

The Mustang Chronicles:

Competitive Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

While she preferred baggy t-shirts or plaid flannel and relaxed-fit jeans, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea had seen almost every fashion faux-pax on the lanes and byways of Assisi since moving to the hillside Italian town. This, though... one with neon-blue hair secured in two mini-buns at odd angles atop her head, another with leggings that resembled a Jackson Pollack painting, and the third with orange streaks among her black mane, a halter top revealing too much skin, and Dollar Store flip-flops meant in no way for the cobbles of these ancient streets.

If she hadn’t known better, she would’ve wondered how their mothers allowed them out of the hotel in such outfits. But, these *were* the mothers. Their daughters had gone off boy hunting, supposedly, leaving Mustang to provide a tour through sacred spaces in which this trio did not belong.

Yet, with no other groups that week, she needed whatever funds they donated to restock the kitchen cabinets of her stark apartment overlooking the Piazza San Rufino.

Odd, to be sure, the fact young Carlo had brought her little business during a busy tourist season. She suspected his loyalty had been diverted by the prospect of larger tips from a newly transplanted rival. She’d glimpsed him among some of the larger assemblies of foreigners, straw-like grey hair jutting in all directions, and puzzled how he could best her, when she could be understood in any language, thanks to the powers bequeathed to her by her grandfather, occultist Jack Parsons.

Unless, he had unusual gifts of his own.

That wasn’t likely.

Genuine command over the natural forces... a rare asset - or liability, depending - indeed.

Finished with her torturous duties - the women chattered so much, Mustang knew they hadn’t been listening - the Montana native retired to the Piazza San Rufino, where a litter of kittens had recently been born. It soothed her jangled nerves to watch the tiny creatures stumble around, their eyes barely open. This was life in its purest form, not that... that chaos of bodies seeking... what?

Busload after busload drove from the town of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley; their passengers paraded through churches and shrines like cattle on the way to the slaughterhouse. They didn’t tarry to appreciate the architecture, the relics, the frescoes. This was just another stop on a vacation they wouldn’t remember after a few months.

From her meager funds, Mustang had purchased a small bag of cat food, to provide the mother sustenance as she nursed her young. Stray dogs were not a

problem in Assisi, so the cardboard box in which the little family huddled was safe enough behind a row of trash bins.

She didn't dare carry them up three flights to her flat; the landlord would pitch a fit if he heard the mewing.

What would happen to them once they were weaned? she mused. They would undoubtedly learn to catch mice and other small animals, and slip through alleys or under fences, hunting for shelter against the rain or winter chill. Black, tabby, tiger striped - they didn't resemble each other in the least, and would go their separate ways in just a few short weeks, marking out their own territory.

For now, they were cute and cuddly. Mustang scooped up the black female and held it to her cheek. The purring made her smile, then a sand-paper tongue licked her ear.

The woman had always loved horses, and never raised ordinary house pets. She could understand why people enjoyed having these kinds of animals...

Her dreams that night involved dozens of kittens and puppies, all scrambling for her attention, until she was buried by the furry, squirming bodies.

And awoke with the blanket tangled around her head.

A glass of water and slice of bread served as breakfast. Showering and pulling on a plain blue t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, she inhaled the cool freshness of the morning breeze. Near the Basilica of Santa Chiara, she perched herself on the wall and watched activity near the souvenir shops.

There. Carlo was given a note by his father, and told to fetch the guide for a gaggle of waiting clerics. Instead of running toward her, the youth jogged around a corner and up a steep incline...

Mustang followed, curious. Enjoying breakfast at one of the Piazza del Comune's many outdoor cafes, this competitor laid a 20 Euro note in the eager palm.

He didn't rush to accept the commission, however. And, as he lingered over his plate, Mustang crossed to cast her shadow over the freshly starched linens.

Nothing special, this one. In fact, too skinny, a bit stooped, like an athlete who had let himself go as he aged. Mid-sixties, at least. Grey-green eyes glanced up at her, and he grinned, creating a diamond-shaped indentation between his nose, the corners of his mouth, and his chin, while showing straight, white teeth.

"I wondered when you'd come," he announced in unaccented, Midwestern English. "Cramping your style, am I?"

"No, merely bribing the locals," she replied, nodding toward Carlo's receding form.

“Those who work for me are well paid.”

“Even when you’re not?”

“I don’t do this for the money.”

“Ah, a wealthy aristocrat, slumming for the summer?” grunted Mustang.

“When my parents died, they left me... comfortably fixed.”

“They must’ve been really old.” The comment slipped out before she could restrain it.

“They died twenty years ago. I’ve been... pursuing other interests over the years. Now I’m here.”

“For how long?”

“Until I get bored, or find a reason to stay.”

“A young widow, perhaps?”

The interloper rose, dropping a pile of coins on the table. “Why must you be so sarcastic? It’s really not becoming in one so young.”

“Force of habit, I guess. Like enjoying a meal now and again.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get your reputation back within a few weeks. I thought living here and meeting people from all over the globe would be...”

“Exciting? Invigorating? Lucrative?” she supplied.

“There you go again. Why do you stay, if you’re such a cynic?”

Together, they rounded the stone fountain. She contemplated her answer carefully. “I stay because there’s more to this city than meets the eye.”

Scrawny fingers caught her forearm, halting her. “Show me.”

“Why? So you can put me completely out of business?”

“We’ll be partners. Fifty-fifty. You’ll be rolling in dough.”

She shook free. “No.”

He yelled after her as she skirted an oncoming crowd, “You’ll regret it!”

She already did, for that matter, pausing in a recessed doorway to catch her breath. Nothing irked her more than someone who made a point of deliberately inconveniencing others. If she hadn’t learn to control her random thoughts, she might’ve raised a boil on his backside which would irritate him to the point of insanity.

At that moment, her stomach growled.

Mustang visualized the scrapings of peanut butter remaining in the lone jar on her cupboard shelf, two slices of bread besides it. She did like to eat more than once a day...

She spun on her heel, nearly colliding with him.

“Change your mind?” he gloated.

