

The Mustang Chronicles:

Beguiled Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Munching a pastry near the Gran Caffé that sunny morning, Mustang Duryea watched tourists converge on Assisi like flies on a rotting piece of meat.

She'd grown accustomed to the pedestrians moving en masse like schools of fish along the steep, narrow lanes between the Basilica Santa Chiara and the Basilica San Francesco on opposite ends of the hillside city, stopping at many other churches and historic sites, as well.

An ability to grasp any language, and to be understood in any language, made her the ideal tour guide for those who did not travel with organized agencies. She'd befriended a number of souvenir shop owners, who directed inquiries about such services her way.

The money paid by grateful pilgrims - usually a goodwill offering - kept her in pastries and hot chocolate, with an occasional pasta or steak dinner as a treat.

Crumpling wax paper from the creme horn and tossing it into a trash bin, the auburn haired ex-patriot tugged her straw-brimmed hat lower over her eyes and strolled in the direction of the Piazza San Rufino.

A grey-streaked curly head ahead of her towered above those nearest; broad shoulders in a lime green polo shirt reminded her of a defensive linebacker on a professional football team. Other distant memories poked at her consciousness, and she shuddered, slowing her pace.

They approached the square, and Mustang distinguished a young blonde accompanying the man, her right arm slipped through his left. The man's right hand held a utilitarian wooden cane, used to support his game leg.

A gust of wind blew the woman's hat across the cobbles, her red tresses swirling in chaotic patterns. Reluctantly, she chased the errant headgear and, as she snatched it from a recessed doorway, found herself confronted by the couple she'd observed.

She stared into the man's green orbs briefly, then considered the lithe creature with him, wearing a sleeveless floral print summer frock.

"Mustang!" rumbled the man.

She recoiled. "Oh, hell..."

An unmistakable voice from her past, Roger Jaffe had been one of the few who survived interaction with her after Jack Parsons had bequeathed his power over the natural forces to her.

Years earlier, Mustang had inadvertently healed Jaffe's daughter of a terminal disease, then saved him from death when a pitchfork mortally pierced his chest.

The National Institute of Health had sent agents to apprehend her, probably wishing to turn her into a lab rat and discover the secret of her powers.

She'd managed to rectify the mess and swore Jaffe to secrecy, seeing how much he loved the motherless child in his care.

"Hello, Roger," she finally sighed.

"Is there somewhere private we can talk?" his companion requested.

Mustang, wondering whether she was the older man's bride, glanced around the piazza. "Any of the cafes..."

"Do you live near here?"

"Up three flights. I don't think Roger's leg..." She signaled them to follow her beneath a portico and along the side of the church to where a few tables had been set up as a coffee bar. They settled at a round, wobbly metal table, ordering cappuccino.

"You have questions," Roger commenced. His distinctive features - high forehead and cheekbones, sloped nose and full lips set above a square jaw - had not altered with the passage of time.

"How you found me, and why."

"You remember my daughter, Suzanne?"

"A beautiful child."

He indicated the young woman.

Mustang's hazel eyes widened. "She's grown!"

"It's been twelve years since..." Roger stated.

For Mustang, that wasn't long enough. She patted the 18-year-old's hand. "You're more beautiful now than you were then."

"Thank you," muttered the girl.

"That still doesn't explain..."

Their order delivered, the conversation lapsed as they sipped from delicate china cups.

"We met some friends in Venice, who had recently visited Assisi," Roger eventually stated. "Their photos from a private tour included you on the steps of a church."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang knew she should've prohibited photos on the tours.

"When we learned you were still alive" - Suzanne leaned toward Mustang's ear - "I insisted we take the train to visit you."

"Is Venice where one of the advertising offices is located?" the older woman prodded.

"No. Dad sold the agency when he..."

Roger laid a warning hand on his daughter's arm.

Mustang scrutinized his implacable countenance. "Cancer?" she ventured.

"No," Suzanne supplied.

"Then, what?"

"Lou Gehrig's Disease."

Mustang lowered her face. "Oh, hell..."

Suzanne's tone conveyed the plea. "Within a year, he'll no longer be able to walk..."

"Hobble down to the basilica and pray to the saints. They may grant a miracle."

"But, you... saved our lives..."

"That was aeons ago."

The girl had to be restrained from sobbing outright. "You refuse... or, you have lost the power..."

Anger welled in Mustang's chest. Innocent as Suzanne's hopes might be, the tour guide had too often been plagued by such petitions - in Montana, Scotland and elsewhere. "Whether I can still heal or afflict, kill or raise, is inconsequential. I live simply here and wish not to be disturbed."

Tossing a 20 Euro note on the table, she rose and strode away without a glance over her shoulder.

Not an ounce of guilt assailed her, until she reached her apartment high above the piazza, Francis of Assisi waiting for her.

"Don't start," she warned him. "You don't know how that man betrayed me - twice - and caused me to kill three people and lie to many others."

The saintly manifestation objected. "I wasn't going to say a word, Signorina."

Mustang kicked off her sneakers and threw the straw hat on the battered loveseat. She grabbed a sauce pan from beneath the sink and filled it with milk, turning on the stove's front burner.

"Hot chocolate won't drown your sorrows," Francis chided.

"Wanna bet?" She flopped on a dinette chair. "At least, he's not able to climb the stairs, so I'll be safe if I stay put for a few days."

"He can't, but she can."

Francis pointed out the window; Mustang joined him in time to see Suzanne shielding her eyes from the sun and moving toward the street door. Roger waited, pathetic and forlorn, near the arched entrance of the Basilica San Rufino.

"Oh, hell..."

"You could accomplish some good..." Francis hinted.

“Sure, and have them both proclaim the cure to the world, so the city becomes worse than Lourdes.”

He acquiesced. “You’re right, of course.”

“That man couldn’t keep his trap shut twelve years ago. Being in advertising, I wouldn’t expect any different of him now, nor of Suzanne, sweet though she may be.”

Sweet, and lost. Suzanne Jaffe had no idea which apartment belonged to Mustang, and hesitated to knock on every door. Hearing tentative footsteps in the corridor, the tenant threw wide the door, growling, “In here.”

