odds...

“You’re next.” A pudgy digit poked MacDonough’s chest. “We need some new blood in the cage.”

Mustang wedged herself between the men. “You’re the one who’s crazy! Those guys are what, twenty, thirty years old? He wouldn’t last two minutes...”

Rheumy blue orbs appraised her lean figure and disgusted scowl. “You gonna take his place?”

“Aye.”

MacDonough lurched toward her, hindered by the bouncer. His glasses smashed on the concrete. “You cannae do this, Elizabeth!”

Her skill in Wing Chun unknown to the Glaswegian, how could he suspect she might actually win a bout against...

His son?

Mustang estimated MacDonough’s age as 72, albeit quite fit. Subtract 50 years, and his youthful self, stripped to the waist to reveal a trim physique, flexed glistening muscles near the cell door. A wavy mane that might have been dipped in different colored inks, or sprayed with an assortment of dyes by sightless beauticians, flowed free.

In a weird way, it might've been intriguing to watch father battle son, but Mustang couldn't allow the old man to be mercilessly pummeled for a mob's entertainment.

She'd need him to make her laugh, if they escaped this latest in her long line of reckless catastrophes.

Hazel eyes dilated and bloodshot - had the lad partaken of illegal drugs? she pondered - he probably wouldn't feel the blows she'd inflict on him, which meant he could be badly injured and not realize it until too late. If whatever substance he'd imbibed had a numbing effect, he'd be that much easier to knock out, however, saving them both a lot of pain.

Evidently, no rules governed these bouts. She was summarily thrust inside the cage, crashing against vertical bars and immediately set upon by her opponent as an oversized key locked them inside.

She ducked the haymaker and backhanded him with a strength augmented by her powers.

The kid crumpled in a heap in less than a minute.

Forty throats dried up, stunned speechless.

Mustang squatted next to the unconscious form as the cell door opened of its own accord. In that same instant, Carabinieri burst through entrances on three sides of the improvised auditorium, weapons unholstered.

"Oh, hell!"

Her right hand encircled the lad's wrist, and she extended her left toward MacDonough, who'd joined her, nursing his broken spectacles. He grabbed her fingers, thinking she needed assistance...

"Don't move!" she instructed. "Don't speak!"

He couldn't resist. "What the fuck?"

"Trust me."

Absolutely immobile, the trio were ignored by a uniformed platoon rounding up those under the influence, suspected of underaged drinking - or supplying minors with alcohol - illegal gambling and a host of other felonies. When the last boots departed the scene, Mustang inhaled a lungful of pungent air.

"How... is it ye rendered us invisible?" demanded MacDonough.

"One of the perks of my... condition."

"And, this wean? 'Tis hospital for him."

The woman smiled. "I didn't hurt him that much. He just wasn't up to par, thanks to whatever the trainer slipped into his water bottle. The bookies fixed the fight so the dolts betting on him to trounce me would lose big. If the cops hadn't

shown up, their scheme would've been exposed, and *they'd* have been thrown in the cage for a fatal beating."

"Oh, my dear..." MacDonough wrapped her in a soothing embrace, and she didn't mind one iota. "But, if he does nae get proper care..."

"He's already had it. He'll wake up none the wiser in a few minutes."

"At which time, we'll..."

"Make ourselves scarce. The Carabinieri may be fools, but it'll be essential they gather evidence to convict the organizers of this ring."

"Oh, aye."

Groans accompanied fluttering eyelids and stretching limbs as the defeated boxer awoke. "What... where... Who are you?"

"What language?" Mustang asked MacDonough.

"Spanish."

"Geez. International lot, eh?"

"'Twould make sense, if your speculation is accurate. I spent many a holiday in Majorca..."

"Oh, hell." This exchange would be difficult without additional obstacles; a silent command permitted both men's brains to automatically translate the words.

"Don't ignore me!" squawked the prone individual.

She offered him a hand up. "Sorry. What's your name?"

"I asked you first."

Mustang introduced herself simply as Elizabeth, and pointed to MacDonough. "This is Billy."

"Funny," he sneered. "My name is Guillermo."

"William in Spanish."

MacDonough interspersed, "What's your mother's name?"

"I have no mother," stated the lad. "She died giving birth to me."

"Ye dinnae know her name?"

"Felicia Martinez. The nuns who ran the orphanage told me she was a very talented Flamenco dancer who succumbed to temptation."

