

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Nocturnal Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

Growing up on a Montana horse ranch, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea naturally felt more energetic in the morning, so accustomed to feeding and watering the stock at the start of each day. Since fleeing Scotland to settle in Assisi, Italy, she no longer needed to rise early for such duties, but still found herself awake with the sun.

She’d learned to block out sounds of the hillside city’s nightlife - albeit negligible when compared to Rome, where vendors and their customers lingered in the piazzas well past midnight. Outside her apartment near the Cathedral of San Rufino, strains of music, chatter and clanking skillets from trattoria serving late dinners reverberated between the buildings; she slept through the racket.

Buried beneath two blankets and a quilt against the April chill, even the expectation of crowds gathering for the annual Easter celebrations at the Basilica San Francesco and other churches the following weekend didn’t disrupt her slumber. She could track the cycle of tourists without a calendar: after Christmas, a lull allowed her a bit of rest from her side hustle as multi-lingual tour guide - thanks to a power over the natural elements bequeathed to her by her grandfather, Jack Parsons, that allowed her to be heard in any person’s native tongue without need for a translator, while she heard anyone who spoke to her in English, regardless of their respective language.

The next burst of activity occurred during these latter days of Lent, observed by assorted Christian denominations. Summer involved a constant influx of those seeking to trod the byways where St. Francis had experienced a radial conversion in the early 13th century. When school resumed in the autumn, a brief respite preceded that local saint’s feast day on October 4, with another break until the waning days of December, despite the possibility of snow and sub-freezing temperatures.

Still, Mustang earned a decent living from off-season groups requiring her services; sharing unique insights into Francis’ life and attitudes - gleaned from a rather personal relationship with the Little Poor Man, who she’d raised from his tomb accidentally more than a decade earlier - garnered her rave reviews when those travelers returned to their home countries.

Opening hazel orbs at 5:30 am that Tuesday, she lay on her pillow, expecting to be serenaded by other early birds - the bakers, especially. Nothing better than the aroma of tarts, muffins, bread wafting on the breeze.

The odd quiet, however, heightened her senses. Ears attuned, she detected a single set of hard-soled shoes ascending the hill at a rapid pace, slapping stone pavers with an annoying rhythm.

Righting herself on the twin mattress, she tried to determine the direction this lone individual moved. Narrow lanes created their own particular echoes, the piazzas constructed with entirely distinct acoustics.

Curious when the gait slowed, she rolled upright and peered out the uncurtained, smudged window. Barely visible in the dusky light, a black-clad figure paused at the edge of the Piazza San Rufino, as if unsure of his route. He abruptly ducked into a recessed doorway as a young woman - whom Mustang recalled as a very dedicated teacher in the elementary level school behind the cathedral - emerged from an alley.

Seconds later, Mustang thumped on her bed, aghast. She could not believe what she'd witnessed three stories below.

Crime in Assisi, especially during tourist season, merited assignment of Carabinieri, with their main station in the Piazza del Comune. She'd had dealings with these oddly uniformed, extremely formal authorities, who periodically tried to pin blame on her for some of the more unusual incidents in the city. That she could not be confined in a jail cell, nor be handcuffed, confounded them, as did her ability to concoct a viable alibi for most any situation.

This... this... went far beyond a typical crime. She'd seen such horrors in classic films watched as a kid, or read about them in novels, but to see with her own eyes...

As the teacher passed, the man stepped from his concealment, muffling her startled cry by clamping a hand over her mouth from behind. Robbery wasn't his intention; she dropped her backpack and he disregarded the wallet, lipstick, notebooks, texts and pens spilled in all directions.

No, his focus proved far more sinister: he sank his teeth into her neck and, seconds later, she collapsed on the cobbles in a heap.

He didn't even bother to hurry away. He used the sleeve of her checked wool coat to wipe his mouth, then strolled off like a gent on a park outing.

Stunned, Mustang didn't react as quickly as the situation warranted. If she'd moved more rapidly, she could have revived the teacher, a pretty blonde whose students loved her enthusiasm.

Mustang had, after all, become quite adept at raising the dead, periodically at inopportune moments.

By the time she recovered from the shock and descended flights of dimly lit, narrow stairs barefoot in her t-shirt and red sweatpants, the woman was beyond anyone's assistance.

"Oh, hell..." she spat.

As dawn broke, she squatted beside the corpse, noting dual puncture wounds beneath the victim's left ear. Her assailant had drained every drop of her blood like a Shop-Vac sucks up puddles of water.

"Vampires aren't real," she muttered, straightening. "Even if they were, what is one doing in Assisi?"

The answer to that question would be unraveled at some future point. For now, with the city coming to life, her presence near the body would prompt unwanted attention. Mustang slipped furtively back into the building, knowing others would notify the Carabinieri.

She monitored the official investigation from above the piazza, restraining her chuckles at the squad's ineptitude. The coroner arrived, examined the deceased and reported preliminary findings, with the sergeant reacting in dismay.

After ample photographs recorded every angle of the scene, the poor teacher was loaded onto a gurney and wheeled to the waiting ambulance for delivery to the morgue.

Mustang turned her sights on preparing a simple breakfast, her stomach growling.

Forceful knocking preempted filling a bowl with cereal. She crossed the small living area to pull the warped door inward, gulping at the shiny buttons on the starched black wool uniform worn by a corporal filling the gap with his muscular bulk.

"Buongiorno, Signorina," he greeted, obviously nervous.

She reluctantly waved him across the threshold. "Good morning."

Flipping the cover on a small notebook, he rattled off a series of questions intended to garner additional facts about the murder. Mustang knew, if she admitted to viewing the spectacle, she would be compelled to sign statements, and possibly testify in court.

Her precarious circumstances would not withstand the scrutiny.

"I'm sorry, I was asleep until I heard the sirens." She didn't like to lie...

"Grazie. Sorry to bother you. It is necessary to interview those residents near the piazza..."

"I understand."

This refusal to divulge the truth meant the responsibility fell on her to track and apprehend the culprit - or worse.

As the door closed behind her visitor, she burst out laughing. If reality matched fiction, catching a vampire wouldn't be easy. He'd already be tucked securely in a coffin somewhere, now the sun fully illumined the sky. She'd need to wait until nightfall... when she'd much rather be nestled in her own bed.