The uninvited guest crossed the threshold, seeing no one but its occupant; Francis had vanished.

“I want you to know, Miss Duryea...”

“Mustang,” the woman corrected.

“Dad was adamant about not coming to see you. I insisted. You gave me my life, and I’ve enjoyed being with him and learning about life under his guidance. The most important lesson he taught me is that caring about others, protecting and defending them, is paramount.”

Mustang swallowed hard. She recalled the flight - planes not being her preferred mode of transportation - from Cleveland to Helena, during which she realized Jaffe’s love for his daughter had been the reason he’d betrayed her to the authorities. Those blackguards had threatened the child, and he would not tolerate them placing her in danger.

“Dad just turned 40, Mustang. He’s too young to die,” Suzanne continued, breaking into the woman’s reverie.

“Sit down, Suzanne. There are some things you don’t understand.”

The girl remained standing. “All I need to understand is that, with a word, you can heal him. Why will you not do so?”

“Because I don’t want a line of the terminally ill outside my door, expecting the same!” Mustang raged. “I can’t risk Roger betraying me again, whether his reasons are valid or not!”

The teen retreated, fear clouding her eyes. She twirled a strand of blond hair around her index finger, nervously. “I’m sorry!” she wept, rushing from the chamber.

From her vantage point at the window, the tour guide watched Suzanne emerge from the building and scurry to her father’s side. He embraced her and, when she pointed toward the upper level, he glowered at the barely visible face behind smudged glass panes.

The smell of smoke distracted Mustang; the milk planned for her hot chocolate had burned on the stove.

Irritated, she twirled the knob to disengage the burner and grabbed the pot's handle, jumping back when the metal's temperature singed her skin.

"Oh, hell! Hell, hell, hell!" she squealed, turning on the tap and letting cold water alleviate the pain.

Once she regained her composure, Mustang examined her palm. In addition to scars from years of traveling via lightning bolt to points around the globe, blistered red lines crossed the flesh.

She could have healed the wound instantly, but Francis interrupted her.

"You'll want to see this," he advised.

She dabbed her hand gently with a tea towel as she returned to the window. The piazza bustled with life, as always, but Roger Jaffe and Suzanne stood off to one side, deep in discussion with a weasly, slightly built, balding Italian, who wrung his cloth cap between his hands.

"Giuseppe Falcone, that opportunistic..." the woman swore.

The saint of Assisi pondered, "Will you intervene?"

"How?"

"He will rob them of all their valuables and leave them stranded..."

Mustang had encountered Falcone the first time she tested her skills as a tour guide in the city more than a year previous. He preyed on pilgrims seeking the "hidden sites" of Francis' life, or miracles of various types.

His *modus operandi* involved gaining a victim's confidence and convincing them he could provide what they sought. Some, he'd scammed so thoroughly, they were discovered days later wandering in the vicinity of Mount La Verna, without a dime or their shoes.

"It's a job for the Carabinieri," she snorted.

Francis reasoned, "They arrest him, but when the travelers have already departed for their homeland, he is not prosecuted and set free."

"Not my problem." Mustang spun and slammed her injured hand on the loveseat. She shrieked so loud, even the crowds below stopped and raised their eyes momentarily, before a ground tremor rocked the piazza and panic ensued.

Saintly features clouded as he watched the chaos. "Is that you?"

"Not deliberately," she moaned, pressing her hand between her legs in a vain effort to reduce the agony.

"Well, your friends have departed with Falcone for destination unknown."

"Bon voyage to them."

"Signorina!" Francis admonished.

“If I break the vow made when I left Scotland to not use my power, where will it end?”

“Isolating yourself from human affection, of even the most cursory nature, is no way to live.”

She leaned on the counter, still grimacing. “You witnessed the trespassers at Boleskine, whose ‘affection’ was guided primarily by greed to use me for their own personal gain. There is no such thing as sincere friendship or unconditional love when it comes to my... my...”

Francis conceded the point. He’d seen the politicians, international agents, artists, actors and nobles employ less-than-honorable tactics to gain her trust, then expose their true colors, prompting catastrophic results when her anger demanded retribution.

Many had died.

Property damage could not be calculated.

Wiping tears from her hazel eyes with the towel, Mustang calmed her respiration and sank on the loveseat. Gradually, the welts diminished, vanishing entirely.

The scars from the lightning bolts remained.

“Perhaps, if you eradicated them, as well, your outlook would change,” Francis ventured.

“No. They’re a constant reminder I still need to exercise self-control.”

“Including denying assistance to the innocents who will be cheated by Falcone?”

She leapt to her feet. “All right! I’ll go!”

Tying her sneakers and adjusting her pony tail, she pressed the straw hat on her head and stomped from the flat.

Not that she had a clue where Falcone would take the Jaffes. She traversed the Piazza San Rufino to the last spot she’d seen the trio, calling upon nature to echo their exchange.

Falcone oozed with charm, despite resembling a devious rodent. He’d politely inquired about Suzanne’s dejection and, when their conundrum was explained, he offered assistance.

“I know of a relic at San Damiano that guarantees a cure...”

Suzanne, desperate to help her father, fell for the ploy - hook, line and sinker - despite Roger’s protests.

The con artist offered them a ride to the site in his car for a mere 100 Euros.

Mustang bit her lip, drawing blood.

She set off at a pace few could match, down the steep incline to the shrine in the Umbrian valley below Assisi.

II

As Mustang suspected, the church of San Damiano was closed. That hour of the afternoon, the tour busses had departed and pedestrians had returned to their lodgings to freshen up before dinner.

Coming down the hill wasn't as bad as the ascent; the woman knew Roger would never make it in his condition. She found the pair holding each other on a stone bench near the abandoned taxi stand.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Suzanne wept. "I thought he was your only hope, after..."

"There, there, dear. It's only money."

"But, your credit cards, too!"

Roger's basso profundo tried to sound philosophical. "And, without my cell phone, I can't call the bank to cancel them..."

Mustang stifled a chuckle. Recalling their encounter twelve years earlier, she mustered a passable imitation of Jaffe's voice: "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

Raising his greying head, he completed the phrase. "The Shadow knows." He hobbled toward her, arms wide.