The comedian's chin drooped.

"And, your father?" probed Mustang.

"He... never married my mother. I know nothing of him."

She addressed MacDonough. "Was I correct?"

Wistfully, the elder confessed, "Even if I had kept a diary, I would nae consult it, for the memory is as vivid as if 'twere yesterday. A savage beauty, we spent two weeks in the sun..."

Still weak from the altercation, Guillermo's knees buckled; Mustang caught him around the waist and deposited him on a folding chair.

"Is there any water..." she asked.

Head lowered, he remarked, "None I would dare drink."

From his duffel coat pocket, MacDonough extracted a silver flask. "Ha' a wee nip o' this t' fortify ye."

A wee nip amounted to a prolonged chug before Guillermo surrendered the embossed container. "Gracias."

"We'd better get out of here," urged Mustang. "Think you can make it?"

"I have... nowhere to go."

"Ye are wi' us, lad," MacDonough pledged. "We ha' a lot t' discuss."

He briefly contemplated his damaged lenses, repaired in an instant and propped anew on his nose. A nod of appreciation to the woman, she retrieved her parka; Guillermo scooped his belongings off the floor. They groped their way through murky corridors to a crumbling loading dock, then skirted the foundry's perimeter to the rented car.

Mustang hesitated near the front quarter panel, smirking.

"What's wrong?" MacDonough puzzled.

"I remember that sweet red Jag convertible."

The comedian caught the insinuation. A two-seat vehicle would've presented another set of issues...

In tandem, they maneuvered Guillermo into the back; Mustang slid onto faded upholstery beside him.

MacDonough, behind the wheel, speculated, "Where do we go from here?"

"Your hotel, if you don't mind," replied Mustang.

"Oh, aye."

A short trek, three miles, but hairpin turns and cold temperatures slowed their journey as the potential for black ice made the surface treacherous. Guillermo, frightened, huddled against Mustang like a child clinging to his mother, spewing curses. The dynamic swiftly escalated into a more intimate scenario, as his hands worked their way beneath her unzipped jacket and his mouth sought hers.

Not only because Mustang sensed Billy MacDonough monitoring them in the rear view mirror - when his attention to the road was paramount - but because she'd dealt with many men wanting her that way, she grunted an ultimatum: "Unless you have a death wish, bugger off."

Guillermo didn't halt his advances, mumbling between kisses to her neck, "You are his? How can a *viejo* like him satisfy someone so full of life?"

"Five seconds, dude."

“All I’d need is five minutes to show you what a real man can do.”

“Four, three, two...”

Just as he smothered her lips with his, an electric current shot through his frame. The shock hurled him against the door, the arm rest jammed awkwardly into his spine.

Guillermo groaned piteously, then sagged forward. “You bitch!”

“Consider yourself lucky, lad,” MacDonough barked from the front as the Toyota cruised into the empty parking lot beyond Assisi’s walls. “Ye must learn t’ respect the wee lassies, or face the consequences.”

The miscreant dragged from the car, firm hands propelled him along quiet lanes toward the hotel. Up marble stairs to a posh suite, he sank on the leather sofa and accepted a generous dram of Glenlivet 12-year-old Scotch.

“You bring your own?” Mustang quipped, inspecting the half-full bottle.

“Aye. There’s ne’er a guarantee good liquor can be found where I travel.” MacDonough drained his glass in one gulp and settled in the matching armchair, loosening his tie and whisking dirt from his suit.

Mustang maneuvered a hand-carved oak chair from the writing desk to the opposite side of the coffee table.

“What is this, an interrogation?” Guillermo bawled.

The woman retorted, “With that attitude, we’ll get nowhere.”

“Calm, calm, Elizabeth,” counseled MacDonough. “The lad’s been through a traumatic ordeal, and has nae understandin’ o’ what his future may hold.”

Guillermo’s hazel eyes narrowed. “I don’t know who you are, or why you’re hassling me, but I’m done running errands for thugs, taking the rap for cowards, being forced to fight then screwed out of my share of the purse...”

“Oh, aye, lad. That’s all finished.”

Another tirade caught in his throat, he gawked at MacDonough. “Eh?”

The comedian smiled, straight white teeth flashing between his untrimmed grey mustache and goatee. “Elizabeth, the lad will need proof...”

“A trip to Rome for a DNA test is my only thought on the matter,” she ventured.