A light tapping meant she didn't have a chance to resume her meal. Black hair still damp from his bath, teeth beaming with mischief, Carlo bubbled, "Signorina, there's a tour group..."

Always excited to deliver these messages, this son of a souvenir shop proprietor on the Via Santa Chiara earned a substantial amount of pocket money from Mustang. She retrieved a five Euro note from her stash in a coffee can concealed in the cupboard above the sink and pressed it into his palm.

"Did you hear what happened?" he queried.

"Yes."

"My father says it is the devil come to collect sinners."

Mustang sighed. "I wouldn't be surprised, Carlo."

Ah, the superstitions of faith, she mused as she ducked into the bathroom. A high school comparative world religions class in her freshman year - when she still attended high school on a fairly regular basis - had debunked beliefs she might have nurtured about a supreme being of any ilk. The irony of living in a city where faith played a major role in the economy brought a smile to her lips as she jerked a blue hoodie over her auburn mop.

A dozen Serbian pilgrims occupied her morning with inquiries about St. Francis and the sites to which she led them, including the San Damiano chapel down a steep hill to the valley. Pleased with her kindness and patience, nearly 200 Euros filled her fist as the pious cadre veered into a teeming trattoria for lunch.

Mustang stopped at the Gran Caffè bakery, a short distance from the Basilica Santa Chiara, loading up with treats. She then bought a carton of milk at the small grocer's to wash down the chocolate and pastries.

She ached for a nap but, sprawled on the mattress, couldn't relax her brain. She'd been able to quash memories of the unusual assault while she worked; now the episode ran like a movie on a loop.

She hadn't seen the man's face. His general build was medium height and slender - fitting for a vampire, she sniffed. If she ventured out that evening in the hopes of locating him, would she be setting herself up to be his next target?

If bullets could not do her harm, how could a pair of fangs?

For that matter, didn't she merely need to command nature to find and identify him?

“That would be too simple,” she reasoned aloud, grasping that she enjoyed a good mystery and despised boredom.

A quiet, accented voice remonstrated, “Foolish child.”

“Save the criticisms, Francis. It’s not my fault I saw what I saw.”

In a tattered and patched brown robe, the shaggy-haired, emaciated holy man sat at the foot of the bed. “You don’t have to pretend to be a detective, when the Carabinieri are fully capable...”

“You believe that?”

“They are extensively trained, Signorina.”

“And, I’m not.”

“In the past, you have placed yourself in danger through naivete. To do so deliberately...”

Wedging her arms beneath her head, she glared at the manifested spectre. “If... and I do mean ‘if’, this guy is an honest-to-goodness vampire, the Carabinieri are ill-equipped to catch, much less detain him.”

“And, you are?”

“I can call on the elements to restrain him...”

“Even ending his life?”

“Pounding a stake through his heart really isn’t in my line...”

“Then, how would you...”

She swung her legs onto the floor. “Couldn’t he be healed of his... ailment?”

“You are so often the pessimist, and suddenly you become an optimist?”

“You think I like causing chaos and death?”

“You revel in it, Signorina,” scolded Francis.

She snickered, “That’s harsh.”

“It’s true.”

“Perhaps this vampire revels in his own type of chaos,” she rationalized. “Or, he could be reluctantly driven to feed on the innocent...”

“How would you make that determination?”

“Confront him, of course.”

Francis repeated, “Foolish child,” and dissipated.

She could not deny his assessment. Since the encounter with Jack Parsons at Boleskine House near Loch Ness, as a 16 year old, she’d failed miserably at gaining sufficient self-control to ensure her power was used wisely. She’d caused earthquakes, destroyed buildings, been obliged to erase people’s memories...

Yet, she’d accomplished a decent amount of good which, if weighed against her innumerable mistakes, might balance things out...

She showered and dressed in jeans, sneakers and a black cable knit sweater before heading out at sunset to begin her search. Since her hair color stood out to Assisi citizens, she darkened it to a less obvious shade, as well. That way, she could loiter near the Piazza del Comune or restaurants on the winding lanes without garnering attention, while watching for suspicious activity.

By 10:00, she'd surveilled locations open into the evening, and noticed nothing unusual. Frequent yawns garnered her some derisive glances from patrons returning to their hotels; she presumed they thought her just another drunk.

She would've preferred to sight the vampire on this first outing, to justify her expectations in Francis' eyes. The process could otherwise be lengthy and onerous, but nonetheless imperative, to protect other potential victims.

By the conclusion, lacking sleep, she'd be worn to a frazzle, unfit to lead tours through the day and keep herself in bed and board.

Best to get it over and done.

"Dust him," she whispered to the icy breeze. "Let it reflect the moonlight."

Grains of dirt and crushed gravel swirled around her shoes before ascending twenty feet into the air. Keeping pace with her gait, the miniature tornado meandered through darkened lanes, toward walls built nearly 1,000 years prior. Rounding a corner, she ran full-face into this column, retracing its path at a much higher speed.

"Oh, hell..." Mustang grumbled, tempted to dispel the cloud.

Then, she heard the shoes, on a collision course at a dead run. She barely avoided the impact, flattening herself against the stones as a blur of black brushed past, panting.

Holding her position, she waited for the pursuer to appear.

Nothing.

Not the vampire chasing his midnight snack.

The elements had never failed her, except in instances where her commands had been non-specific. She'd improved in that aspect as she'd matured...

It must've been the vampire himself who'd been in such a rush.

Fleeing after his latest attack? she puzzled.

If he possessed a conscience, perhaps.

Mustang caught up with the dust devil, hovering above a manhole cover improperly replaced, as if in a panic. She could distinguish labored breathing through vents bored in the thick metal, and resisted the idea of bringing the fugitive up by force.

Gaining his trust might be a wiser course...

She bent to the gap between the cover and its frame. "Hey, dude," she murmured. "You okay?"

"Someone - something - is chasing me!" tremored a resonant baritone.

"Naw, ain't nobody here, except me. You're safe."

"No cops?"

"The Carabinieri are probably playing cards at the station, it's that dull."