The young woman sensed she'd been in this situation - too many times - before. Usually, under pressure from an individual who had learned about her oft-unwelcome gifts, she found herself backed into a corner, extorted to perform certain deeds and, rebelling at the notion of being controlled, retaliated in ways that caused damage to persons and buildings or, worse, death.

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," she warned.

"A simple partnership? Nonsense! If Carlo knows he'll be paid the same coming to you or me, we'll both benefit..."

"What, we pool our money at the end of the day?"

"Why not? I'm certainly not in this to get rich."

"Because you already are."

"Precisely."

She eyed his long-sleeved Disney half-marathon t-shirt, black track pants and Merrell walking shoes. "You've got some ulterior motive..."

"Sure. I speak three languages. I've heard you speak many more. If we diversify our clientele, we increase our profits."

"What'd you do in real life?" she queried.

"I operated a water treatment facility in Poughkeepsie."

At the very idea, laughter burst from her lips.

"Why is that funny?"

"More ironic than funny," admitted Mustang. "What's your name, anyway?"

"The passport reads Allan Denetdale."

"Unusual..."

He drew her from the path of an oncoming red Fiat 500. "Navajo. My fourth great-grandfather was a Cavalry scout during the Civil War. He rescued and later secretly married a widow who'd been imprisoned by the troops as a spy. After he was killed in battle, she took her newborn son to Chicago, passing him off as white, thanks to light skin and blue eyes. The Native American blood is quite diluted these days, and only a few of my cousins keep in contact..."

"I sense there's a 'but' coming..." Mustang hinted.

"My very Irish mother's only sister made sure her youngest son didn't forsake me. Until he died, that is."

The curse escaped her lips. "Oh, hell."

"By working on the Reservation, he sort of made up for my failure to be true to my blood."

Anger seethed in Mustang's soul, another deception trapping her. This cousin of Catholic priest/marathon runner Fr. Stephen Jamison, had stolen her clientele purposely. He sought revenge...

And, under close scrutiny, bore an uncanny resemblance to the deceased.

"When I first arrived in Assisi," he supplied, "I recognized you from the photo published after Steve miraculously survived being shot in the heart. There've been too many questions over the years... when I'm done with today's tour, I'd like some answers."

Mustang had noticed, even if Denetdale hadn't: the piazza was clearing due to the threat of rain. There would be no tours, unless the people came well-armed with umbrellas.

And, many didn't. Though rains in Umbria were normally warm and pleasant, downpours still soaked a person to the bone, and could cause a horrible chill. Such weather impacted the restaurants, shops, and street vendors, who relied upon tourism for their bread and butter.

Her turn to lead this newcomer into a rustic coffee shop. He ordered a cappuccino, while wiping the lenses of his reading glasses - which had been dangling from his shirt - on a paper napkin. She selected hot chocolate.

"I suppose, being the cousin of a priest, suspecting that you'd come to kill me was kind of ridiculous," she confessed, sipping the stimulating brew.

Denetdale toyed with his spoon. "I've known families where one is a priest and the other a convicted felon."

"That's old Hollywood."

"There's no accounting for environment, genetics, rank in the family pecking order..."

"So, you're admitting you do plan to kill me?"

"Not at all," he smirked. "But I would like to know what part you played in Steve's death."

"None, actually. I knew he needed a hip replacement, not that he had an irregular heartbeat - or cancer."

"You didn't... reanimate him after he'd been shot?"

"He wasn't dead, just close to it."

"How?"

Here it comes, Mustang lamented silently. She despised lying, and revealing her secret to this stranger could destroy what she had so carefully built during this prolonged Assisi exile...

"What did the locals tell you?" she deflected.

“Nothing specific. For one, being an outsider, they didn’t feel comfortable confiding in me. They also didn’t actually see...”

“What did Steve tell you?”

“Not so much direct information, but things posted on social media - television reports about random lightning strikes near his Arizona parish, or while he was in Montana running that last marathon. Something about a divine vision of the Blessed Mother, a pillar of fire...”

At least, that narrowed the field of possibilities, though she had made a grand mess of the whole incident by allowing her temper to overrule what common sense she boasted. “You know Steve drank, sometimes heavily.”

“That’s the Irish side of the family.”

“The majority of those... claims were most likely hallucinations.”

Fortunately, the direction Denetdale spit the hot liquid was not Mustang’s face. “Bullshit,” he scoffed.

“Why do you think so?” countered the woman, commandeering a stack of napkins to soak up the brown spray.

“Those scars on your palms aren’t the Stigmata.”

Self-consciously, Mustang slid her hands under the table as a clap of thunder rattled the windows beside them.

The distraction provided Mustang an opportunity to formulate her response. “Allan, I didn’t really like your cousin. He created a situation which I handled badly, so I did what was necessary to correct my mistakes. It’s in the past; my life has changed tremendously, and I’d rather the two of us simply part company.”

“You know that’s not feasible,” retorted the older man.

“Why?”

“Because we’re competitors, and the only way I’ll move on to my next... adventure is if you tell me the truth.”

That wasn’t going to happen, Mustang promised herself. She rose, pitched her paper cup in the recycle bin, and crossed to the exit. Denetdale shot off his chair, his half-full beverage spilling onto his lap. As he bemoaned the accident, she traversed the rainy piazza toward her apartment.

II

Withdrawing to the heights of Mount Subasio, Mustang camped in a small clearing near the pasture where wild horses fed, far from any temptations Allan Denetdale presented.

A leisurely game of chess gave her time to vent her frustrations to her companion, Francis, who listened with the patience of a saint.

“You thought, by coming here, to escape your troubles,” remonstrated the slight, painfully thin figure garbed in a worn, patched robe. “That’s one thing we can never escape.”

“You speak from experience?” chuckled Mustang.

A wry smile flashed across his bony features. “Centuries of experience.”

“The last few years have been so peaceful. I didn’t have to worry who I met, or about doing something stupid. Now, this...”

“A person’s mistakes often catch up to her, though ample time may pass in the interim.”

“What you’re saying is I’ll never be free?”

