

The Mustang Chronicles:

Ebullient Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

A concept Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea could not fathom: destination weddings.

Since leaving Montana shortly after her graduation from Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School at age 18 - had it been 13 years already? she mused that late September morning - such events had increased in popularity.

She couldn't figure out why a couple, Americans mostly, would spend tens - hundreds - of thousands of dollars, Euros, British pounds to drag their parents, attendants, relatives and friends across the country, or across an ocean, to celebrate an event that might end in divorce within a few years.

Buzz about this latest affair reached every corner of Assisi, Italy. The bride's family must've been extremely wealthy, Mustang determined, to afford loading the travelers on a chartered jet to fly from Chicago to London, then transfer to an elite cruise ship, docking in Rome for a luxurious ride in a parade of limousines to the city adorning the western slope of Mount Subasio.

Visits by the Catholic Pope merited an equal amount of excitement.

The wedding party included a bishop and four priests, with the nuptials scheduled for that Saturday in the main chapel at the Basilica San Francesco. Prior to that, upscale bistros were reserved for exclusive functions every night, with tours through the day for groups no larger than ten.

Mustang touted as a knowledgeable multi-lingual guide by the souvenir dealers with whom she'd become friendly, her services were in high demand; she'd been guaranteed 100 Euros per hour.

Not that she spoke any language other than English. A power over nature bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons, occultist and scientist, allowed her brain to automatically translate other tongues into English, while those to whom she spoke heard her in their native dialect.

Another advantage: she had first-hand information on the countless historic sites in the city, thanks to her close acquaintance with its most famous son, St. Francis.

This display of extravagance and affluence would cover her expenses through the forthcoming off-season until the following spring. The auburn-haired woman - who many presumed was a teenager, given her youthful mien - was fine with that.

From the window of her tiny flat overlooking the Piazza San Rufino, she reveled in the magnificent sunrise. After a bowl of cereal, she showered and donned a sky blue t-shirt, jeans, sneakers and a red plaid flannel shirt to stave off

the morning chill. Tying her hair in a ponytail, she snatched a wide-brimmed straw hat off the coat tree before heading down narrow stairs to the quiet flagstone-paved square.

The smell of freshly baked bread assailed her nostrils, reminding her that staff of the Gran Caffè, her favorite establishment for pastries near the Basilica Santa Chiara, would be putting the finishing touches on the wedding cake that afternoon.

A sight not to be missed, so rumors had it.

She descended to the Piazza del Comune at a brisk pace, halting abruptly. At scattered intervals around this heart of Assisi, media vans of various shapes and colors, call signs emblazoned on the sides, had set up satellite dishes, reporters eager to begin live transmission of pre-wedding activities.

“Oh, hell...”

Since the day she discovered how much ruin could be wrought by her affinity with the elements - thanks to impulsive utterances - she'd stringently avoided publicity or, when it occurred, managed to erase the recordings from all storage devices. For her presence to be captured by the lens of a Steadicam, even accidentally, would disrupt the idyllic existence she'd created for herself in the years since she'd abandoned voluntary exile in Scotland.

She couldn't risk guiding the tours if reporters planned to tag along.

Hoping to remain unobtrusive, she reversed course, navigating the steep lane toward her flat. Disappointment hardened her jaw; tears welled in her eyes.

Not a propitious combination for someone who, when angry, could cause horrible disasters.

“Hey, you!”

The shout seemed to envelop Mustang from behind. She hesitated before continuing her trek.

A rhythmic pattern of footsteps approached; a firm hand gripped her shoulder.

“Are you deaf or something?” puffed the female. “I just wanted to ask...”

Confronted with burning hazel eyes and scowling lips, the American journalist withdrew her fingers. “Sorry, I thought you were one of the natives...”

Curious about this assumption, Mustang retorted, “What makes you think I'm not?”

“Your... hair, for one.”

“So, because Italians in old movies all had dark hair, you automatically...”

The lithe blonde with the bob cut expressed genuine remorse. “I'm... sorry if I offended you.”

Without replying, Mustang resumed her climb, only to be tailed.