Long, thin digits reached upward, gripping the manhole cover and nudging it aside. Mustang glimpsed the disheveled short black mop, stained black attire and shoes resting on the rung of an iron ladder. When he raised his face toward her, she shuddered at the sallow, haunted features.

"You sure?" he prodded.

"Absolutely."

Calmer, he liberated himself from the sewer with astonishing agility. He might've been middle-aged, given his demeanor, but moved like a teenager.

Furtive brown eyes darted around, as if able to see distinctly through the gloom. Reassured, they focused on her.

She recoiled unwittingly.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

Mustang swallowed hard. "It seems like you were the one with the problem. Why did you think you were being chased?" She smirked. "You wanted by the cops... or the mafia?"

When he grinned at the sarcasm, his fangs shone white.

"Oh, hell..."

## II

"What are you doing out so late, alone?" Mustang's companion inquired, dismissing her stunned reaction.

"Looking for someone."

"Well, you've found someone, haven't you?"

Steadying her nerves, she repeated his previous statement. "Someone - or *something*."

"You saved me from... whatever was after me. You shall be rewarded for your solicitude."

"What if *I* was the one who was after you?"

Those penetrating brown orbs widened. "That... is not possible. Such an insignificant creature?"

Let him think that, she noted. "Describe what happened."

“I was... enjoying some... exercise, when a sudden wind stirred. Then, a wall of... particles - nothing of the physical realm - enveloped me.”

“Why did it frighten you so?”

Mustang spied a palsy in his hands, and his voice cracked. “I... don’t know. I’ve never seen the like in my... life, so ominous and foreboding.”

“What threat could it pose to a man whose soul is free of guilt?” she mocked.

Thin lips pursed, almost angry. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“I know all, except your name.”

“Liar!”

“Oh, drop the pretense, already!” She leaned against an old hitching post, weary. “I may not know your name, or why you chose Assisi to conduct your... business, but I know what you are and what you’ve done.”

He sustained the false bravado. “Indeed?”

“Fine. Be that way.” Perhaps a fatal mistake, she presented her back to him and moved along the alley.

He did not rise to the bait. Had he taken advantage of her implied vulnerability, she would have made use of her martial arts training to subdue him - if not kill him, outright.

Maybe he assumed she would report him to the Carabinieri, of whom he had no fear. Maybe - she silently issued the directive - the dust cloud could remain in close proximity, until she caught up on her sleep and resumed the interaction.

That way, too, she would discover where he spent the daylight hours.

“I cannot fathom why you relish placing yourself at risk,” greeted Francis of Assisi when she stumbled into the apartment in the wee hours.

“That’s because you lack knowledge of psychology,” she countered.

“And, you deem yourself an expert?”

“Experiential psychology, let’s say.” She sank on the battered loveseat and removed her sneakers, wiggling her toes to restore circulation as her hair resumed its auburn tint. “The periodic craze of making vampire films stems from their connection to... well, let’s say, unconventional sex. As women have gained more rights and respect in the public sector, they refuse to submit to male dominance, so the mystique of the vampire has increased, rather than diminished...”

Francis grasped the concept. “In other words, secretly, women still wish to be dominated, and by offering themselves to a make-believe character...”

“Except, this one isn’t make-believe,” Mustang somberly acknowledged.

“Precisely. Yet, you defied...”

“Not because I’m interested in him sexually.” She chortled self-consciously. “Could you see me causing another earthquake that would damage the holy sites?”

“Frankly, I wouldn’t care,” remarked the local saint. “They could use the rubble to build homes for the poor.”

“Except, they wouldn’t. They’d send out petitions to raise donations to restore every wall and work of art...”

“Damn their foolishness, when those funds could feed thousands... millions.”

Mustang switched on the light above the kitchen sink, grabbing a saucepan to warm milk for a mug of hot cocoa. “Sorry, we got off subject. I don’t ever want another human being to experience what he did to that teacher...”

“But, you let him go, when you could have easily vanquished him - permanently.”

“I’m not sure he really is... what I suspect he is. He might be a deluded psychotic who’s watched a few too many vampire movies, and adopted that persona.”

“As if you haven’t faced off with the like in the past, and put them on the ground.”

She breathed, “In the ground, you mean.”

“If you prefer.”

“Francis, you always try to be gracious, if not blunt, but I have no illusions about myself. I would qualify as what some popularly call a ‘hot mess’.”

They chuckled together as she blended cocoa and sugar in the boiling milk.

Not that the drink lulled her to sleep. She watched the sunrise, unfinished mug in hand, until she discerned dark flickers obscuring wispy, pastel hued clouds above the Rocca Maggiore.

“That bastard,” she hissed.

When he awoke that evening, she would be standing over his chosen repository, ready to strike.

She retired to bed so resolved, only to be roused within the hour by Carlo, relaying another tour request.

The Easter crowd had begun to converge en masse, and pickings would be good... if she could keep her eyes open!

As she led a gaggle of Ursuline sisters from church to church, waiting as they prayed, lit - electric - candles and snapped photos of the statuary, she didn’t want to imagine the tumult if one or more such vowed religious fell beneath the

vampire's bite. With Holy Thursday less than 24 hours hence, she had to act swiftly.

The early tour not very lucrative, the priests she escorted after the daily siesta garnered even less. Still, she savored a delicious dinner in a café sequestered from tourist establishments, then hiked up Mount Subasio to the vast fort originally designed to protect the city.

Dust, unlike human flesh, did not tire. The column had thinned, but still swirled discretely above the vampire's resting place. Mustang navigated ruins on the lower level, reminiscent of tiny caves in which St. Francis had prayed farther up the mountain at the Eremo delle Carceri, to where an improvised coffin had been positioned in a crevice.

She lowered herself on a flat stone, cross-legged in meditation, watching the last rays of light vanish - a vampire's equivalent to an alarm clock, she surmised.

He didn't sense her presence when he roused himself from the straw mattress. Her cheery, "Good morning!" caused him to nearly jump out of his shoes.

"What the devil?" he cursed.

"By the way, I still don't know your name."

"Barnabas," he stammered. "Barnabas Richter."

"German?"

He glared at her, eyes creating their own luminescence. "Are you daft? I've been speaking German all along."

"If you say so."

Mustang had confused him, and she felt no qualms about that.

"How did you find me?" he demanded.