“Aye, ‘tis logical.”

Guillermo squirmed on the cushions. “DNA test? Proof? Proof of what?”

“That I’m your father, wee Billy.”

Mustang chortled at the moniker MacDonough bestowed on the Spanish scruff, who actually stood - at minimum - five inches taller...

Her reverie was interrupted by the door banging against the wall, six Carabinieri bursting in with firearms leveled at the occupants.

“You’re under arrest!” they chorused.

IV

“Oh, hell...” Mustang Duryea sputtered.

The Carabinieri sergeant signaled with his revolver. “You will stand and place your hands behind your heads...”

Guillermo, desperate, glanced from Billy MacDonough to the woman; she recognized the flight instinct behind his panic. The Scotsman, for his part, waited on Mustang to comply with the police order.

She didn’t.

She couldn’t.

Or, more accurately, wouldn’t.

“If you do not obey, you will be shot as escaping criminals...” bellowed a skittish corporal.

Her back to them, Mustang scoffed, “Charged with what crime?”

“Illegal gambling, money laundering, assault, murder...”

“Grasping at straws, are we?”

Two athletic officers clamped their mitts on her shoulders, intent on removing her from the lodgings.

Pressure on her clavicle, she grimaced at MacDonough. “You guys should probably close your eyes.”

Neither, however, did so.

They witnessed the full extent of her power - and she wasn’t even riled.

Liquified pistols scalded their owners’ flesh, dripping onto their boots and the floorboards.

Uniform trousers burst into flames, causing the men to leap about like rabid kangaroos.

Mustang never moved a muscle.

“Impressive, dear,” praised MacDonough. “But, ‘tis nae a bit...”

“Over the top?”

Guillermo croaked, “I’m trippin’ on the acid!”

Teeth clenched, Mustang contented herself with knowing what drugs the young man had taken. She’d healed his physical injuries, but hadn’t addressed the poison in his blood stream...

One enterprising Carabinieri commandeered a fire extinguisher from the bathroom and doused his comrades in foam.

“Ah, stealing my thunder!” mocked Mustang.

The red canister exploded, shards of metal contained within an invisible sphere, shredding the scorched rug.

“Aye, that’ll cost me!” joked MacDonough.

She countered, “Don’t you think me capable of cleaning up my own mess?”

His head cocked slightly; he blinked affirmation.

The petrified squad fled down the stairs, stumbling over each other.

Their supervisor, posted beside a black van in the piazza below, marveled at the disorder when they emerged from the hotel. He hustled them into the windowless compartment and transported them to the Ospedale Assisi for physical and psychological evaluation.

Mustang, MacDonough and Guillermo observed the scuffle from the balcony. The adults chuckled heartily, the young man joining in without comprehending the humor.

“I’m that glad I watched,” MacDonough acknowledged. “I ha’ suspected these many years ye were... suppressin’ the extent of...”

“What, besting the Skinwalker wasn’t sufficient...”

He enveloped her in an enthusiastic hug, whispering in her ear, “They’ll send a battalion next.”

“That’s why you should go. Now.”

“For our sake, or theirs?”

“Billy, I could wipe every living creature off the planet if I wished. Doesn’t that... curdle your blood?”

“Nae, lass. I know ye would nae gi’ in t’ such an impulse. Ye ha’ a tender heart.” He brushed ebony strands off her forehead and planted a kiss on her cheek before waving Guillermo toward the exit. “Come now, wee Bill. We’re off.”

Mustang caught his jacket sleeve as he latched his suitcase, a tear trickling along her nose. “I’ll miss your stories... I wanted so much to laugh the way we did in Inverness...”

“So we shall, dear. My flight’s nae ‘til Sunday, mind. Once I get wee Bill sorted, I’ll be on your doorstep wi’ tales o’ m’ travels...”

“Promise?”

“Aye. ‘Twill be dead easy.”

Still confused, Guillermo accompanied MacDonough; from her vantage point at the open air railing, Mustang tracked them through the square in the direction of the parking lot. Then, she focused on debris scattered around the sitting room, the decor restored to its original ambience before she withdrew.

A definite plus to this dilemma: the Carabinieri had not seen her face. Any description they circulated about her would fit thousands of Italians - slender, mid-height, long black hair.

She even dismissed the notion of returning her tresses to their true auburn shade.