She gestured him back to the seat. "How much did he steal?"

Roger exhaled, "Over a thousand Euros."

"Besides our luggage," Suzanne supplied.

"Oh, hell..." She dropped on the edge of the bench. "Here's the deal, and it's not subject to negotiation."

Both faces focused on her attentively.

"I have no choice except to heal you, Roger. Otherwise, you'll never make it up to the city, or to Santa Maria degli Angeli to find a hotel."

"I understand, and I'm grateful," he breathed.

Suzanne chimed, "Me, too."

"Save your gratitude. What I want from you is a solemn promise, under pain of death, you will never mention my name to anyone, not anywhere, not ever."

They nodded in unison, sensing her rising emotions.

She passed Roger a roll of currency. "Check into a hotel and get some rest. I should have your belongings - and your cash - to you by first light."

“Mustang, I’m more than willing...”

“Thanks, Roger, but your help would be more a hindrance right now. Where I’m going, you’d stand out like a sore thumb.”

Suzanne, reassured by her father, asked, “When will you...”

“When will I what? Say the magic words?” Mustang clenched her teeth. “There aren’t any. It’s already done.”

The teen shifted toward Roger, who rose and tested his limbs. “I feel a strength I thought I’d lost!” he beamed.

Suzanne jumped up and hugged the man.

Mustang did not reflect their enthusiasm. “Get going, now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“How will you know where we’re staying?” Roger puzzled.

She squinted at him, not needing to speak the words: “Ask another stupid question.”

Unexpectedly timid, the broad-shouldered figure embraced her. The top of her head fit exactly beneath his square jaw.

“I owe you my life, again,” he whispered into the straw hat.

“You owe me nothing but the fulfillment of your promise. Knowing what I’m capable of, if I ever...”

“Say no more,” he gushed. “This time, I won’t foul up.”

“Good-bye, then.”

Fingers clasped, the Jaffes set off toward the city basked in colorful hues by the setting sun.

Huffing and puffing at a 30 degree angle, Mustang made certain a late taxi stopped to give them a ride to one of the hotels near the railroad station.

“Francis, I’ll never know how you accomplished all you did, if you had to climb this damned hill so often,” she grumped, pausing to bend almost double.

She could hear the delicate laughter on the breeze.

Giuseppe Falcone, as a rule, did not work evenings.

Not at his predominant trade, anyway.

Mustang had occasionally noticed him parked at an outdoor restaurant in the Piazza del Comune, a vulture stalking his next meal ticket.

He’d not been caught picking pockets, but the woman guessed he’d started out in that profession.

As she stepped off the escalator that, fortunately, eliminated the last part of her ascent to Assisi, she kept her eyes and ears open - for Falcone’s weaselish mien, trademark cloth cap and nasal tenor.

Her muscles already sore from exertion, wandering the narrow lanes and byways of the ancient city for three hours didn't improve her mood. Her stomach growled; she hadn't eaten anything since that pastry mid-morning.

Damn him! Mustang swore under her breath, seeing the object of her search slip his slimy digits into a diner's purse - placed foolishly on a vacant chair at the table outside the bistro on the Via Sant' Agnese - and withdraw her wallet.

"No, you don't," the tour guide hissed, ordering a shock to run up his arm.

The leather pocketbook bounced on the cobbles.

"Excuse me, ma'am, you dropped this." Mustang retrieved the item and presented it to the confused tourist. "You may wish to be more careful. Thieves roam these streets."

"Thank you."

It didn't matter if the phrase was uttered in English, German, Hindu or Chinese. Mustang heard it in English, just as she was heard in the woman's native tongue.

Falcone had frozen in his tracks, staring with wide-set, terrified brown eyes at the redhead. His nose - the only larger one she'd seen being Jimmy Durante's - twitched. She tilted her head knowingly, flashed her best impression of Roger Jaffe's sardonic grin, and winked.

The con man bolted as fast as his spindly legs could carry him. She saluted the couple with a cheery wave and pursued him at a leisurely pace.

She could've predicted what happened next. Not thirty seconds elapsed before he charged toward her, the illusion of six Carabinieri on his tail.

"Hide me!" he begged, tugging Mustang toward an alley.

She scoffed, "After what you've done?"

"I swear, never again, if you'll get me out of this!"

"You'll take up an honest trade?"

"Yes, yes, anything! Please..."

The spectres dissipated and, stunned, Falcone fainted on the pavement.

Mustang leaned against the stone wall, softly humming to herself, until Falcone regained consciousness. He sat up tentatively and scanned his surroundings.

"What..."

"You're in some serious trouble, Giuseppe," she scolded.

He shifted to his knees, retrieving his cap. "How do you know my name?"

"Don't you know? You've got quite a reputation in the city."

"Nothing good, I suppose."

"That's right."

He straightened to his less-than-impressive height. “You gonna turn me in?”

“After you so eloquently pleaded for me to save you?”

Skepticism showed on his wrinkled face.

“You make it worth my while to keep my mouth shut, and I’ll consider your request.”

“How much?” He dug in his baggy trouser pockets and pulled sizable rolls of bills from both.

“That, the luggage and other belongings you heisted from the pair stranded at San Damiano.”

He shuddered, disconcerted. “How’d you...”

“They’re friends of mine. But, even if they weren’t, you need to stop treating visitors to Assisi so... callously.”

“Hey, it’s a lucrative living...”

“One which will land you in prison for the next 30 years, I guarantee, if you ever... try... it... again.” Her last words carried with them an electrical shock twice the strength of what he’d earlier experienced.

Falcone hopped around like a rabbit on hot coals. “Who are you?” he cried.

“Your worst nightmare, enfleshed.” The sensation ended as abruptly as it began. “Now, take me to where you stashed the goods.”

Stashed was an understatement. Like a dog with his tail tucked between his legs, the thief led her to a tiny apartment up five flights overlooking the Basilica San Francesco’s green lawns. Every inch of floor was covered with suitcases, parcels, stacks of coats, piles of shoes.

A long dining room table held heaps of wallets, many unopened.