"It would take longer to explain than to conclude our discussion."

"The discussion *is* concluded, as far as I'm concerned. I have... urgent tasks."

"Not tonight, dude." She grabbed his arm, taut musculature resisting.

"How'd you get... this way?"

"Eh?"

"By choice, or by accident?"

"What on earth makes you think anyone would do this by choice?" he rumbled.

"Hey, the prospect of eternal life..."

He shrugged off her grip, relaxing. "It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"How long have you been..."

“Just shy of two centuries.” He propped himself on the edge of the coffin. “In your parlance, I pissed off the wrong person.”

“So, by accident.”

He nodded.

“You want out of it?”

“What, a stake through the heart? Nobody’s been courageous enough...”

“No. There are other ways...”

He snorted, “I’ve tried, believe me. Doctors, psychiatrists, Catholic priests, voodoo practitioners, high priestesses. Their bodies lie in remote, untended graves as payment for their failure...”

“What if this ‘insignificant creature’ could succeed where they didn’t?”

His turn to snatch a handful of her hoodie and drag her into the moonlight, bathing the Rocca Maggiore in peace, as a live band’s driving beat drifted from a tavern below. “Who in God’s name are you?” he roared.

“The angel who can restore your humanity,” she bluffed.

“You refuse to divulge your identity?”

“If I did, you would not survive the night.”

His pale brow furrowed. “I can’t abide riddles, child!”

“Content yourself with this fact: if you wish to leave behind your futile existence, you need but say the word...”

“What utter nonsense!” He bared his fangs, eyes afire, grip unyielding as he drew her close. “I hunger...”

Only to receive the most intense jolt - literally - he’d ever felt. The electrical charge propelled him through the air and landed him 30 yards away against a stone bench, unconscious.

Mustang brushed off her jeans as she covered the distance. “C’mon, Barney,” she prompted, stooping to him and slapping his cheeks. “Wakey, wakey.”

Eyelids fluttered; he didn’t recognize her. “What... happened?”

“You made a damned stupid move.”

He attempted to right himself, moaning in pain. Searching digits ran across his skull, blood staining the flesh as he examined them.

“You’ve got a nice gash on your noggin,” related Mustang. “I’d suggest a trip to the hospital for stitches, but they’d...”

“Discover the truth about me?”

With one hand, she lifted him vertical.

His jaw gaped. “Where’d such a diminutive female acquire such strength?”

“You ask questions that place you in danger, dude. Just answer mine: do you wish to be fully alive - human - again?”

His mind calculating options - she read the machinations in his range of expressions - he finally ventured, "I'm not sure."

She clucked her tongue. "Let me summarize the situation for you: say yes and live; say no - or say nothing - and die."

Defiantly, he challenged, "You haven't the means to kill me..."

"Bullshit."

Pebbles near their shoes spontaneously combusted, melting into liquid.

Richter stiffened. "Why must you interfere..."

"Because, you kill indiscriminately, to assuage your own... ego."

"I kill only of necessity," he asserted.

"Total strangers."

"Shamefully, I've... killed friends, too."

"So, you do have a conscience beneath that veneer of braggadocio."

His chin drooped.

"What will it be, then?"

He spun from her. "What's to say, if you restore my humanity, I will not instantly age and die, anyway?"

"There's a chance that won't be the case. Refusal will mean excruciating pain..."

"Ah, you are the cruelest of women..."

She guffawed, "You have no idea."

"When shall this feat be accomplished?"

"The sooner, the better, wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed. What does the process entail?"

Auburn tresses bobbed with dismay. "This presumption there's a need for choreographed gestures or incomprehensible incantations..."

"Not to mention ample sprinklings of holy water, burning candles and incense..."

"Now you're getting the idea," grinned Mustang. "Was this condition caused by an actual bite, or a curse of some sort..."

"Both, I suppose."

"Explain, please."

"I was the eldest son of a Bavarian Duke. One of our maids was quite... alluring for her station. She came willingly to my bed, but exhibited some rather... torrid proclivities. When I rejected her, she exposed her true nature, sneaking into my bedchamber on the night of the full moon, planting her teeth in my neck and reinforcing the transformation with a most emphatic pledge that I would not rest in this life until I sought her out and made amends for my offense."

“Meaning: she, too, was a vampire?”

“That’s what I discovered.”

Mustang contemplated the scenario. “That does complicate things a bit.”

“How so?”

“We might need to find your... paramour.”

“Impossible!”

“Is she dead?”

“I doubt it. Her modus operandi was to seduce the males who engaged her interest, bed them, then drain them dry before moving on to the next.”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult to research incidents where men died of such causes.”

“Throughout Europe, over two centuries?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Mustang shuffled toward the Rocca Maggiore’s gate. She’d presented the process as straightforward, knowing full well she had no access to a computer.

“In the meantime?” Richter called after her.

“Think positive thoughts, and stay in your coffin.”

“But, I shall wither to an empty husk without sustenance...”

She halted. “It doesn’t have to be human, does it?”

“No...”

“There are plenty of animals hereabout. Make do with them.” She resumed her trek. “If you violate this mandate, and attack any human, you’ll drop in your tracks.”

Thankfully, he took her threat to heart, though it had been an empty warning.

She descended the slope, brain churning. Assisi had a library, but to access its holdings, she would need documentation of her identity - potentially attracting the authorities, since she didn’t possess a current passport and, technically, lived in the city illegally. That locals with whom she interacted accepted her as Italian, because they heard her speaking their own dialect, saved a huge amount of difficulty, and she avoided people and places that might raise doubts about her origins.

Could the origins of this maid who transformed Barnabas Richter into a vampire be traced without an internet search of suspicious deaths?

On a hunch, she wound through shadowy lanes, arriving at the Piazza Santa Chiara where a view of the valley could be had from the wall stretching beyond the basilica. Envisioning the sprawling countryside as a map, she instructed the

elements to track Richter's journey to Assisi across 200 years, and that of the female during the same period.

Richter's path white, the other gold, Mustang's chest tightened when both intersected at Assisi, their most current destination.

"Oh, hell..."

### III

Mustang heard the clacking heels a mere second before impact, dodging the contact and whirling with a roundhouse kick to the woman's torso.