“I was hoping to find somewhere we could plug in our equipment, since our generator has crapped out on us and our camera battery is almost dead,” pleaded the woman.

“I suggest you try the restaurants in the piazza.”

“I... don’t speak Italian.”

“Too bad for you.”

Tired of the pursuit, the reporter accelerated her pace. She passed Mustang and stopped, blocking further progress.

Mustang felt her temper rising. “Look, I can’t help you....”

“Why not? You’re an American, living in an Italian town. You must understand the lingo, and speak it, even a little bit. All I need is five minutes.”

The sigh originated in the depths of her soul. “Oh, all right.”

Together, the pair tramped down the incline. The reporter, who introduced herself as Carrie Byers, led Mustang to the van sporting a prestigious cable network logo, parked directly in front of Carabinieri headquarters.

Mustang would definitely not be requesting assistance from *them*.

In fact, she wished she’d commanded nature to darken her auburn mane before plunging into this... mess. So much easier to blend in with the locals if she needed to make a fast break for safety.

The owner of a café situated just beyond toted a bucket of soapy water from his establishment, intent on washing windows before welcoming customers. Mustang approached him with a cheery greeting.

While he heard it in Italian, Carrie heard it in English.

She ignored the phenomenon, busy untangling wires her inexperienced associate had dumped in the van’s storage compartment. When Mustang notified her that Fidelio would allow them to use his electrical outlets - as long as they purchased coffee from him - she smiled her gratitude.

Faking nonchalance, Mustang skirted the piazza, only relaxing her muscles after diverting into an alley. She’d performed her good deed for the day, and would sequester herself in her apartment until the wedding was over and done.

Or, not.

“Are you our tour guide?”

Her chin drooped. “Oh, hell...”

An imposing figure in ivory silk shirt, custom tailored trousers and Armani shoes towered over her when she turned.

She gulped. “May I help you?”

“I was told our tour guide was a lovely, red-headed young lady.”

Idle flattery agitated her nerves. “Thanks.”

“I’m Norman Rawlings, the groom’s father. We’re ready, if you are.”

Trapped, Mustang had no choice. “Sure.”

Rawlings signaled to those milling near the piazza’s ancient fountain with its three lions. They trooped toward her; none of the camera crews seemed to pay attention, a relief for the woman who would spend the next two hours sharing the city’s history.

After the second tour - a wad of 100 Euro bills stuffing her jean pocket, tips from individuals appreciative of her thoroughness - Mustang wound her way to the Gran Caffè bakery. Curved glass cases overflowed with delectable treats, and she emerged into the warm sunlight with a large waxed paper sack of delights. She had time to purchase a carton of milk at the little grocer’s and return to her apartment for a siesta before the next tour at 2:00.

Another at 4:00 would round out this shift. Fortunately, her sneakers provided sufficient arch support, or her legs would’ve been throbbing from so much walking - including down and up the hill to San Damiano in the valley.

Mustang had always meant to ask St. Francis how he managed that feat so often, in the days when he and his first brothers lived at a compound near St. Mary of the Angels, and begged for stones to rebuild churches or food for the lepers in the city.

Thighs of iron were an absolute must for such exertion.

That last circuit might’ve ended without incident, had a bicyclist not rounded the corner too fast near the Porto Nuova gate and collided with her as she brought up the rear from the excursion to the former home of St. Clare. Propelled backward by the impact, she slammed into the stone archway and, wind knocked from her lungs, crumpled to the ground.

Most of the tourists proceeded toward their hotel, unaware of the accident. A straggler from the group, however, focused more on snapping photos of the landscape with his Nikon, witnessed the ordeal and rushed over, squatting beside her.

“Are you all right?” he queried, offering his hands to lift her upright.

She accepted the gesture, maintaining her grasp until she was sure of her balance. “Yes, thanks.”

“Would a drink help?”

“No. I’m fine, really.” She brushed dirt from her jeans. “You’d better catch up to your friends. It’s way too easy to get lost on the winding streets...”

His pleasant baritone conveyed a hint of Scottish burr and a soothing quality. “I’d gladly accompany you wherever you need to go.”