The Holy Man of Assisi’s expression grew wistful. “Once others realize you are special in whatever way... they cling to you like heavy chains. Casting them off becomes impossible. The only freedom comes in death.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Think about it, Signorina. The stories written about me: most are false, or ridiculously embellished, yet people believe them. Consider the tale how I spent nearly two months at San Damiano, unable to sleep because of mice and rats crawling all over me. Do you really think my brothers, and Blessed Clare, would have allowed that? They made me so comfortable, I felt as if committing a sin!”

“With me, the stories don’t need to be embellished,” Mustang sighed.

“True, true. You have created your own... mystique, and people love nothing better than to be close to that which is sensational.”

“Even if they end up dead.”

Setting aside the chess board, Francis stretched. “Come, the horses are waiting for their treat.”

The pair carried a basket of apples to where magnificent animals loitered amidst tall grass. Each accepted the gift, and allowed their manes to be gently stroked. In the process, Mustang recalled the horses raised on her parents’ Montana ranch, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Francis tossed her an apple, disrupting her reverie. “Eat, Signorina. You’ve taken no food all day.”

“The peanut butter jar is empty, and the bread has gone hard.”

“You must go back, and earn your living.”

“When I could just as well pop over to Nice and break the bank at a casino?”

His scowl required no words to clarify the sentiment.

“All right, all right. Maybe Allan’s tired of his game, and left town.”

A gruff baritone penetrated the tree line. “No such luck.”

Mustang spun so quickly, she frightened the horses. “Oh, hell!”

“Who are you talking to?” Denetdale queried, attired in Irish soccer shirt and matching track pants, leaning on a gnarled walking stick as he scanned the pasture.

Francis had vanished.

“Myself,” she bluffed. “Bad habit. What are you doing here?”

“Exploring on my day off. I’ve always loved hiking.”

“Good for you.” She hoisted the empty basket over her shoulder and strode toward the downhill path.

“You going to leave the rest of your belongings?” he challenged, poking at the lopsided hut of leafy branches, and a pile of dirty laundry.

Expletives barely audible, she doubled back to scoop the garments into a small duffle.

“Don’t rush off, please. Can’t we be civil?”

She grunted, “No.”

“I’ve got more work than I can handle. A partnership between us...”

“Dependent on whether or not I give you acceptable answers to your questions?”

“No, just expediency. And, you’re obviously short of funds.”

“I like living hand-to-mouth,” she sniffed, muttering a quiet plea to the horses.

When Denetdale attempted to pursue her, the herd blocked his route. He repeatedly moved to side-step them, only to be impeded anew.

Then, the scream.

Mustang cringed, instinctively backtracking and, when she glimpsed the man sprawled on the ground, broke into a run.

He’d spooked the horses with some movement or gesture, and the stallion had reared to protect them.

Shattered pelvis.

“Oh, hell.”

Moaning in agony, Denetdale worked to prop himself on his elbows, to view the damage.

“Be still,” Mustang warned.

Options limited: she couldn’t carry him down the mountain to a hospital, and he couldn’t even stand if she supported him. If she didn’t call upon nature to mend the bone, he would never leave that place.

Very likely, the memory would never leave his head, either. She couldn't have him using her power to his own advantage - as so many had done - or endangering the horses, to whom she'd promised freedom.

"They would not begrudge giving your friend a ride to town," suggested Francis, again visible.

She countered, "I swore they would never be used as beasts of burden."

"Then, what will you do?"

"Beyond healing him, I don't know."

"Heal him, certainly, and with some dispatch, for his pain will soon drive him to unconsciousness..."

Having him unconscious would be a decided plus, Mustang realized. She could somehow move him, and when he woke, she could convince him the whole debacle had been a nightmare.

Or, better still, get him to some safe location, and wipe his memory of the entire morning.

"Do you think that's wise?" pressed Francis.

"Probably not, but I have no other choice, given the circumstances."

One hideous yowl preceded his entire body relaxing in a faint. Out of her blanket, his walking stick and a sturdy twig, the woman created a type of sled, on which Denetdale lay while she dragged him through the trees and along hidden, packed earth trails. She roused him in the Piazza Santa Chiara, stretched on a stone bench built into the wall overlooking the valley bathed in evening sunlight.

"What... happened?" he muttered, shaking cobwebs from his muddled brain.

"You passed out." The truth, anyway.

"Ah, I remember!"

Sucking air, Mustang averted her face, though she'd disguised herself by turning auburn tresses black, pulling on a wide-brimmed straw hat, and hiding her hazel eyes behind large sunglasses.

"I came for the chalice!"

Not what she expected to hear.

Not at all.

"What chalice?" she prodded.

"The one Steve stole from me and brought here to hide..."

All too much became clear in that brief sentence; Mustang's fists clenched and unclenched.

Righting himself, Allan Denetdale grasped he had divulged too much, and to someone he believed a stranger. "Thank you for helping me. Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

"I was on my way to get a bite to eat at the Gran Caffè bakery..."

"Please, allow me."

The aging con artist - for that's how Mustang thought of him at that moment - behaved in a most considerate manner, until she discarded the hat and glasses at their table. Devouring delectable chocolate-filled cannoli, followed by two miniature creme horns and a puff pastry, she ignored his disdain.

"You slipped me a mickey," Denetdale accused her.

"When did I have the chance? I don't know where you live, and I haven't been within arm's length all day." Well, mostly true.

"Look, it'll be to our mutual benefit if we just take an hour or so to have a polite conversation."

"Maybe over dinner and a bottle of wine?" she proposed.

"Sure. My treat."

Wiping her mouth on a series of napkins - the chocolate that thick and delicious - Mustang rose. "I'll meet you in front of San Rufino at six."

"That's pretty early for dinner around these parts."

"The restaurant will be quieter, so we can talk."

The ascent to the Piazza San Rufino left her slightly winded, after the day's exertion. She rested against the stone wall near the bell tower for a moment, before facing three flights of stairs.

The kittens could be heard crying for their mother a short distance away - unusual, because they had the instinct to remain quiet while pedestrians wandered the area. Concerned, Mustang ambled to the collection of trash and recycling bins, checking for idle passersby before ducking behind to check the box.

No mother present, only five hungry babies.

Their caretaker counted twice. Yes, only five.

There should've been six.

That explained a lot: mama had gone in search of the prodigal.