The jaunt to her flat took her through the Piazza del Comune, where a full contingent of Carabinieri congregated outside their headquarters.

They'd be working extra hours until they captured the elusive suspects, she presumed.

An absolute impossibility.

Not that she didn't respect law enforcement agencies - those who operated within their legitimate mandates. The tendency to target innocent parties griped her... she'd been pestered by their ilk for more than a decade.

Those whom she cherished shouldn't be harassed, either. Billy MacDonough's name vanished from the hotel's register...

The Carabinieri, coffee cups in hand to ward off the nocturnal chill, didn't notice her pass the dormant, lion-adorned fountain and ascend toward Piazza San Rufino.

She fought the wood stove to restart the fire; at times like this, she would have preferred an electric heater or reliable furnace.

"The joys of living in centuries-old domiciles, Signorina," declared Francis from the shadows.

"Yeah, but you had servants to perform these duties."

"I never..."

"You're saying, with the money your father made selling fabrics to the nobles, he let you get your hands dirty?"

"Well, I..."

"Later, after you... realized other aspects of life were more important, you earned your callouses," she commented.

"Si." He presented her with a log. "You have come to know me well."

Flames crackling, she rose and moved to the kitchenette. "As you know me." Hot cocoa would thaw her before bed. "Except, you keep secrets that should be shared..."

"Like whether Guillermo is Billy's son?"

"A good example."

"You both noticed the strong resemblance..."

"That could be... entirely coincidental."

"He admitted knowing the boy's mother."

“In the biblical sense.”

“Si.”

“And the DNA test...”

“Will not happen.”

Mustang flinched, the spoon stirring sugar into steaming milk causing liquid to splash her arm. “What!”

Feeble knocking prompted her to switch off the burner and shuffle to the door.

Francis had vacated the premises.

Billy slouched against the jamb, spectacles gone, clothes shredded, bloodied and bruised.

She gripped him by the waist and delivered him to the love seat, swinging his feet onto a kitchen chair jostled into place.

“What the hell...”

“Wee Bill... the devil...”

“What did he do?”

“We chatted pleasantly as we walked and, when we reached the car park, he offered t’ drive. When I gave him the keys, he punched me. I fell, and he kicked me repeatedly, robbed me and stole the car.”

“Oh, hell!” Mustang spun toward the window. A gust of wind rattled the casement and, miles distant, a rented Toyota stalled on the highway, initiating a 23 car pile-up and a major explosion.

“Ye nae...” MacDonough struggled to breathe. “Oh, God...”

She knelt on the floorboards and studied his anguished mein. “How bad...”

“Too much for a man m’ age.”

“You should’ve gone to the hospital, rather than come here.”

“I promised ye...”

She moaned, “This isn’t going to make me laugh.”

“Gi’ me tonight, and I’ll keep m’ word.”

“You mean, you want me to heal you?”

“Aye. A wee miracle...”

Sinking on her heels, she trembled. “What, then?”

“I ha’ lived a good life...”

“No!”

The outburst’s volume shook every fixture in the surrounding piazza.

MacDonough clutched Mustang’s fingers. “Please, dear.”

His chest stopped heaving, gashes on his temple and arms mended without scarring, and his broken hip knitted once more.

“Better?” she prodded.

“Oh, aye. Much.”

Consumed by regret, Mustang straightened and finished preparing the hot cocoa - fortunately, enough to fill two ceramic mugs. They sipped the sweet liquid, staring at each other...

“Australia is one of my favorite countries, but, m’ God, the creatures...” he began a narrative that continued until dawn.

Mustang was the one whose lungs ached by the private performance’s conclusion. MacDonough laughed with her - it delighted him to see her enjoying herself after the rigors of the past few days, and his own interpretation of people’s behavior tickled his fancy.

She prepared a breakfast of eggs and bacon, the last items, along with the jug of milk, in her refrigerator. Toast from a loaf of home-made bread completed the meal, and they ate heartily.

Mustang begged nature to grant this gem of a human being another week, month...

“‘Tis m’ heart, dear,” he confided, exhausted. “The doctors implanted a pacemaker three years ago, but ‘tis just a wee muscle, and gi’es oot eventually. The knocking about wee Bill ga’ me...”

“He’s paid for that, Billy.”

“Wi’ his life?”

“Aye. Or, a great deal of agony.”

“Ye should nae ha’...” MacDonough lamented quietly.