“What’s your game, Giuseppe?” Mustang demanded, aching for the many who had lost their possessions through this creature’s connivance.

“It’s... an addiction.”

“Bullshit.”

That he spoke Italian didn’t stop him from grasping her displeasure.

She grabbed his wiry, stooped shoulders and forced him to meet her gaze.

“From this day forward, your sole task will be to return each of these items to their rightful owners.”

His jaw dropped, but he could not resist the force of the command.

“Now, where are the Jaffes’ things?”

He waggled his thumb toward a chair near the door, where he must’ve dumped his latest haul before returning to pluck more unsuspecting victims.

“And, the money?” she pressed.

He laid one of the rolls in her extended hand.

Mustang moved to collect the hardsided cases, checking for the stolen credit cards. "You forgot his..."

Falcone attacked her with the fierceness of a tiger, dagger raised, and died for his troubles.

"Oh, hell..." she muttered, disgusted.

His broken frame crumpled against the far wall, she cut through the detritus to study the lifeless heap. "You idiot! Why couldn't you just..."

She spat in his still-open left eye and stormed from the flat, burdened by the heavy luggage.

At ground level, she paused to inspect the three scratched Samsonite bags. The largest was unlocked, and Roger's wallet - his credit cards intact - had been tossed inside.

Wheels and handles made pulling the valises through the streets somewhat easier, but she refused to carry them up to her own apartment. The street door locked, no one would disturb them before she took them to the Jaffes in a few hours - it already being well past midnight.

She navigated around the corner to a public phone, placing an anonymous call to the Carabinieri station. She relayed information of where Giuseppe Falcone - and evidence of his activities - could be found.

"There will be a reward if your tip leads to a conviction..."

"Donate the money to the Poor Clares," she mumbled, breaking the connection.

If she'd had three bottles of aspirin, it wouldn't have been enough to dull the pain in her legs when she collapsed on the loveseat in her apartment ten minutes later.

"Francis, damn! Look what you made me do!" she complained to empty air.

Or, not so empty. The saint manifested, his kindly smile no comfort to the woman.

"You might've felt some satisfaction, until..."

"I reacted on the spur of the moment," she justified Falcone's death. "He would've plunged that knife into my back..."

"What about your Wing Chun training?"

"I'm... out of practice, and he moved way too fast for a middle-aged weasel."

"Brew yourself some coffee. You'll need to be in Santa Maria degli Angeli in two hours, if you're to keep your promise."

“I need some sleep.”

“After your friends have gone.”

Mustang smirked. “What if they don’t go?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“The same reason I got in trouble the first time I met them. Some doctor is going to shout ‘miracle’ and all hell will break loose.”

“True, there’s not been a case where this disease has been reversed by natural causes...”

She rested her weary head in her hands. “I can just see the lines: cripples on crutches, in wheelchairs, on prosthetic legs...”

“You don’t believe Signore Jaffe will keep his promise?”

“He might. I don’t know about Suzanne.”

“She’s young, enthusiastic and impulsive.” Francis chuckled. “Sounds like someone I know.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Wincing as her muscles tightened, Mustang rummaged through the kitchenette cabinets for a tin of coffee. She plugged in the rarely-used pot and spooned grounds into the basket.

What she poured into a ceramic mug amounted to little more than steaming sludge, but it refreshed her for the task ahead.

Descending the dim stairs, she stumbled repeatedly, swearing as she went. She didn’t need to pull the suitcases far, an early taxi waiting behind the Basilica San Rufino providing transportation down the hill to the town three miles away.

“You going on a trip?” queried the scruffy driver.

“No. My friends lost their luggage, so I’m returning it to them.”

The sputtering vehicle braked near the Hotel Franco Antonelli. She paid the man - adding a generous tip - from Roger’s funds, since he owed her what she’d loaned him the previous day.

A dozing desk clerk roused when the sliding door squealed open, and he rushed across the lobby to assist Mustang with the bags. “Our check in time isn’t until three o’clock, Signorina,” he declared.

“I’m not checking in. These are for the Jaffes. They already have a room.”

“Ah, yes. The father and daughter. They are in the restaurant eating breakfast.”

“So early?” Mustang marveled.

“They wish to catch the first train to Rome.”

“Good.”

“Why good?” came Roger’s booming question from beneath a carved lintel.

Rolling her eyes skyward, Mustang turned. “Here they are, as promised.”

“Everything?”

“Down to the last Euro. Or, at least, minus cab fare.” She presented him the currency. Fanning it, he peeled off a wad of 100 Euro notes and stuffed them in her fist.

“I...” she said.

“Consider it a reward for finding the thief, or for... other services rendered.” He backed into the restaurant. “Join us. The pastries are excellent.”

Having only imbibed coffee in 22 hours, Mustang accepted the invitation. Suzanne was sipping hot chocolate, making the older woman’s mouth water. “Is it good?”

“Fantastic,” replied the teen.

Roger summoned the waiter, who took Mustang’s order of hot chocolate, eggs, bacon and toast.

“An eventful evening?” he speculated, munching on a cinnamon roll, frosting dripping.

“You have no idea. Were your rooms comfortable?”

“Very.” Roger scooped up her hand with long fingers suited to a musician. “I can’t tell you how much we appreciate...”

“Don’t say it, please,” she protested, retracting her digits. “Let’s just part as friends and get on with our lives.”

Suzanne interjected, “Why *are* you living in Assisi?”

“Because it’s a fantastic city and I enjoy it.”

“I thought you liked Montana and planned to take over the horse ranch,” Roger remarked.

“Originally, I did. I would’ve liked nothing better, but...”

“That which you referred to as your curse?”

She nodded.

“Who was it, the Feds or...”

“My own fault, really. I never learned to control my mouth, my thoughts... and when I found someone who actually wanted to marry me, despite everything, I got him killed.”

Suzanne gasped; Roger averted those deep green eyes.

A train whistle blew in the distance.

“Is that your ride?” Mustang hinted.

Linen napkins hit the table, and the Jaffes repossessed their luggage, stepping into the humid dawn.

Mustang accompanied them to the depot, where a small crowd waited for the south-bound transport.