It also meant danger - from people or cars.

The bells above rang the quarter hour; she had plenty of time to make a search. Requesting assistance from the natural forces, she listened intently and heard a weak voice not too far from where she stood.

To the errant creature with those short legs, it probably seemed like miles.

When Mustang located the noise, the mother cat hovered above an open grate, into which the black kitten had fallen.

It had been able to perch on a slippery ledge above a stream of running water - the drainage from someone's washing machine. Still, Mustang found it necessary to lie flat on the pavement and stretch painfully into the sewer, where the kitten thought it play time and batted at her hand with very sharp, albeit tiny, claws.

A firm grip assisted her upright. "You are a saint," whispered Francis, relieving her of her burden, nuzzling the frightened animal into calmness once more.

The mother pawed at his leg until he returned her damp child, which she grabbed by the scruff of the neck and carried toward their make-shift home.

"I'm no saint," quipped Mustang, her sleeve substituting for a handkerchief. "Unless caring about others qualifies."

"Not only do you care about those who can't help themselves, you take action to help."

"That still doesn't... besides, most often, I make a mess of things."

"Better than not trying at all," spoke the Holy Man of Assisi.

"Sometimes, I wonder." She limped toward the piazza, glancing back. "Is that a cheap shot?"

"No, simply the truth. You've made many mistakes, but most would not even take the risk."

"The potential to kill somebody makes that very understandable," she snorted, continuing on her way.

In her two-room flat, Mustang stripped off clothes smelling of muck, horses and earth, showered and chose a clean red flannel shirt and jeans from the wardrobe. Brushing out her hair, she tried three times unsuccessfully to braid it, finally leaving it to fall loose over her shoulders.

She didn't want Denetdale to make the same mistake his cousin, Stephen Jamison, had made years before: professing her to be the most beautiful female he'd seen in his life. Some aspect of her power created that aura, which occasionally drew men to her before they ever knew about the gifts Jack Parsons has passed to her.

Selecting a cozy trattoria along the Via Dona Doni, the pair settled in for the evening. Mustang sipped red wine, enjoying the three courses of salad, pasta and dessert, while Denetdale drained glass after glass of the local vintage.

Soon, he became quite talkative.

"Like a lot of kids from the sixties who got in with a bad crowd, I did some stupid shit," he drawled between bites of chicken alfredo. "Did time in juvenile hall for armed robbery and car theft."

Definitely a scenario from a Hollywood movie, his companion chuckled silently: Jamison the good priest and his bad cousin.

“I went straight for awhile, but a couple of my old cellmates looked me up with a job I couldn’t refuse.”

She waited, toying with her linguini.

“They’d heard about this jeweler who stopped at the same motel the second Friday of every month, bound for New York. No security, no nothing. They estimated he carried almost a half-million in gems and gold each trip.”

Denetdale poured wine up to the rim and imbibed half without bothering to appreciate the bouquet or the taste.

“They knew the stuff would have to be stashed for an extended period; that was my job. I’d done ceramics as part of my rehabilitation in the can. The idea was to make some clay pots or whatever, and bury the goods inside, set ‘em on a shelf somewhere, and later, bust ‘em apart and have a blast with the profits.”

Sounded quite creative to Mustang.

“But the guy put up one hell of a fight. Buck cracked him on the head with the bedside lamp from the motel room, then panicked. The bag of gems fell from the second floor balcony, scattering all over the parking lot. The cops were already on their way, so those two took off running. They were chased, while I was able grab a few of the bigger stones and duck down an alley. Had time to embed them in a chalice I was making - as a joke - for Steve’s tenth anniversary of his ordination, before I was ratted out and hauled to jail.”

Ah, the pieces were falling into place.

“Steve didn’t know until after I was released what I’d done. The chalice had been blessed, and used in his parish for years. He didn’t think it proper to turn it over to the police so, instead of returning it to me, he packed it when he came to Italy for his 25th anniversary. Some donor paid for the trip, and he had a chance to officiate at a wedding in one of the churches here in Assisi...”

“And hid the chalice,” Mustang supplied, Denetdale’s tongue growing numb.

He nodded.

“Your game was to earn my confidence, thinking Steve might’ve told me before he died where it was stashed.”

Another affirmative gesture.

“Bastard,” she grunted, bolting so quickly, his chair pitched backward and he landed, unconscious once more, on the floor.

This time, she didn’t stop to check on him.

Somewhere in Assisi, a group of students was singing and clapping - a type of rally common among young travelers, though Mustang couldn't understand why the residents didn't strenuously object, given the late hour. She trudged homeward, again disappointed by the greed of humanity.

III

That a hangover kept Allan Denetdale from accepting tours the following day had not been Mustang's intention. Yet, young Carlo came searching for her, desperate for his pocket money - which she promised after she received whatever donation was made at the end of the day.

A good day, too. Groups in the morning and afternoon netted her 100 Euros, promptly used to buy groceries and pay some of her past-due rent. Returning from the Eremo delle Carceri through the arched stone gate, she encountered her competitor propped against a battered delivery van, grey-green orbs unfocused.

"Thank heavens, I've never had a hangover," the woman chided.

"Why'd you let me drink so much?"

"I'm not your keeper. And you're surely old enough to know your limits."

"I..."

She snickered, "I know, it's the Irish blood."

"No, it's the Italian wine. Not the same as the stuff in the States."

"You've been here long enough, you should know."

"My... usual is a Tanqueray gin martini."

The mere thought turned Mustang's stomach.

San Rufino's bells rang the half hour, then broke into mad peals of joy - another wedding, she surmised. That reminded her of Stephen Jamison's mission... if she could find the hidden chalice with its stolen cache of jewels, there might be a generous reward from the authorities, even after decades.

Her teeth clenched. She could never claim such a bounty, given her need to avoid attention from the likes of the FBI or Interpol.

Her lot in life would be toiling for her bread until she could rid herself of these powers, or die.

Not a pleasant prospect.

She didn't care if Allan Denetdale hobbled after her, shielding his eyes from the descending sun with a trembling left hand. She'd devised a plan to begin searching the numerous churches in the city, at night when they were secured against ordinary tourists.