“No son should treat his father so.”

“‘Tis true, but how ha’ many fathers mistreat their bairns...”

Mustang recalled stories Billy had told her during their encounter in Scotland. He’d endured a rough upbringing, which sparked an ability to transform horrific memories into comedy, by which he’d uplifted countless thousands on a global scale.

She couldn’t forget her own father’s shortcomings, either.

Her lips kissed Billy’s hand, wetting it with salty droplets.

He stroked her tangled mop. “I ‘twould love t’ see your bonnie red hair once more.”

No word, no gesture, just a sudden alteration of color.

“Aye. So much like a Scottish lass.” He dug in his trouser pocket. “I ha’ something for ye.”

A small jeweler’s box popped open: a silver Triskelion ring - similar to the one he’d bought her at the Inverness fair - nestled in blue velvet.

“We share an unbreakable bond.”

She whimpered, “You, me and Glenn.”

“Aye.” He slipped it on her left middle finger, then cradled her hands between his. “Ye ha’ brought joy t’ me, Elizabeth, and taken me on nae wee adventure. I shall ne’er forget ye.”

He struggled to rise from the love seat.

“Stay,” she burred.

“Ye dinnae need a dead body in your flat.”

“It would be an... honor and a privilege to be with you...” She beamed, “I can bring you back. I’ve done it... with others...”

“Your chess opponents?” he chuckled.

“Aye.”

“Nae, dear. Let me ha’ m’ rest.”

“What about... a funeral, burial?” she queried.

“Ach, m’ ashes can be scattered t’ the four winds. ‘Twould be fittin’ for a citizen o’ the world like m’self.”

On his feet, he inspected his tattered garments. “I always wanted t’ be a tramp,” he jested. “Now I look like one, for sure.”

Without a word, Mustang refurbished the suit. He tilted his head slightly left and blinked his gratitude before striding to the door.

Francis materialized beside the love seat. “I can’t intervene,” he responded to Mustang’s silent plea.

“He shouldn’t be alone...”

“He won’t be.”

MacDonough faltered, digits slipping off the knob. He collapsed, strength drained.

Mustang rushed forward, embracing him. His shaggy white head nestled against her breast, she murmured inanities until his frame seized for a split second, then went limp.

Francis opined, “You cannot blame yourself...”

“Of course, it’s my fault. Isn’t it always? Anyone who meets me... suffers for it.”

“Nonsense, Signorina. Billy would have come to Assisi, regardless of your presence. He well could have seen Guillermo being chased by the Carabinieri and made the connection on his own...”

“Bullshit! I convinced him to go with me to the factory... If I hadn’t brought them together, he wouldn’t have been beaten by that... bastard.”

“He might’ve been attacked on a random street corner, his fate the same - but without a loving advocate to usher him into eternity.”

“Who, you?” she scoffed.

“No, you.” The Little Poor Man’s essence paled in comparison to Billy MacDonough’s soul, shimmering beside him. “Your power transcends the earthly realms, as well you have suspected. He will be at peace, I promise.”

“And, what should I do with this?” She laid out MacDonough’s corpse, crossing his arms over his chest.

“He wished his ashes released on the wind... That is well within your purview.”

The last Mustang glimpsed of Billy MacDonough, he beamed a smile and inclined his head with a reassuring blink. Then, both spectres dissolved into the ether.

A proper crematorium would have consigned the deceased to a coffin and placed him in a specially designed apparatus to reduce his tangible shell to dust. She didn’t have that advantage.

Window open, snowflakes swirling into the room, she directed the elements to accelerate MacDonough’s decomposition, the remains swept onto the air current to mix with the jet stream.

Saturday mid-morning, Mustang showered, dressed in warm sweats, darkened her hair again, and set off in search of sweet treats to assuage her depression. Mass was concluding in the Cathedral San Rufino, and the pious filed from the ancient structure, chatting in small groups. She heard a British couple discussing a particular news item...

“Sad about Billy MacDonough.”

“Indeed. To die in a automobile fire that way...”

“Lucky he could even be identified...”

So, as Mustang figured it: in the wake of Guillermo’s “accident,” the authorities determined that - since the Toyota’s rental contract was in Billy’s name - he’d been the one driving.

Plodding down the steep hill, she resigned herself to never laughing again.

She’d remember this aching of her muscles, though, with undiminishing fondness.