Caught off guard, knocked off balance in the ankle-length slinky red sequined gown, she could not defend herself when Mustang laid her on the pavement with a flurry of punches, ending up sitting on her chest, fist raised to finish the job.

"You're here for Barnabas Richter?" asserted Mustang.

The vampire gasped, "Yes!"

"What's your name?"

"Victoria Collins!"

Mustang eased her pressure slightly. "British?"

"Born in London."

"What, about 1750?"

"Try 1634."

"Oh, hell..." Well, what could be done for one, could be done for two.

"You get it by choice, or by accident?"

"I was... having a tumble with a knight in the tower of his castle and got bitten by a bat."

"You wanna stay this way?"

"Are you nuts?"

At least, Victoria seemed to have adapted better to the modern era than her counterpart though, even if restored to humanity, she might still qualify as little better than a prostitute.

There were far worse fates.

Mustang rose, rearranging her twisted hoodie. "Be on your way, then."

Victoria remained prone for a prolonged moment, sucking air into her lungs with renewed energy. She rolled to her right, propping herself on an elbow.

"You mean, I'm... okay?"

"Stick around for first light. If you don't go up in flames, you'll know the answer."

Toes feeling around for her red stilettos, the former vampire stood three inches taller than Mustang in stocking feet - quite pretty, as Richter opined - with luxurious, tousled blonde locks and well preserved figure. "What about Barnabas?"

"His salvation comes tonight."

Blue eyes squinted. "How are you able..."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, if you get my drift."

"I do. I do." Her smile reflected genuine gratitude. "How can I repay..."

Mustang ushered her toward the Gran Caffè, where the smell of freshly baked pastries permeated the air. "In the days or years you have left, enjoy yourself, and try to make up for past faults."

The object of an unwelcome embrace, Mustang hastily extricated herself and waited until Victoria vanished beyond the ancient structures. The tour guide's emotions abruptly overwhelming her, she sank to her knees, a quivering mass of nerves.

Relief came with the realization that she would not need to seek out Richter to facilitate his restoration after severing the link created by the curse. He would awake - at whatever hour - flesh and blood once more.

"Congratulations, Signorina" Francis welcomed her as she secured the lock on her apartment door. "You managed to assist two people and not destroy the city!"

She didn't stop, moving straight to the bedroom. "For a saint, you can be quite facetious."

"You're a bad influence."

"Gee, thanks."

He paused beneath the lintel. "Carlo has already been 'round twice."

"So early?"

"The tourists will be plentiful on this first day of the Triduum, so they're putting their bids in early for the best guides."

Her shoulders sagged. "It's nice to be wanted, I suppose."

"His notes are on the table."

"You let him in?"

"Of course not! He slid the papers under the door. I merely retrieved them so you wouldn't crush them underfoot."

"Thanks."

Curling on top of the quilt, she dozed almost instantly. Francis fetched an extra blanket from the linen closet and draped it over her snoring form.

"By Sunday, Signorina, you'll be exhausted."

She resembled a zombie when violent banging jolted her upright at 8:30. Wrenching the panel wide, she repressed the urge to scream at the youngster nearly frantic in the hall. “What is it, Carlo?”

“You are late, Signorina!” he babbled. “The tours, they must be done before the evening Mass.”

The schedule of worship services over this three-day period did smack of the inconvenient, she recalled from previous years. The faithful recalled Jesus’ last supper at or after sunset with elaborate rituals, including washing feet and processing through the city. Good Friday, depending on the church, liturgies ran from noon until nightfall. For Saturday, a strange silence fell - except for the tourists who really didn’t care about the spiritual side of their journey. Many restaurants closed, bars served no alcohol until after the night’s vigil, when full-blown celebrations resumed with the purported resurrection.

She’d netted 500 Euros during the same cycle a year ago.

“I’ll be down in ten minutes,” she assured Carlo, groping in her pockets without luck. “I’ll catch you later.”

Not exactly satisfied, the lad scoffed at her and shuffled toward the stairs.

Her stomach empty, Mustang could hardly muster the energy to hurry to the appointed gathering. Brain fog forced her to question whether she could even conjure an engaging narrative for the Asian delegation.

She nearly fell asleep on a pew in the Chiesa Nuova mid-afternoon, while Peruvian pilgrims compared the cell in which Francis was confined by his father to their own prisons. Euros jammed in her jeans, she trudged homeward as bells summoned the congregations.

Barnabas Richter intercepted her outside the Gran Caffè, where she’d stocked up on discounted treats, since the shop would be closed until Tuesday. Initially, she didn’t recognize him, having not previously dealt with him in daylight.

“I can only hail you as my beloved angel,” he declared, “not knowing your name.”

“Oh, hell...” She yearned to evaporate. “I thought you’d be on your way back to Germany by now.”

“A wanderer these many decades, I have nothing in that land to claim as my own.”

“You were the son of a duke. Wouldn’t you have inherited some ancestral estate?”

He sneered. “No doubt, my younger brother’s progeny assumed the title, and who’s to say what properties remained after the wars...”

In her befuddlement, she conceded his point. “So, what will you do?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“If you stay in Assisi, you may be charged with murder...”

He supported her at the waist when her limbs failed en route to San Rufino.

“As I might be in every principality in Europe.”

“Widely traveled, were you?”

“Of necessity.”

“You know, Victoria is here.”

When he pulled up short, she nearly face-planted on the cobbles. Automatic reflexes shifted her weight toward the nearest wall, where she sagged against the stones.

“You... saw her?”

“I almost killed her when she pounced on me last night...”

Renewing his aid, Richter ventured, “I feel a ‘but’ in the offing.”

Sneakers planted firmly, she cleared her mind. “I cured her instead.”

“She is still... in the city?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” This exchange did more to drain her strength than the steep trek. “Feel free to look for her, if you like.”

He held fast to her midsection. “There’s no need. I finished with her long ago.”

“You’ve no remorse over how you treated her?”

“It is she who should apologize to me. She deceived me, consigned me to exist as I never wished to live!”

Nearing her apartment building, Mustang really didn’t want Richter knowing where she lodged. “What do you seek of me?”

“You’ve done more than enough, my angel. I simply extend my blessing upon you, and hope you will accept my sincere gratitude.”