Unlocking a side door and creeping into the ancient structures wasn't exactly violating her frequently-broken vow to not call upon nature.

The sunset had cast its glorious colors over the valley; still she waited, listening to Indian melodies from a restaurant near the Basilica of Santa Chiara until almost midnight. Only when the lone disruption was a gentle north breeze did she change into a black turtleneck and sweats, venturing onto the cobbles, avoiding the piazza for a lane beneath the bell tower.

Past mistakes had taught her vital lessons about being thorough in her request of the natural forces. Not only did she direct the door in the wall to give up its lock, but that its hinges remain silent while opening for her. Within the cavernous structure, no electric lights provided illumination, just the memory of candles which had once burned in sconces on the pink marble walls.

Manual inspection of potential concealment would take until dawn, she realized. Having known Stephen Jamison, she guessed he would have placed the chalice in a wooden box, and wedged it beneath a statue or other fixture where it would not be disturbed. Visualizing this, she coordinated the elements to point her toward any such treasure.

Nothing.

By 3:00 AM, she'd returned to her flat and fell asleep, fully clothed, on the twin bed. Carlo's knock six hours later roused her from a series of bizarre dreams, better forgotten.

How fickle the loyalty of the young! she mourned, accepting the summons to lead visiting priests on a tour. She'd given the shopkeeper's son a generous tip the previous day, so he'd abandoned Denetdale.

Or, perhaps, Denetdale had abandoned Assisi.

In his own words, "No such luck." He'd secured employment with a cluster of families; the two groups crossed paths outside the Chiesa Nuova.

He didn't acknowledge her by gesture or sign.

The Chiesa Nuova itself offered little in the way of hope for finding the chalice, the interior filled with scaffolding during renovations. Anything hidden would have been discovered and reported.

Mustang marked that church off her list, not leaving anything to chance however. San Pietro, Santo Stefano, and other churches were ticked off, one by one, as her body bemoaned the lack of rest.

She still had the basilicas to search. Santa Chiara featured two levels - the main church and the crypt where St. Clare's remains were enshrined. The probability that Fr. Jamison had gained access to the adjacent monastery of the Poor Clares remote, she eliminated those buildings from her list.

Not so the Sacro Convento, attached to the Basilica of San Francesco at the opposite end of the city. Jamison might have resided there during his visit, and she had no means to verify that fact without raising undue attention.

No telling how often Franciscan friars cleaned beneath their beds, or those in the guest rooms.

The basilica itself contained the upper church, the lower church, and the crypt - with St. Francis no longer enshrined therein, thanks to Mustang's erstwhile impulsive utterance.

For that matter, the earthquake which struck the area some years previous might have dislodged the chalice and buried it beneath still-unexcavated rubble. To retrieve it would mean another earthquake shaking away the debris...

And the end of her days in the Umbrian countryside.

Not worth the trouble.

She stood in the midst of the gloom that midnight, electric candles the sole illumination in the Mass chapel. Placing her hands on the back of a highly-polished pew, she imagined a grid connecting the entire complex together and begged the universal forces to find the object of her search.

An iridescent glow shown through the ceiling, but it wasn't that simple to reach the floor above. Mustang crept to the far end of the structure, where doors to a courtyard were bolted, preventing her from reaching the stairs. Manipulating the tumblers silently took patience, and the steps themselves were uneven stone which left her panting.

No spotlight could've been brighter, blinding her until she murmured, "Tone it down, already!" Then, a soft radiance steered her toward the front of the building, Giotto frescoes lining the walls, still awaiting restoration.

"Better than a GPS." Allan Denetdale's shoes squeaked as he traversed the floor, a sign he'd been through a patch of dew-covered grass.

"Oh, hell..."

"Did you honestly believe no one would figure out what you're doing?"

"Are you talking about the Carabinieri?" she queried.

"Oh, they'd love to nab you on breaking and entering, but I was referring to myself."

Mustang exhaled audibly.

"I don't look kindly on anyone who... double-crosses me."

"I wasn't double-crossing you," she protested, then reconsidered. Wanting the chalice with its stolen gems for herself, to dispose of in an appropriate manner - whatever that decision might be - could be interpreted as such...

She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "What will you do with it?"

“What was originally intended.”

“But, you’re already rich...”

Denetdale guffawed. “You really are naive, aren’t you? I lied.” He approached warily. “Once I have it, I’ll be rich.”

Con man, indeed, Mustang mused. He’d led her a merry dance since they’d met, and she’d enjoyed the music.

For his part, though, he didn’t suspect the extent of her power. The anger welling in her soul threatened to wreak havoc at that very second, if she didn’t exert some serious self-control.

“Allan, don’t.” The tenor echoed through this high-ceilinged chamber from origin unknown. “You’ve got a chance to salvage your life, to redeem yourself.”

Mustang recognized the voice from past dealings with Fr. Stephen Jamison, but could not take responsibility for his manifestation. When Francis trod the stones alongside the deceased Arizona priest, she breathed easier.

Denetdale’s reaction to seeing his cousin bordered on panic. “Steve? What the hell...”

“That’s where you’ll end up, if you don’t abandon this stupidity and leave Assisi at once,” stated Jamison.

The criminal shifted his gaze from the subtly shimmering image to Mustang. “You *did* slip me a mickey!”

“When? I haven’t seen you for days!” she replied.

“Then, how can I be hallucinating?”

“You’re not.” Jamison clamped ethereal fingers on Denetdale’s shoulder. “You’re facing judgment for your sins.”

Denetdale wrenched free. “Don’t give me that sanctimonious bullshit, Steve! You know I don’t believe...”

Frankly, Mustang didn’t hold with religion, either, but she grasped - through her interactions with the likes of St. Francis, Gandhi, Mark Twain and Erwin Rommel - the afterlife existed in a very interesting form.

She’d also found, no matter how logical an argument, some people just didn’t listen.

Denetdale, she was convinced, would ignore his cousin’s scolding and do as he pleased.

And face the consequences, not too gracefully - be it arrest and imprisonment, or death.