“That’s not necessary...”

Though, as soon as she took a step, her left ankle buckled.

“Or, maybe it is.”

She clutched his arm as she limped the distance to the Piazza San Rufino, a nearly 30 minute venture. Rather than struggle in tandem on the stairs, her companion scooped her up and carried her, not even panting when he deposited her on the battered love seat in her stark flat.

He rummaged through the kitchenette cabinets for a glass, filling it from the tap and bringing it to her.

“Thanks, but you really don’t need...” she objected.

“Nonsense.” He knelt in front of her, unlacing her sneaker to gently remove it and the frayed tube sock from an already swollen foot. “You really ought to have a doctor exam this.”

“It’s just a sprain.” She wasn’t going to admit, once he departed, the injury would heal itself with a simple directive.

“Have you a cane, or a walking stick, so you can get around?”

Mustang reflected. “In my bedroom... maybe.”

“I’ll fetch it for you.”

When he moved, she clutched the sleeve of his orange hooded sweatshirt.

“Please, no.”

Staring down at her, he flashed a momentary grin, the corners of his mouth twitching upward just a tick. “Stubborn woman!” he chided. He pried her fingers loose. “As you wish.”

Just for an instant, a vague recollection assailed Mustang’s brain. She shook her head to dispel the image, muttering, “Thanks for taking the time...”

“No trouble, my dear.” He relieved her of the empty tumbler, placing it on the stained laminate counter. A swift assessment of the cupboards’ contents furrowed his sloped brow. “You haven’t much in the way of staples...”

She chuckled. “I’d planned to swing by the grocer’s on my way home.”

“If you make a list, I’d be happy to...”

“You’ve done more than enough, and I appreciate it.”

He lowered his trim frame onto the straight wooden chair at the dinette table. “Why are you, an American, living here?”

She studied his bluish-brown eyes, slightly oversized nose, bushy mustache, smooth cheekbones, tapered chin - all framed by a neatly trimmed mop the color of dark chocolate, streaked with grey. Square shoulders topped his lean torso; long legs stretched out before him.

“Lots of Americans have... fled the States, seeking...”

“A lower cost of living?” He scanned the chamber. “Can’t get much lower than this.”

She bristled. “My needs are simple. Why should I waste cash on some fancy suite, when I’m comfortable here?”

“Are you?”

She nodded.

“I doubt it,” he countered with a disdainful edge. “In my opinion, this is... akin to squalor.”

“To each his own.” She shifted her weight, the ankle in spasm. Her urgent desire for him to make his exit was, even so, overridden by an inherent curiosity. “What about you? Why are you part of this crazy wedding fiasco?”

“I’m the chef who’s preparing the meals.”

Mustang swallowed. “They brought their own *chef*?”

“Why not?”

“You hire yourself out for a living?”

“For special occasions, yes. Usually, I’m the *chef de cuisine* on a cruise liner.”

Another hazy echo floated past her mind’s eye and dispersed just as fast. In the midst of this mental torment, she managed, “So, you’ve traveled the world?”

“Much of it.”

“Good for you.” She attempted to stand, but surrendered to her temporary immobility. “Thanks, again, Mister...”

“Professionally, I’m known as Guillaume.”

“You’re not French, though.”

“I studied at the best schools in Paris, earning my accolades through hard work and persistence.” That distinct smile lit his face for a split second. “My legal name is William Lorimer.”

Like the sluice of a dam thrown open, the rush of memories battered Mustang’s consciousness. Hazel orbs widened as a long-buried truth set her heart pounding in her chest.

“Oh, hell...”

II

Ten years.

The place: Boleskine House, near the eastern shore of Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands.

Mustang Duryea had ached to stay off the radar of both governmental agencies and locals, without much success. Bee swarms, attracted by a poorly phrased comment, posed a danger to her horses, and she'd requested assistance from an expert beekeeper in Aldourie to move the hives.

In their leisure moments together, Jeremy Lorimer related his long family history producing natural honey, and how he'd taken over the business when his older brother opted to become a chef, taking a position on a cruise ship.