“You’ll get off at Foligno,” she instructed. “It could be about an hour’s wait, but the next train will take you straight to Rome’s Termini.”

“Come with us!” Suzanne urged. “You could show us Rome...”

Mustang refused.

Roger kissed her on the mouth, his unshaven stubble irritating. “I’ve done a lot of thinking... and once I get Suzanne on the plane for the States so she’s in time to start the fall semester at Vassar, I’ll be back.”

Before Mustang could deter him from that plan, he hoisted the bags through the door of a first class car and mounted vibrating metal steps. The sound of the engine deafened the woman, and he could not hear what she tried to say, merely waving farewell, Suzanne doing the same.

The train continued along the tracks and, while others departed the platform, Mustang remained, disheartened.

“Oh, hell.”

III

Mustang Duryea spent the next week in sheer dread. Roger Jaffe’s thousand Euros made it possible for her to avoid giving tours and sequester herself in her flat, pacing the floor and counting the hours.

She had no idea when Jaffe would return, and her chest tightened when she contemplated the bomb he would drop.

Francis encouraged her to concentrate on games of chess; she lost to him each time they sat at the dinette table with the chiseled marble set. She could not crack open a book to read, nor find diversion in the classic movies she’d collected on video.

“What’s the worst he can do?” the saint pondered that Friday evening.

She squirmed on the loveseat. “Don’t you remember? He’ll profess being attracted by the beacon of light I cast on the world, or some such nonsense. How many times did I deal with that in Montana and at Boleskine? He’ll either propose marriage, or devise a plan to present me as the next best thing to sliced bread...”

“You should take it as a compliment!”

“I just want to be left alone!” she yowled.

Comforting her as best he could, Francis allowed her to rest her head on his chest, where she slumbered through the night.

The sun lit the eastern sky with shafts of light when the sound of boots gamboling up the stairs with the energy of a spring buck shot the tenant to attention.

“Oh, hell...”

The knock was polite yet persistent.

Assessing her appearance - a disaster, with crumpled t-shirt, stained jeans, a hole in one sock and her auburn mop tangled - she shuffled to the door and unlatched the bolt.

“Come in.”

To her shock and surprise, a young, beefy, bronze-headed Carabinieri officer in full regalia down to the polished gold buttons waited on the threshold.

“Signorina, we have some questions,” he declared.

“About what?”

“A... felon named Giuseppe Falcone.”

Curious how they linked her and the corpse, she bowed the man inside and secured the door.

“Did you know Signore Falcone?” he began, a pen poised over a small notepad.

“I may have seen him in the city a few times.” No lie.

“A couple saw you with him last week, shortly before he was found dead.”

She swallowed in relief. “Where? How?”

“They provided a description of a red-haired American wearing jeans and a straw sun hat.”

With a laugh, she chided him. “Am I the only red-haired woman in Assisi?”

“You are American.”

“Speaking Italian so fluently?”

She knew he heard her in that language, and watched his certainty turn to doubt. “Scusa, Signorina. We are trying to track the individual who killed this man.”

“How was he killed?”

“He was thrown against a wall with enough force to break his neck.”

She spread her arms, forcing him to consider her slender frame.

He saluted, acknowledging his supposed error. “Grazie. I appreciate your time.”

His descent to the piazza occurred more slowly, and she guessed his hopes of scoring a major arrest had been dashed.

Her nerves remained on edge, nonetheless. Roger Jaffe would be on her doorstep at any moment.

“It’s a beautiful morning,” Francis commented. “You’re low on milk, bread and cereal. You haven’t seen the horses in days. You should get some fresh air.”

Mustang scowled at the manifested 13th century ascetic.

“The piazza is deserted. You can be up Mount Subasio before anyone knows you’re awake.”

She aimed for the bedroom, taking time to shower and change into a green flannel shirt, jeans and hiking boots. She dug bags of apples and carrots from a cupboard. Being with the wild horses that lived high above the city would be the perfect medicine for her emotional ills.

The road to the Eremo delle Carceri provided a solid surface part of the way to her destination, then she veered off the asphalt to a narrow, tree-lined path. Not as steep as the climb from San Damiano, her lungs reveled in the crisp, cool air.

Until she heard a brisk tread behind her.

Ducking behind a sturdy Aleppo pine, she listened to leaves and twigs crunching ever closer.

Many locals enjoyed walking, she knew, and she had no intention of voicing her paranoia if such was the case. When Roger Jaffe passed in the murky light, she grunted.

He jumped and spun, startled to a ghostly pale.

“Geez, Roger. You’re stalking me now?” Mustang remonstrated.

“No, not at all. My taxi dropped me at the parking lot near San Rufino, and I saw you heading out, so I followed you.”

The woman debated taking her visitor farther along the trail, or doubling back to the city.

“Where are you going with all that food?” he prompted.

“To see some friends,” she finally replied. “Come on.”

Thirty minutes later, they emerged in a clearing boasting tall grass and wildflowers. From the opposite end, a herd timidly approached.

“They’re not used to strangers,” Mustang explained.

Jaffe retreated slightly. “Whose...”

His companion squinted at him. “You’re still scared of horses?”

“I... haven’t ridden since...”

“What about buying Suzanne a horse?”

“She changed her mind, once you cured her. She went in for ballet, softball and boys.”

The statement brought a chuckle from Mustang's lips. "Typical."

A noble roan stallion nuzzled her shoulder, conveying how much the animals had missed their patron. She offered him a carrot, which he gratefully devoured.

The mares mimicked the greeting, receiving their portion in turn.

Roger soon found himself chuckling and stroking their manes, one by one.

"See, there's no reason to fear," Mustang noted.

He countered slyly, "There's no reason for you to fear me."

She led him to a rock outcropping, perching cross-legged on the slant. He swung up enthusiastically, hugging his knees.

"Feeling better?"

"Better than I've felt in years," he answered. "Like a new man."

"I still remember the old one."

"I know, Mustang. You have every right... but will you, at least, hear me out?"

She sniffed. "It's a gorgeous day; I'm content to see these horses well and happy... just don't ruin it."

"Would living on a horse ranch in Wisconsin ruin it for you?"

Hazel eyes glared. "What?"