In the interim, she retreated into the center compartment of an ornate wooden confessional near the basilica entrance, groping beneath the bench where the priest normally sat, and extracted a corrugated box, sealed with moldy duct

tape. Shredding the material, she marveled at the workmanship of the gold-glazed clay chalice, precious stones completely concealed within.

As one source of illumination faded, that provided by the visiting spirits cast plentiful shadows to facilitate Mustang's stealthy exit from the 13th century structure. She heard the contentious conversation persist, but paid no attention to the words.

Allan Denetdale did not know where she lived, a definite advantage. She could stash the chalice in her kitchen cupboard, until she determined its fate.

That wouldn't transpire until after she made up for all the sleep she'd missed in recent weeks.

That wouldn't transpire with Francis and Stephen Jamison awaiting her just beyond the threshold.

"Not now," she objected. "I'm too exhausted."

The saint countered, "We thought you'd want to know."

"Not really."

"He's stubborn, that one," remarked Jamison, not attired in his clerical collar, but a torn white t-shirt and sweats.

He died fleeing attendants from a mental ward, after professing he'd experienced divine visions, among other phenomena.

"Seems to run in the family," Mustang grunted, setting the chalice on the dinette table.

"If you don't give that to him, he'll find a way to take it."

"Is it such a big deal, really? Is anyone really looking for these jewels after so many years?"

Francis interspersed, "That's not the point. Justice must be served..."

"Then, he should've turned it in back in the day..." Mustang thrust her index finger toward the other spectral visitor. "Why'd you bring him here, anyway?"

"To prevent a murder," supplied Jamison.

That elicited a hearty laugh from their hostess. "You telling me Allan would've..."

"He had a hunting knife tucked in his waistband. He'd been following you from church to church, night after night, waiting until you found the chalice..."

"Thank you for saving my life." Mustang bowed with a smirk. "I'm going to bed."

Jamison caught her arm in passing. "What will you do with it?"

She shoved him away, so he bounced on the lumpy cushions of the love seat. "Smash it to bits, and flush the pieces down the toilet."

Her bedroom door slammed, leaving the two staring at each other.

“She doesn’t understand,” muttered the priest, rising.

The saint replied, “You underestimate her.”

“Why *did* you bring me here? You could’ve easily stopped Allan...”

“The Signorina could’ve stopped him, too - permanently. Another death on her conscience, even one caused by self-defense, might totally unhinge her. She’s existed peacefully since coming to Assisi, and to have that spoiled by... opportunistic fools...”

Jamison grinned, nodding. “You thought my presence would defuse the situation, and Allan might rethink his plan... but you were wrong.”

“I took a chance. Protecting that woman has become important to me. She’s not responsible for what happened to her, and has done her best to learn and control her emotions... but she’s still young.”

From the opposite side of the warped panel, Mustang eavesdropped on this exchange. Touched by the care and concern of Assisi’s patron saint, she nonetheless would not be swayed to place herself at further risk. Stephen Jamison would return to the eternal realms unsatisfied.

Stripping off her sneakers, black turtleneck and jeans, she fell onto the rumped twin bed, soon snoring.

The brilliance of a full moon through the window did not rouse her, nor did the dawn sunlight, followed by thick clouds and a thunderstorm. She felt no guilt upon waking at 3:00 PM, the persistent rain reassuring her no tours would’ve been possible that day.

Her refrigerator offered up eggs and bacon, since her finances had recovered somewhat during the tenuous truce with Denetdale. The meal satisfied her stomach, but her mind still churned with uncertainty about the treasure perched on the cupboard’s top shelf.

Too late in the day for a hike up Mount Subasio to see the wild horses, she opted to distract herself by checking on the kittens. A fresh bag of cat food would feed the entire family now, the youngsters having very definite, incredibly sharp teeth.

Their box nestled behind the trash bins, and under a jutting stone overhang, they’d been spared a wetting from the day’s precipitation. The black female - whom Mustang had named “Wanderer” due to her tendency to venture further than her brothers and sisters - stuck her nose out from behind the nearest set of steps, wet fur betraying a trek through puddles along the lanes.

The unofficial keeper used a bath towel she’d draped over her shoulders to dry the creature, a process she resisted strenuously with meows and claws. Once

finished, she resembled a fluff ball, content to be back in the cardboard confines with her mother.

Grandchildren of one shopkeeper had been peering at Mustang from a nearby doorway, fearful of punishment should they spoil their clothes with rain or mud. The woman beckoned them over, and they crept through the drizzle to see the fuzzy animals.

As a rule, Mustang didn't like youngsters. Her own youth in Montana left her with sour memories of an uncaring father and distant mother. Happiness, such as these little ones displayed at the kittens' antics, had not been possible there.

She chaperoned the trio until their grandmother summoned them for dinner, harsh words at the need to wash their hands and faces thoroughly - having been well licked by sandpaper tongues - not dispelling their innocent joy.

A plate of pasta would hit the spot, so she strolled down the Via Dona Doni, then the Via Sermei, continuing toward the Porta Nuova, where a variety of shops and restaurants catered to tourists, whose busses had avoided the town that day, or departed before the storms. Being a "local", the menu she received from the owner reflected far lower prices than those given to the unwary travelers.

Sad, but true.

Though made popular by its saints, Assisi was not a saintly town in some aspects.

Mustang recalled the old saying, "Caveat emptor" - let the buyer beware. Or, the adage, "What the traffic allows."

People who came to see the shrines, or pray before the altars, were not always thrifty with their money. And, with tourist season lasting only part of the year, the businesses needed to make a profit to sustain them through the lean months of winter.

She was ruminating over this philosophy as she enjoyed the bowl of manicotti, when her thoughts were disrupted by Allan Denetdale, pale and bleary-eyed, commandeering the chair opposite.

"Go away," she instructed.

"We need to talk."

"No, we don't."

"That... that... Steve and the other dead guy..."

"If you don't leave, I *will* turn you in to the Carabinieri."

"They've got nothing on me," he snapped defensively. "Besides, if you do, I'll finger you for breaking and entering all those churches."

She snickered, "There's no proof. No jimmed locks, no fingerprints..."

Defeated, he rose. "Don't think this is the end."

Her response incomprehensible, she continued chewing the *al dente* rigatoni.