He'd died as a result of a lightning strike days later.

William's younger brother, she suspected.

She could not - dared not - mention this connection, for fear of reprisals. Jeremy, after all, was showering in her bathroom when the bolt severed an old oak near the kitchen, the electrical charge shooting through the walls, cracking the plaster and finding ground via the hot water running in the pipes.

Guillaume might hold her responsible.

Especially since, to avoid contact with the authorities, she'd clothed the body in a pair of her sweats, loaded him - via a command to unseen forces - into his van, and sent the vehicle plummeting down a cliff along the shores of the lake, as if a tragic mishap.

"Are you all right?" inquired Lorimer, leaving his chair.

She bluffed, "It's amazing... how much a sprain hurts."

"I've had my share," he managed a snicker. "Growing up with a brother, we had plenty of tussles."

Mustang could imagine the boys, possibly only a couple years apart in age, so similar in size and appearance, wrestling over a favorite toy or a piece of candy. She'd never known that type of conflict, being an only child.

She recalled Jeremy's account of how, at age 15, he'd allowed his left ear to be pierced in order to wear the symbol of the family's pledge to care for the bees: a gold earring formed from the wedding band of the original Lorimer's wife after she died upon delivering their son.

Somewhere in the bedroom, that ring lay among the other keepsakes she'd hastily packed when leaving Boleskine House.

As she ruminated, Lorimer crossed to that adjacent chamber, locating the rough, bent branch Mustang had brought back from a visit to the wild horses up the mountain, propped in the corner of the closet. He presented it to her.

"C'mon, now. Stand up and try this," he insisted.

She reluctantly complied, hobbling once around the love seat with a contrived smile.

“Good. I feel better about leaving, now I know you can fend for yourself.”
He bowed slightly. “I can order some dinner sent up from the hotel..”

“No, thanks. I have plenty here.”

She just wanted him gone.

“May I call tomorrow and check on you?”

“No need, truly.”

“Very well.”

He pulled the warped door inward and moved along the dimly lit corridor to the stairs. Once he disappeared down the flight, she secured the deadbolt and leaned against the wood, exhaling loudly.

“You tire of human contact so easily?” came a soft Italian voice from the shadows.

“Don’t mock me, Francis,” she admonished the ethereal being. “You’ve seen enough of my... mistakes to understand why I hold people at arm’s length.”

“Ah, Signorina, you forget that each encounter is an opportunity to solidify the self-control you so desperately crave.”

“Oh, go away!”

A deep breath enabled her to steel herself for the task ahead; her ankle repaired itself with a searing wrench of the tissue, and she bit back the anguished scream.

Peanut butter and jelly smeared on day-old bread served as her evening meal, followed by a tall glass of milk and a chocolate-drizzled croissant from the Gran Caffè. A shower preceded her falling onto the lumpy twin mattress, asleep no more had her damp head hit the pillow.

Chirping birds woke her with the sun on Wednesday. No tours scheduled, she dressed in jeans and flannel shirt, detouring into the grocer’s for a bag of carrots and apples, hiking up the mountain to visit the herd of horses she’d discovered on her first visit to the city more than a decade previous.

During the 13th century war between Assisi and nearby Perugia - in the process of asserting the privileges of the merchant class over the feudal nobility - hundreds had died. Stables destroyed, the horses had fled to the heights, finding plentiful nourishment and tranquility.

Their human masters had never bothered to reclaim them, so their offspring thrived into the modern era.

These animals had accepted Mustang into their ranks, congregating around her when she arrived, nuzzling her for treats and grateful when she tenderly stroked their flanks. Foals born the previous spring had grown, romping in the tall grass with the energy of youth. Her laughter resounded beyond the clearing.

These hours of peace restored calm to her soul. She watched the sun arc overhead, not descending to Assisi until mid-afternoon, the last apple serving as her lunch.

Strolling past a row of souvenir shops hoping to entice visiting Americans to spend their money, she noticed the rotund Giovanni rearranging plastic statues in his display window.

“Buon giorno, Signorina!” he hailed through the glass.