"I'm immensely wealthy, after selling the agency. Before... Suzanne and I decided to enjoy the world while I could still travel, I bought a magnificent estate near Lake Geneva. There's plenty of space in the house... you wouldn't have to see us unless you wanted some company, but it would be better than that hovel Suzanne described to me."

"I happen to like that hovel. It provides protection from..."

"The uninvited?"

She nodded, strands coming loose from her pony tail. The memory of her now-expired passport, tucked in a decrepit backpack in her closet, instantly negated such a plan. "Why make this offer?"

"You deserve the best things in life, the same as my own daughter. If it had been possible twelve years ago, I would have done it then, but your parents..."

Wistfully, Mustang smiled. "Things might have been vastly different, having someone willing to plead my cause and stand with me in the face of... my own stupidity." She squeezed Roger's fingers. "I'm as happy as I ever can be right here, but thank you. At this point, personal entanglements and proximity to large populations..."

"Entanglements?"

“You can suspect what would happen, can’t you? We’d become fast friends, living under the same roof. I’d trust you. Then, that roof would crash down on our heads after some trivial argument and my anger decimated the countryside.”

“I wouldn’t...”

“Then, the authorities - local, state, federal - would come hunting for me. Again.”

“Are you saying, in all this time, you haven’t... learned to control yourself?” Jaffe pressed.

“In some ways, yes. In others, no. The man who stole your luggage is dead, for instance.”

Brilliant green orbs reflected the mid-morning sun as they scrutinized her. “You didn’t tell me...”

“It was self-defense. He came at me with a knife.”

“And you turned it on him?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t touch him. He went sailing across the room like a sheet of paper in a strong wind.”

Jaffe swallowed hard. “I... see.”

Mustang hung her head. “When we first met, I told you I could heal - or afflict - raise the dead or kill. Since then, I’ve lost count of how many have come to me, for help or other reasons, and are now... no longer among the living.”

“Then, I should fear you more than the horses?”

“You could make me laugh, if you’re willing to tell me some of those old stories about off-color advertising slogans your people pitched.”

His right arm encircled her shoulders for a quick hug. “Of course. We’ll hoof it back to town for lunch, and I’ll keep you laughing until the food gets cold.”

Treating the horses to an apple a piece, they aimed for the trail through the trees.

Meals in Assisi, and many European countries, lasted far longer than in America, but Roger Jaffe did not exhaust his repertoire of anecdotes through five courses at the cozy La Laterna Ristorante.

He emptied the bottle of chianti by himself, but with his muscular bulk and newly recovered health, the alcohol didn’t affect him in the slightest.

Mustang’s abdominal muscles burned from the exertion; she’d hardly been able to ingest the antipasto, soup, ravioli and tiramisu.

While Jaffe sipped a cappuccino, she studied his unique features. She recalled thinking, more than a decade before, he was built like a defensive linebacker on a pro football team. His shoulders stretched twice the width of hers,

and his chest threatened to pop the buttons off his blue henley-style shirt. His legs barely fit beneath the table, thanks to his more than six feet of height.

Other than the grey streaks highlighting his black wavy mane, he hadn't aged much since their encounter in Montana. He would live a long, full life going forward, due to her... gesture of kindness.

"What will you do when you get back to the States?" she queried, folding and unfolding the red linen napkin.

"Given how funny I must be, if your reaction is typical, I might write comedy," he boomed, the sound reverberating around the dining room.

"I've always enjoyed laughing, but there's been a dearth of it in my life lately."

His face assumed a somber mien and he leaned across the dessert plate. "That's why you must come back with me. It would be good for you to laugh on a regular basis, to forget your... curse, as you called it..."

"I... don't consider it that... so much anymore," Mustang confessed.

"If you lived a normal life, you could forget it entirely."

"What do you consider normal?"

"Up every morning, out for a ride on one of the horses, maybe breeding and training racing stock..."

She snickered wryly. "That was my life at Boleskine, and I still managed to screw things up royally."

"For instance?"

"I'm responsible for the death of the Scottish First Minister roughly five years ago, and others along the way. Not so prominent in society, perhaps" - she remembered with fondness Jerry Richards, the vaudevillian who'd proposed marriage to her, and not so fondly the owners of a traveling renaissance faire, who died in prison after she'd ensured their arrest, as well as an erstwhile acquaintance of her grandfather, Jack Parsons, who'd returned 20 years later to acquire full knowledge of the universe...

Jaffe's high forehead furrowed.

"I've even been back to the States - unofficially - and put the fear of... me into the Feds."

"You mean..." He indicated his palms.

"Right. I'm amazed, sometimes, the lightning hasn't burned permanent holes straight through."

"With ample love and care, you could find the strength..."

"I'm not an addict in need of rehab," Mustang objected. "As for strength, I have plenty. I could pick you clean off the ground, if I chose."

“Like you threw that little con man to his death?”

She smirked. “Right.”

“Then, what will *you* do with the rest of your life?” he echoed her earlier question.

“Give tours to travelers and keep to myself.”

“How futile!”

“Life is one giant futility,” she remonstrated. “Trust me. I have it on good authority from experts...”

His quizzical expression affirmed she’d revealed too much.

“I told you: I can manifest the dead.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe you...”

“You want *proof*, after what you’ve already seen?”

Jaffe gulped. “No. No thanks.”

The waiter brought the check; he paid with cash, including a generous tip. They departed the restaurant and strolled toward San Rufino.

“Being a tour guide is... a laudable job, but is the pay steady?” the former ad man inquired.

“Not always. I don’t charge a set fee, so I’m paid more by some and less by others.”

He stopped mid-stride. “Dammit, that’s what I mean! With me - Suzanne and me - you wouldn’t have to worry about your next meal...”

A few yards ahead of him, she rapidly backtracked. “There’s more to worry about right now than food.”

Six Carabinieri blocked their route.

“Signorina, you will come with us, please.”

Gallantly, Jaffe positioned himself between the officers and Mustang.

She pushed him aside.

“You’re not going to surrender?” he hissed.

She responded without taking her eyes off the squad. “Of course not. Even if they locked me in a cell, I’d walk out immediately. Why waste the time?”