IV

Mustang Duryea fully realized Allan Denetdale would be lying in wait for her to emerge from the trattoria, in order to pursue her to her flat and confiscate the hidden chalice. Even clouds and rain would not dissuade one so determined.

She could be determined, too. Determined not to be seen. A mere thought and, as she exited the restaurant after paying her bill, she vanished between the water droplets, whisking right past Denetdale, who cowered beneath a souvenir shop awning. Tempted to give him an additional wetting by stomping in a puddle, she instead left him to his futile vigil.

Thursday morning broke clear and warm. Dreamless sleep refreshed Mustang, and she anticipated a day of guiding tours, suspecting Denetdale would still be in bed, possibly nursing a head cold from his exposure to the previous night's weather.

Indeed, young Carlo knocked on her door while she was sipping a mug of hot chocolate and munching on a slice of buttered toast. He did not bring her word of a group seeking her expertise.

“Signore Allan asks that you look out on the piazza,” stated the child.

A factor Mustang had not included in her calculations of Denetdale's resourcefulness: Carlo knew where she lived, and Allan knew Carlo. The 50 euro note peeking out from the boy's coat pocket as he scurried along the corridor proved as much.

“Oh, hell...”

Desperation must've motivated the man, because he stood in the middle of the stone square, the cat box at his feet, holding three of the angry kittens for her to see.

What kind of warped soul held helpless animals hostage to obtain what he wanted?

Not that the mother of this litter would tolerate such treatment. Mustang observed her sink her claws into Denetdale's leg, not understanding why he didn't flinch. From her vantage point, the woman could tell he was wearing leather boots beneath his jeans; he'd thought out this tactic well.

A microburst of wind would knock him prone, but might also harm the kittens, despite the accepted fact cats always landed on their feet. Nerves taut,

Mustang pulled on her Pink Floyd t-shirt, green sweats from a hook in the wardrobe, and shoved her sockless feet into still-damp sneakers.

Scurrying down three narrow flights of stairs, she didn't care if the noise woke her neighbors. She burst through the door, Denetdale's sneer aggravating her temper to dangerous levels.

"Are you out of your mind?" she demanded. "Put them down!"

He replied, "Did you bring it?"

"Bring what?"

"You know what. Why do you think I'm out here..."

"Put them down, or you'll never see noon!"

The threat didn't faze Denetdale. His fingers tightened around the Wanderer's neck, and the black kitten squirmed in discomfort.

"When we first met, you asked me about my involvement with your cousin."

"Yeah. Those hokey stories about pillars of fire, and miracles..."

"Even after seeing him risen from the dead..."

"That was... unexpected, but you drugged me somehow."

Abruptly, his hands released the kittens, who dropped to the ground with annoyed meows. They huddled around their mother, while Mustang elevated Denetdale above the stones.

"As I said to Steve all those years ago: your feet hit the ground, they better start running."

"Not until..."

"Or, you can imagine what it would be like to sail over San Rufino and land on your head in the parking lot."

He inched higher into the air, and his voice reflected genuine panic. "I... okay, okay. I give up."

She didn't alter his position. "Not that simple, Allan. You have four hours to leave Assisi, or I go to the Carabinieri with the whole tale."

"You wouldn't!"

He'd called her bluff - and bluff it was, because she'd sworn to have nothing to do with law enforcement since she'd freed herself of FBI surveillance and Interpol interference - but she wouldn't acknowledge the tactic. "Try me," she concluded.

Hovering higher than the cathedral doors, Denetdale succumbed to his fears. "I'll be on the next bus."

"With no plans to return."

"The chalice!"

“Will be donated to the poor, perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” he scoffed. “You’ll keep it for yourself!”

If only I could, Mustang contemplated silently. The necessity of dealing with those who dealt in stolen goods, or jewelers needing to appraise the gems’ value... No, not worth the pain.

Not worth the pain to let Denetdale live, either, she grasped. He might leave under duress; nothing would keep him from returning to the city and claiming what he deemed his rightful possession.

In a bizarre way, Mustang pondered a similar probability for others she’d allowed to live in the years since Jack Parsons had imparted his power to her. The very notion they might seek her out, for revenge, or closure, or whatever motivation...

She shuddered, and Denetdale dipped toward the pavement, shrieking in fear.

Could it be that his straw-like grey hair stood straighter than usual? Mustang managed a wry laugh. She’d wiped his mind once, making him forget about the horses high on Mount Subasio. Repeating the process...

A huge void would occur in his life - the reason he was imprisoned decades ago, his relationship with Stephen Jamison...

“Very good,” praised Francis from behind her left shoulder. “Now, put him down.”

Mustang complied. Disobeying a saint merited more serious repercussions than accidentally killing someone, she’d learned.

Boots again in contact with solid ground, Allan Denetdale heaved a sigh of relief. In two strides, he stood nose-to-nose with the woman, growling, “You... you...”

Francis’ grip on her wrist reminded her not to think, or say, anything foolish.

“Four hours, Allan,” she emphasized quietly. “I’ll know if you’re not gone.”

He marched off in a huff, almost tripping over one of the kittens he’d manhandled. Mustang watched him veer down the hill, then squatted to gather up the box and its inhabitants.

“You’re ready to be on your own, just about,” she soothed the disoriented creatures. “But not quite yet.”

Another week, and they’d be seeking their own territory.

“Better you find them homes,” opined Francis.

“They’re feral. They couldn’t stand being cooped up inside.”

“Similar to you not being comfortable ‘cooped up’?”

She nodded.

“Take the day. Go and see the horses,” the saint suggested.

“With Allan gone, there’ll be four groups to guide.”

“You will worry about him?”

A shrug preceded Mustang’s answer. “Guys like him are like a dog with a bone. They won’t let go.”

“But, you have no solution.” They walked together to the alley where the row of trash bins concealed the kittens.

“I didn’t expect him to pull such a stunt. It threw me off...”

“All I ask is that you don’t sabotage the bus or train he will take to Rome,” advised Francis.

“It hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“Good. That means you’ve truly matured in self-control.”

She snorted, “Except for hoisting him ten feet in the air.”

“No real harm done.”

“And, oddly, no one saw...” The woman squinted at her companion.