“Consider it done.” She lurched forward, crashing to her knees.

Not asking permission, Richter swept her into his arms. “Where were you bound?”

“Oh, hell,” she groaned. “Second door, third floor.”

Deposited on the loveseat five minutes later, Mustang’s eyes refused to stay open. Richter untied her sneakers and removed them, along with her tube socks. He carried a blanket from the bedroom and tucked it around her lower half, then inspected the mostly empty cupboard.

“You don’t eat much,” he announced. “Is that why you’re so trim?”

“Please... go,” she drawled.

“Willingly, if you promise I may check on you tomorrow.”

“Sure... whatever.”

She didn't hear the door latch as he made his exit.

She didn't hear anything until sunrise, when a flock of pigeons decided to perch on her window sill and render their own version of the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

"Really?" she swore. "You won't let me sleep in?"

The voice she anticipated complied in kind. "Signorina, Carlo is knocking."

"The kid needs to stop playing hooky so often."

"His school is on holiday," corrected Francis.

"For the holy days?"

"Exactly."

"Then, he should still be in bed."

"He has no way of knowing you've altered your routine to roam the streets at night seeking a vampire."

She bolted upright. "And he better never find out!"

Hands raised in surrender confirmed Carlo would not hear this tale from Francis.

"Give me five minutes."

At least, her muscles didn't scream in pain when she moved. A large spoonful of peanut butter and mug of hot cocoa provided some protein and energy to last until mid-day. After that, she would be free.

Or, not.

As she dreaded, Richter waited in the Piazza San Rufino upon her return from enlightening two dozen Algerians about the intricacies of Italian tradition. She remained outdoors, loathe to be alone with him.

"If you need a loan to be on your way, I can afford to share from my abundance..." she hinted, fist wedged in her pocket.

"I... wanted to tell you..." he began, somewhat at a loss for words.

Her patience strained, she snapped, "What?"

"I found Victoria last evening or, rather, she found me."

"I'm in no mood for some sordid tale, Barney. Get to the point. You going away together; you getting married?"

"Heaven forbid!" he sputtered. "Being with her again, if only a few moments, reinforced my desire to take you to wife."

"Oh, hell..."

"Where Victoria boasts the morals of a..."

"Trollop?" supplied Mustang.

"To be polite. You... shine like a beacon through the gloom..."

She'd lost count of how often she'd heard that, and the very compliment - for that is how so many intended it - reinforced her vow to avoid interaction with others.

He'd swept her hands to his mouth. She flipped them so the scarring from repeated trips via lightning would repulse him.

"What's this?" he simpered.

"Proof I'm damaged goods, Barney. I must remain detached, solitary..."

He relinquished her digits. "Indulge me with one - no, two - favors?"

"What are they?"

"First, please don't call me Barney."

Mustang bit her lip to quell the giggle. "And, the second?"

"Grant me one day with you, sharing your world, before..."

The words died in his throat, as his legs seemed to weaken. He'd predicted his demise, Mustang noting significant greying at his temples: the aging process had commenced, and he would reach his full chronological condition in a less than a week.

She pondered whether Victoria would succumb to the same fate.

"I cannot," she proclaimed, brushing past him. "It would benefit neither of us."

"You *are* the cruelest of women."

She whirled. "If I *am* cruel, it is a consistent trait, not one of convenience when a need arises to manipulate the emotions of others. In those hours before Victoria burdened you with her curse, think about your own cruelty, your selfishness in using a servant for your own pleasure, then casting her away like so much garbage. Why you were ever surprised she retaliated against you to the fullest extent of her power is beyond my comprehension. As they phrased it in your century: you were a cad, and you deserved to be treated accordingly. For her part, Victoria's morals left a great deal to be desired, and she's suffered for her lapses in judgment."

The critique went unheeded, Richter too bound up in his own interests.

"My dearest angel..."

"I warn you, Barnabas: make me angry, and you'll regret ever coming within arm's length of me. I do horrible things when I'm angry."

Plumes of acrid steam rose from cracks between the stone pavers in a ten-foot radius of Mustang's position. Scalding heat melted the soles of Richter's shoes and scorched his feet; he leapt around like a dervish while those bound for the nearby cathedral gaped at him in awe.

She dared not go inside, her rage escalating. Suppressing the energies could crumble every building in Assisi, with thousands killed.

On more than one occasion, living at Boleskine House, she'd rushed to the clearing where Jack Parsons altar slowly rotted, loosing her fury - shattering windows miles distant. In this instance, she scrambled up a rusted iron fire escape, hoisting herself onto the clay-tiled roof above her apartment, aiming the outburst toward the mountain's uninhabited wilderness.

The microburst of wind whipped through circuitous lanes, dislodging signs from their brackets above shop doors, blowing off pedestrians' hats and toppling souvenir carts before uprooting a 50-foot wide and 100-yard long strip of trees.

Richter witnessed this feat, dumbstruck.

"Go!" she hollered down to him.

Perceiving a determination no words could sway, he slunk from those precincts.

Rather than descend the unstable safety equipment, Mustang pried open the skylight over the corridor and dropped onto the floor, slipping into her apartment and securing the bolt.

## IV

Collapsing on the loveseat, tears streamed down her cheeks, her body wracked with sobs. She felt the hand on her shoulder, rearing back and falling into Francis' tender embrace.

"Why? Why?" she bawled, soaking the fabric of his thread-bare robe. "Why can't I control myself?"

He stroked her tangled locks while humming a soothing melody. Soon, her muscles ceased twitching and her breathing slowed. She lifted her damp face, swollen eyes pleading.

"I've been considering your problem," the saint murmured. "All these years, our cohort of advisors has encouraged you to overcome your weaknesses, using your power to positive ends."

"Like Peter O'Donnell recommended in those months after I killed... my grandfather," she whimpered.

He cradled her chin in his palms, welts from the stigmata bestowed upon him centuries ago so similar to her own scars. "We may have overlooked one key facet of your relapses into impulsiveness."

"Which is?"

“You wield control over nature, are capable of rendering thought into reality. Your mind craves to exercise equal control of those around you.”

“That’s not so!” she retorted, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

“Not consciously, Signorina. Think about it: you direct the elements to a certain task, with no need to doubt your will is law. To do likewise with people... they can, mostly, not be trusted to act as you expect, instead exercising their own free will.”