Sorely tempted to set them ablaze, Mustang limited herself to sending an urgent call through the radios clipped to their belts. Jaffe didn’t comprehend the panicked Italian rant, a summons to a serious grease fire in a restaurant kitchen near the Piazza Santa Chiara.

One of the group defied orders - the same young officer who had questioned her that morning. He held a set of handcuffs. “You must come with me,” he commanded.

“Why?”

“Your DNA was discovered at the scene of Giuseppe Falcone’s murder.” Mustang’s amusement erupted so loudly windows shot open along the street, the occupants roused by the noise.

“What did he say?” Jaffe wondered.

“They’re going to charge me with murder because I spit in Falcone’s eye after he died.”

“That’s... not funny.”

“No, but this is.”

The Carabinieri felt the stones beneath his feet heat to an unbearable temperature. Penetrating the soles of his boots, he could not tolerate the anguish and, petrified, took off at a run after his comrades.

Jaffe watched, mortified. “You...”

“Kiss me good-bye, Roger. Best you not be seen with me after this, or you’ll be implicated, too.”

He complied with her request, the kiss chaste yet pleasant. “Does that mean...”

“I won’t, I can’t go back to the States, but the offer is greatly appreciated.”

She set off through the August heat, leaving him to find his way to a taxi stand.

IV

Mustang Duryea took a circuitous route to the Carabinieri headquarters, fully cognizant if she didn’t nip this situation in the bud, she’d be dogged by those dunderheads day and night.

Parading into the cluttered offices, it didn’t faze her to see a technician tearing apart the dispatcher’s radio set, to trace the source of the bad transmission.

“Someone hacked your frequency,” she proclaimed to the spectators at the table.

The chief grumbled, “That’s impossible!” without looking up.

His assistant, however, did swivel toward the source of the voice. Urgent fingers tapped the superior, pointing eagerly with his right hand.

En masse, the squad straightened, leaving the technician holding a screwdriver and various components, unaided. One pair seized Mustang by the arms, another made ready to place shackles around her slender wrists.

“Desist!” the chief ordered.

The men withdrew.

Graciously, the elegant figure with thinning wisps of white hair and a bushy mustache accenting his florid cheeks waved her into an interrogation room, slamming the door before his subordinates could enter.

“Forgive these recruits,” he apologized, indicating a metal chair. “They are here training for the summer, while my regular contingent enjoys a much-needed vacation.”

“Their... enthusiasm is to be commended, I suppose,” Mustang commented. “It is rather inconvenient, nonetheless.”

“The prospect of capturing a murderer, even though that murderer rid the city of a notorious confidence man and pick-pocket, overwhelmed their sense of propriety.”

“Understandable.” Mustang shifted on the uncomfortable seat. “Now, what is the problem?”

The Carabinieri official cleared his throat. “We received a report indicating your DNA was present at the scene of the aforementioned murder.”

“How do you know it’s my DNA? I’ve never supplied your department - or anyone else - with a sample to provide a comparison.”

Bloodshot brown eyes contemplated the tile floor.

“Unless you... acquired one illegally?” she accused.

His baritone dripped with guilt. “It is our custom, when newcomers take up residence...”

“It’s a custom which should be discontinued. I know, in Italian courts, there is much leeway when it comes to presenting evidence, but I’m positive you’ll find your evidence is spurious.”

“How so, Signorina?”

“I encountered Giuseppe Falcone - that was his name, correct? - attempting to steal a woman’s wallet. After disrupting the theft, I spit in his eye for good measure.”

Not the whole truth, yet not a lie, either.

“Ah! Another witness did come forward to report Falcone in the vicinity of the outdoor restaurants shortly before... and a red-haired female.”

Mustang decided to return her hair to black, to be less conspicuous. “Does that clear up your investigation?”

The chief rose. “Not entirely, but it does clear you of any involvement in the crime.”

“As I explained to the young man who called on me this morning: there’s no way one of my stature could break any man’s neck.”

“Agreed.”

The ease with which Mustang left the building confused the rookie Carabinieri, who peppered their superior with questions as the door closed.

Mustang heard herself whistling as she shuffled up the Via San Rufino. She could settle in for the evening without a care in the world...

That wish held until she reached her flat above the piazza, finding the door cracked.

Pushing the panel inward hesitantly, she discovered Roger Jaffe reclining on the loveseat.

“What the devil?” she snarled.

He jumped to his feet. “I’m so sorry, Mustang. I...”

“What are you doing here?”

“Before I left, I thought...” His fist held a thick roll of currency. “I can at least provide you a nest egg, in case... the tour guide gig doesn’t pan out.”

Sweet, in a way, Mustang mused. “Really, Roger, I don’t...”

“I found that out. I didn’t know you were living with someone.”

Her eyebrows twitched. “Living... with...”

“When I knocked, no one answered, so I was going to leave the money with a note. When I came inside, a man in a ‘Save the Whales’ t-shirt and jeans was setting up the chess board on your kitchen table. He nodded a greeting and disappeared into what I presume is the bedroom.”

Mustang let out a resounding guffaw.

“There’s nothing hilarious...”

She crossed to the bedroom. “Francis, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

Jaffe towered above the diminutive figure as they shook hands.

“Roger, this is Signore Bernardone, otherwise known as St. Francis of Assisi,” Mustang stated.

The ad man recoiled as if sustaining an electrical shock. “You mean...”

She felt that sardonic smile creep across her face.

“You... raised him...”

“Raised, manifested...”

“He’s... 800 years old!”

“Give or take,” Francis affirmed.

Jaffe sank on the cushions, knees weak. “He lives with you?”

“He comes and goes as he pleases, these days,” Mustang replied. “We both enjoy a good game of chess in the evening.”

“How long...”

“Oh, since before I first met you.”

“So, in Montana, and Scotland...”

“Not Montana. Too many people around, I suppose. At Boleskine, though, having someone to talk with preserved my sanity. Francis, Erwin Rommel, Mark Twain...”

“Twain?” Jaffe stammered.

“Another of my... mistakes, if you will.”

“What other... mistakes are there?”

“Mahatma Gandhi.”