“That their shutters would not open is... convenient.”

Together, they chuckled, as the Wanderer scaled Mustang’s back and rested on her shoulder.

“They will need homes,” reasserted Francis. “You’ve tamed them so completely, they will not be able to fend for themselves.”

“With your access to inside information, you’re undoubtedly right.”

Restoring the kitten to her mother, Mustang straightened. “I’ll put out the word.”

He thrust a bony hand toward a door where the grandchildren were observing them. “I think the word may already be out.”

Puffing from exertion, Carlo located Mustang there, with Francis instantly vanishing. “Signorina, groups are anxious for your services.”

No cash in her sweat pockets, the boy waved away her offer to pay him later. “My papa has forbidden me from taking your money, after he learned what trouble I caused you.”

“Tell them I’ll be in the Piazza del Comune in ten minutes.” Enough time to change her clothes.

Consigning both the kittens and Allan Denetdale to the back of her mind while she ushered Americans, Argentinians and Romanians through the narrow Assisi streets, Mustang earned enough to pay a month’s rent in advance and fully stock her kitchen cabinets. Taking out the trash as the sunset cast a colorful glow over San Rufino’s bell tower, a stranger approached, followed by three children.

“Signorina?” he greeted.

“Yes?”

“I believe you know my bambinos.”

She eyed the youngsters, who had been staying with their grandmother.

“Yes.”

“They are begging me to take the kittens home with us.”

“Where is home?”

“We have a farm near Foligno. They would have room to roam, and would serve by keeping the rodents away from the grain bins.”

“You want all of them?”

“Si, Signorina. And the mother.”

The boy and two girls, their puppy-dog orbs pleading with her, framed by dark locks, melted her heart. “When do you leave?”

“In the morning.”

“I’ll see they are fed and ready.”

“No need.” He revealed a bag of cat food from behind his back. “We... anticipated your agreement.”

At least, Mustang would have a chance to bid the litter farewell.

Or, not.

Carlo brought the news after helping close his father’s souvenir shop. “Signorina, I thought you’d want to know,” he puffed when she answered his knock.

She waited, not particularly anxious.

“The bus... the noon bus down to Santa Maria degli Angeli...”

“What about it?”

“A car... driven by a man from London...”

These scant details began to form into quite a disastrous scenario.

After the boy had drained a glass of water, and his chest ceased heaving, he recounted the news report of the bus - on the route which ran twice hourly up and down Mount Subasio between Assisi and the town below - was struck head-on by the mini-van with Great Britain license plates. It seems the driver, who died on impact, forgot that Italians drive on the right. He was in the left lane, and could not avoid the collision on the sharp curve.

Allan Denetdale had been on that bus.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I helped carry his luggage to where the bus had stopped at the Porta Nuova.”

She gazed at him, suspect.

“I knew you would want confirmation of his departure.”

Mustang gulped guiltily. “I appreciate that, Carlo.”

He rose, but moved no further.

“There’s more?”

“Signore Denetdale...”

“Is in hospital?”

“No, Signorina. He was thrown from the bus, and struck his head on a rock.”

Another wave of guilt clenched her teeth as she spun toward the window. She hadn’t wished it, hadn’t instructed nature...

Fumbling in her jean pocket, she pressed a five Euro note into the boy’s hand. “Thanks, Carlo. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Buona sera, Signorina.”

“Buona sera.”

The door closed quietly behind him; Mustang remained staring out the window at the stars.

“I thought the phase of my life where people I know dropped dead like flies was over,” she spoke aloud to the night breeze.

“People you know die every day,” proclaimed Francis from the shadows. “Their deaths have no direct connection to the way you control, or don’t control, your power.”

“That’s nice to hear, but is it true?”

“You’ve been in Assisi for a number of years, and nothing untoward has happened. Just because there’s one... problematic interaction...”

“Will there be more?” She sank on the wooden chair at the dinette table, head buried behind her scarred palms. “If one person connected to my past can find me, won’t others?”

The silence jangled her nerves.

“You know, and you won’t tell,” she accused the saint.

“Time, as I’ve said on many occasions, is fluid in the afterlife.”

“So, Allan will know it wasn’t my doing...”

“Once he’s adjusted to his... unexpected demise.”

Mustang peered between her fingers at the diminutive, emaciated figure. “You mean, it’s like something out of the old movies, where a person doesn’t realize he’s dead right away?”

“When it’s sudden, yes.”

“And, there’s no heaven or hell...”

“Existence is... not so black and white in the ethereal realms,” he reassured her. “Probably, the degree of boredom a soul experiences is more hellish for those who had... unrealistic expectations.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Nor did I,” Francis affirmed. “Being taught by priests and others that one would endure among the choirs of angels for all eternity... The reality was a definite disappointment.”

“Then, I shouldn’t long for death as a release from my... situation?”

“Of course not! Remember how Jack Parsons lived to a ripe old age, pretending to be the caretaker of Boleskine House. You can do the same, if you keep a low profile.”

“I’ve tried. But, I have to wonder, did I leave the equivalent of a trail of breadcrumbs, which people will follow, to once more disrupt my life, as they did when I lived in Scotland?”

Francis’ minuscule grin spoke volumes.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang murmured. “Can you tell Allan I’m sorry?”

“No need. And, if it’s any consolation, he was writing you a postcard on the bus, apologizing to you for what he’d done. He intended to mail it before he boarded his train. If he’d been watching the road, he could’ve held on and saved himself...”

“Consolation? You mean, it *is* my fault he died?”

“No, no...”

Agitated, and fearful of the consequences, Mustang grumbled, “Be gone, Francis.”

He vanished.

She got to her feet and opened the cupboard where the hastily crafted clay chalice rested on the top shelf - a small fortune in jewels embedded within.

It crumbled into worthless dust.

In that instant, she did not entertain much hope for the future. Her exile, her refuge, might be compromised at any moment, and she despised humanity for its greed and insensitivity.

Still, she would have to live one day at a time, and do her best to avoid more than cursory contact with the tour groups, or others she encountered.

Self-preservation would be the priority.

And she would fail, as she had so many times before.

Tears dripped into the sink.