“Ain’t that the truth!”

“Even when you want to be left to your own devices, they thwart your resolutions...”

“And, end up dead.”

“You didn’t kill Barnabas Richter.”

“In a way, I’m responsible,” she professed.

“How so?”

“You, who know the secrets of past and future, ask me that?”

He disregarded her accusation. “Tell me.”

“He’s already growing old. He may be dead by morning. If I hadn’t broken the curse...”

“He would continue his murderous habits, feeding on the blood of innocents.” Francis dabbed a trickle of moisture from her lips. “You made the right choice.”

“What about Victoria Collins?”

He rose. “She has already met her maker.”

“Because of when she was born?”

“Si, Signorina.”

“Then, I should find Barnabas, ease him through the transition...”

He preempted her attempt to stand. “It will not be pleasant for either of you.”

“If I am the source of his suffering, isn’t it proper I should suffer, too?”

Retreating, the saint uttered a silent prayer as she grabbed her parka off the kitchen chair and rushed from the flat.

Instinctively, Mustang located Richter on the exact spot near the Basilica Santa Chiara where Victoria had ambushed her the previous night. He leaned on the stones, gazing over the valley at the sun gradually sinking beyond the Umbrian hills.

She sidled up beside him; his face tranquil and less gaunt - rather handsome without its strained edge - he didn’t divert his gaze. The number of grey strands had increased exponentially since he’d left the Piazza San Rufino.

“I haven’t seen a sunset since...” the sentiment died, baritone trembling.  
“Thank you for giving me this chance.”

“What other experiences would you like to cross off your bucket list?” she whispered.

Brown orbs clouded briefly. “Bucket list? I’m not familiar with that term.”

“Never mind,” she replied. Why try to explain, when he’d know soon enough. “What do you want to do next?”

“I want a full meal. Seven courses. Wine.”

“You picked the wrong weekend. The restaurant owners, whether from personal piety or fear of scandalizing their customers, lock their doors during these liturgical observances...” Then, she straightened. “Come with me. I think I know a place.”

As they hiked through unpopulated lanes, Richter’s pace steadily decreased. They detoured into a hidden alley just as his knees buckled.

“How much farther?” he queried.

“We’re here.”

He peered through weather-stained window panes at flickering lights and heard mellow strains of jazz.

Mustang, in the course of exploring the city after her requisite relocation from Scotland, had spent a most invigorating November evening in this establishment, discussing philosophy and religion with the owner. He, like her, put little stock in such rituals, but his family had settled in Assisi after they fled Poland during World War II, and he inherited his parents’ tavern, keeping the atmosphere low key, geared for residents rather than tourists.

Six of the ten round tables were occupied, not draped with red and white checked linens, like other trattoria. Imprints from beer and wine glasses created unique patterns on the wood surface where the pair settled.

A petite teen, black strands pulled in a ponytail, delivered the handwritten menu, encased in a plastic sleeve.

Richter glanced at it. “I... don’t read Italian.”

“Never mind,” remarked Mustang. She smiled up at the waitress. “Give us the best meal Misha can prepare. All the bells and whistles.”

A knowing nod preceded the youngster’s withdrawal, without ever jotting a line on the notepad.

“How is it you spoke German to an Italian, and she understood?” wondered Richter, toying with a paper napkin.

His companion countered, “How is it I was able to cure you?”

“You’re... a witch?”

“No, but people have hung that label on me at various times in my life.” She patted his arthritic knuckles. “Suffice it to say: I was given a gift I never sought, and haven’t used it incredibly well.”

“Would you have... used your gift to cure me, if you knew this would happen?” He studied his wrinkled visage reflected in the window beside him.

“You had to be prevented from killing again.” She stifled a chuckle. “The Carabinieri will have another file to add to their collection of unsolved crimes.”

“Why is that funny?”

“On your journeys, did you ever frequent the cinema?”

“You mean, movies?”

“Yup.”

“To stop *myself* from killing, I spent many nights in theatres: operas, stage plays, music halls, films.”

“Did you ever see the Keystone Kops?”

“From the silent era? Of course. Laughing at their antics refreshed my heart.”

“The Carabinieri.”

He grasped the comparison. “I see.”

Bowls of aromatic soup were placed before them, the conversation suspended as they dipped spoons in the opaque broth.

For her part, Richter’s radiation of pleasure at the delicate spices, textures and ingredients of each plate conveyed more than words. A man who hadn’t eaten solid food in two centuries, aware this would be his final opportunity to do so, savored every bite of the fresh bread, marinated veal, steamed perch, *al dente* pasta, antipasto and tiramisù. Ample glasses of wine brought a flush to his previously pale cheeks.

Mustang sampled each, unaccustomed to more than a serving of ravioli with a periodic glass of chianti. She did finish the portion of tiramisù, however - one of her absolute favorite desserts.

Richter had difficulty rising as the check was paid, and not only because he was full to the brim. As he had assisted with her fatigue the day before, she repaid his kindness, calling on nature to buoy him up.

“When I saw Victoria this afternoon,” he croaked faintly, “she’d already lost most of her beauty, more resembling someone’s grandmother. Do I remind you of your grandfather, I wonder?”

She couldn’t divulge how Jack Parsons had stopped aging after the FBI faked his death in the 1950s and shipped him off to Boleskine House to live out his

days in isolation. When she'd visited him that fateful October, he'd looked like a man still in his thirties.

"You haven't lost one ounce of your good looks," she quipped, squeezing an arm, its muscles shriveled. "Where would you like to go next?"

"A comfortable chair, so I can watch the stars until the sun rises, then pass quietly into eternity."

Not her apartment, then.

She managed to guide him to the Basilica San Francesco, the façade lit by spotlights. The crowds had dispersed following the Good Friday service; they had the stone bench on the front lawn, near an unappealing bronze statue of St. Francis on horseback - representing his dejected return from heading to the Crusades - to themselves.

"How's this?" prodded Mustang.

He lowered himself delicately onto the chill surface, facing away from the church. "Perfect."

There the pair remained, Mustang observing the ongoing deterioration of Richter's physique, as he mumbled randomly about the constellations and the planets.