Green orbs traveled from Mustang’s serene features to Francis’ placid mien.

“She’s telling the truth,” acknowledged the saint. “She is... an exceptional individual.”

“I... see that,” Jaffe concurred. He attempted to stand, unsuccessfully.

“Have you anything to drink in this hole?”

Mustang chuckled. “I used to keep a bottle of Jameson handy, but not for a long time.”

“Water?”

“Sure.”

Delivering a tumbler filled at the sink, Mustang settled beside him. He drank greedily as she spoke. “Do you see why I can’t go back to the States?”

Trembling fingers wiped a dribble from his chin. “You’d have... an awful lot of baggage.”

They smiled together.

“At least, take the money. I’d feel better knowing...”

“Thanks, but no, Roger. I’m independent of all... entanglements, and I wouldn’t want you to come back someday and hold it over my head... asking for favors.”

“I’d never...” he barked.

“You say that now, but others have tracked me down out of the past with their schemes...”

Jaffe’s expression mellowed. “Suzanne and I among them, even though her intention was purely based on love.”

“True. She’s a fine young lady, a credit to her father.”

Mustang rose, offering Jaffe her hand. He declined, standing under his own power, albeit slightly unsteady.

“I probably never should have told you so much,” she lamented. “You’ll be watching the sunset some evening in Lake Geneva, and begin to doubt your own sanity.”

“I already am,” Jaffe admitted.

The woman swiftly deliberated wiping his memory of the past few hours - or days. If she did that, Suzanne would be impacted, as well, and how many others?

“Don’t,” Francis admonished, laying bony fingers on her arm.

She patted his hand reassuringly, then addressed Jaffe. “You’d better go, Roger, or you won’t be able to find a cab.”

“Will you breakfast with me in the morning, before my train?”

“Better we part now, and for good.”

His embrace threatened to crush her ribs. He planted his lips on her forehead, whispered, “Do good with your gift,” and strode from the apartment.

She listened to his heavy steps descending the stairs, furtively observing him traverse the piazza, pass the basilica and vanish beneath the portico.

He didn’t turn, and she was glad.

“What will you do?” Francis wondered, noticing a tear on her cheek.

“I can’t think. There are too many factors...”

“Such as?”

“If Suzanne hasn’t already spread the word about her father’s cure, the first doctor who examines him will. As you said before, no one has ever recovered from Lou Gehrig’s Disease, so it will be a phenomenon worthy of international attention. At some point, my name will slip out...”

“Your name, perhaps. The location?” Francis reasoned.

“The connection will be made, sooner or later. The friends they met in Venice, who caught me with their camera, might supply the information. Their train stubs will confirm they stopped in Assisi - Roger twice, for that matter. He came with a cane and left without it.”

Retreating from the window, she noticed the wooden memento propped in the corner.

“Did he bring it with him?” she puzzled.

“When he entered, so unexpectedly, he was twirling it like a baton. He set it down, then saw me.”

Dejected, she crossed to the bedroom. “I need some sleep. Maybe tomorrow, I’ll be able to make a decision about my future.”

“Another move?”

“No. I’ve learned, wherever I go, there will always be people who...” She shrugged and latched the door.

The idea woke her at three a.m.

When Suzanne Jaffe had been dying at the Cleveland Clinic twelve years earlier, Mustang had inadvertently cured her, sparking a horrendous spectacle. To quash the physicians' chatter of a miracle, Mustang had "doctored" the file, making it appear there had been a misdiagnosis of the girl's ailment.

The same would serve for Roger. Instead of Lou Gehrig's Disease, a pinched nerve could suffice for the deterioration of his leg function.

At least, the doctors investigating Suzanne's claims about her father's cure would find it so.

Six hours later, Mustang relaxed on the loveseat, nursing a mug of hot chocolate. A fresh breeze through the open window brought with it the clamor of early tourists.

The woman shifted on the cushion, feeling a lump beneath her. Checking whether a spring had given way, she discovered the roll of bills Jaffe had meant for her, stuffed in a gap.

"Damn him!" she snorted.

Francis appeared, bearing a beatific smile. "You can always donate it to charity."

"And have the directors pocket it, rather than help the poor?"

"You are quite jaded for one so young."

"You know quite well why, my friend."

"Signorina, you know Signore Jaffe owed you not just his life, but his daughter's. It was his only way to pay you for your kindness."

"He made me laugh - harder than anyone in ages. That was payment enough."

"In his view, money..."

"His view is wrong, then." Throwing the roll out the window, for the pilgrims below to chase like some miraculous rain, was vetoed for the same reason she would not pass the funds along to a charity. She could envision the people scrambling, tackling, pushing each other - and for what?

"I'll pay my rent for the next year," she decided, "and buy some food."

"Yes, you never did make it to the grocer's yesterday for milk, bread and cereal."

"And, maybe, some chocolate?"

"You should be able to afford it."

Reluctantly, Mustang showered and dressed. She hiked down to a shop near the Piazza del Comune, lugging home a sack of food.

That afternoon, and subsequent days, she occupied herself giving tours to small groups of travelers: families, priests - who rarely paid what she was worth - and politicians.

At the close of a particularly tiring round of the city with Norwegian school teachers, she mounted the stairs to her flat, finding a large manila envelope propped against the doorframe.

She laid the parcel on the dinette table while she prepared a hasty dinner of soup and salad. Then, prying open the clasp, she pulled a stack of copies and an x-ray film from within.

Roger Jaffe's letter expressed bemusement and gratitude for her ability to prevent the doctors from going "ape-shit" over his cure.

"Somehow, my records were altered - and I can suspect the source. The diagnosis of a pinched nerve was buried beneath multiple pages detailing the ALS - Lou Gehrig's - version."

He concluded, "Hope you were able to use the money to pamper yourself a bit. You have my eternal thanks."

A post script under his signature brought a chuckle to her throat: "We're nicely settled on the Lake Geneva estate. If you ever feel like popping over, I'll have a horse waiting."

If only...

A cursory review of the physicians' reports and test results meant little to Mustang. She tossed the pile in the trash basket and picked up her fork.

She cared only about living quietly going forward.