Around midnight, gnarled digits fumbled in the space between them for her hand. His elbow popped when he raised her fingers to his lips, planting a tender, gallant kiss on her scarred palm.

A final gesture of gratitude.

The sun peeked over Mount Subasio as she held his decrepit frame in her arms. He would've expired around 2:00 am, if she hadn't kept him alive to fulfill his final request.

"I'm ready," he sighed as a shaft of light washed the creases from his countenance.

Indeed, after his lungs emptied of their last breath, his body slid to the ground, restored to its original appearance.

She bent to check for a pulse in his wrist, then on the carotid artery in his neck.

Nothing.

Still - did a vampire have a heartbeat?

She couldn't be sure - especially due to this final transformation - that Richter had actually died, and not reverted to his vampiric traits, sleeping with the coming of daylight.

Whatever the case, she couldn't leave him on the dew-flecked grass. Transporting him to her flat would be a struggle; the Rocca Maggiore was closer, and his makeshift coffin remained concealed in the rubble.

The natural elements not only conducted Richter that distance, but shielded him - and Mustang - from public view. The Carabinieri inept or not, their interrogation would have aggravated her temper if they'd seen her toting a corpse through Assisi's streets.

She half-expected her burden to inhale deeply and waken when his body was unceremoniously dropped on the loose straw within the plank framework beneath the historic fort. Completely immobile, she could tell by his awkward position that rigor mortis had begun to set in.

Barnabas Richter was unequivocally dead.

She perched on a toppled stone, rapt by the scene. If archeologists - or those engaged in the periodic restoration of the site - discovered him there, a full-blown probe would commence with wide-ranging consequences.

Her imagination concocted an elaborate series of findings, each sparking more questions than answers. A DNA sample would be run through computer databases, possibly linking him with his younger brother's titled descendants on their estate in Bavaria. Inquiries about a missing relative would be met with confusion and denials.

That an autopsy would reveal no signs of foul play would not preempt the mandatory inquest. The coroner and collaborating detectives could not ignore that the body had been deliberately placed in the repository, and they'd need to discover why.

Another touch of irony: the option of reducing him to dust - having used dust to initially track his location. The ashes could be scattered to the four winds, or left to be swept into a trash bin by a diligent cleaning crew.

Unlike some religious authorities, she didn't entertain a second thought about the prospect of desecrating what amounted to an empty shell. Whether it decomposed instantaneously or in a hundred years, it would still blend with the earth, from which new life constantly grew.

She could purposely call him back, as she'd accidentally done to Francis, Samuel Clemens, Erwin Rommel and Mahatma Gandhi. Her mistakes had evolved into means of learning from their wisdom, understanding their lives in ways historians could never record.

While remorseful at the conclusion of Richter's existence, Mustang would find little enlightenment in the tales of a man who'd indulged himself from youth, then wandered the continent, piling up victims of his bloodlust.

“Rest in peace, Barnabas,” she uttered, rising.

Descending from the Rocca Maggiore, the sun had already dispelled the chill this Holy Saturday. Tourists would be waiting to make their respectful pilgrimages to the city’s churches, filling her pockets with enough Euros to pay rent for the next three months.

Anyone exploring the fort’s subterranean levels would notice nothing beyond the remnants of battle damage from prior conflicts. A burst of wind had blown the commingled ashes of Richter, the wood from the coffin and even the straw through a gap in the stones onto the mountainside.

Morning, mid-day and afternoon groups - from Morocco, Costa Rica and India, respectively - set Mustang’s legs throbbing well before she retired to her apartment as preparations were being made in the Piazza San Rufino to light the pascal fire outside the cathedral entrance at dusk. From those flames, candles held by the congregants would be lit, symbolically illuminating the darkness.

Mustang craved the darkness as she sipped a mug of hot cocoa on the battered loveseat. She ached for sleep. Easter Sunday would be a “day off” - liturgical services throughout the city brought all but the most crucial of activities to a halt. Italians did, in fact, revel in a respite from their daily toil.

By late Monday, the tourists would have boarded buses and trains, or driven south to Rome for their homeward flights. An uneasy quiet would again envelope Assisi, with souvenir vendors parking their carts, and outdoor cafés stacking chairs atop tables, not to be moved until the universities dismissed students in early May.

It comforted the American, as she crawled beneath the quilt on the twin bed, that she could hike a hidden path to the clearing where a herd of wild horses appreciated the apples and carrots she brought them. She didn’t otherwise disturb their idyll, but could remember tending her own animals: Heartbeat, the pinto she’d claimed for her own as a youngster; Molly, Pietra, Sarge and the others who’d kept her grounded at Boleskine House.

These recollections - pure and unsullied - revived her hope for the future.

A hope that, invariably, came crashing down every time she encountered another human being on the winding lanes of the city she couldn’t quite call home.

“You torment yourself uselessly,” Francis admonished as she munched a bowl of corn flakes Sunday morning.

The spit-take sprayed milk across the kitchenette table. “Excuse me?”

“Think about these last four days,” he continued. “Other than... displaying your anger in a rather overt manner, you identified an evil and managed to turn it to good without drawing unwelcome attention to yourself.”

Using paper towels to soak up the mess, she clarified, “You’re saying I’m more careful than in past circumstances?”

“You’re thinking before acting impulsively, si.”

“But, two more people are dead because of me.” Despondently, she deposited the half-empty bowl in the sink.

“Their deaths were overdue, wouldn’t you agree? You performed a courtesy by taking action.”

“I suppose so.”

Leaving the dishes for later, she lingered at the window, where well-dressed families converged on the cathedral for the morning service. Images assailed her of how Maggie Duryea had forced her to wear frilly skirts and ridiculous bonnets on Easter until she reached the age of ten.

She recoiled, shaking her head to clear the memories.

Francis stood beside her. “There’s no need to wait until mid-week,” he affirmed. “We can go to see the horses now.”

“A temporary respite,” she lamented. “Will I ever find a permanent one?”

“Not in this world, Signorina. Sadly, all living creatures are plagued by suffering - of their own making, or imposed by others.”

“For me, it’s a bit of both.”

“Not if you dedicate yourself to nurturing self-control.”

Caressing Francis’ weathered cheek, she smirked. “The story of my life.”