“Buon giorno, Giovanni!”

“Did you hear what happened this morning?” This in Italian, heard by Mustang in English.

“No.”

“A big fight in the Piazza del Comune. The groom’s former girlfriend flew in to make some trouble for the bride.”

“I suppose the news crews filmed the tussle,” sniggered the woman.

He signaled her inside, a wall-mounted television blaring the video and sordid details. She shook her auburn ponytail at the high definition fracas, both disturbing and clumsy - unlike fights choreographed for the movies.

“I’ll be glad when they take their limousines back to Rome!” remarked Giovanni. “This kind of publicity, we don’t need!”

Mustang agreed. “Amen.”

With a faux salute, she veered toward the Piazza San Rufino.

Exhausted - in a good way - and ready for a simple supper, a bouquet of wildflowers and a bottle of chianti propped against her door startled the woman. A note tucked among the blooms confirmed Guillaume was concerned by her absence. He’d scribbled the hotel number below his signature and asked her to ring him.

He didn’t know she possessed no phone.

Tossing the blooms on the kitchenette counter, she warmed a saucepan of milk on the stove for a mug of hot cocoa.

He’d be gone in a few days.

Experience reminded her, nonetheless, how much devastation she could cause in a few days.

Earthquakes, storms, buildings razed, people killed...

Sipping steaming brew, a creme-filled pastry on a plate, she glanced through smudged panes at a news camera being set up in the piazza below. She recognized Carrie Byers, probably capturing some stock footage of the sunset for future use.

No such luck.

Carlo, Giovanni's son, thrust his innocent finger toward the building, rewarded with a few coins for his trouble. As the boy sprinted off, the reporter moved awkwardly on stiletto heels toward the structure.

"Oh, hell..."

Better to meet this woman on neutral ground, Mustang decided. Stuffing her feet into her sneakers, she scurried down the stairs and almost bowled the visitor over while rounding the first landing.

"Well, hello!" Mustang exclaimed, feigning astonishment.

"Hello, yourself," responded the cultured soprano. "I've been looking for you."

Side-stepping her, Mustang drifted toward the exit, compelling Carrie to follow. The evening breeze cooled the tour guide's rising anger. "May I ask why?"

"It took me awhile, but I realized you're quite the strange duck."

Hazel eyes squinted at the blonde in her red wool business suit. "That's a hell of an arrogant thing to say to a total stranger."

"Arrogance is part of my job." Carrie caught Mustang's sleeve. "Do you deny speaking to that café owner in English yesterday?"

At this point, a scuffle served no purpose. "What's your point?"

"He heard you in Italian!"

"How can you be sure, when you don't speak Italian yourself?"

"His wife speaks English, and I asked her while we were eating lunch. She verified it with her husband."

"So? What do you want of me?"

"If you have that kind of skill with mental telepathy, there's a fantastic story..."

"I thought you were here for the wedding."

"That, and whatever else comes my way."

Mustang grit her teeth. Ambitious, this one.

She'd met the type too many times in the past.

"My suggestion to you is this: go back to your van and contact your supervisor. Tell him to review your archives from... um, fifteen years ago or thereabout. See if he can find any footage of a rally right here in Assisi, where reporters claimed St. Francis of Assisi manifested. When he comes up empty, remember that this is a unique place, and many inexplicable things happen here. You can't trust your own... senses."

Rather than lead Carrie to her apartment, Mustang rambled across the flagstones and beneath the bell tower of the Cathedral San Rufino.

The journalist, stunned, did not pursue her.

Hopefully, that would be the end of it, the Assisi resident mused. She knew no records of that mass gathering could be found - in any network's archives or on the internet - because she'd instructed the natural elements to delete everything that transpired during her chance journey to Italy months after she'd acquired her powers from Jack Parsons. The Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli had nearly crumbled, and St. Francis had materialized from his tomb beneath the basilica bearing his name, to eventually be attacked by a mentally disturbed friar intent on reforming that religious order.

Lingering behind a stone wall until Carrie and her assistant vacated the piazza, Mustang smirked in the twilight. This city had become her home, and none of its citizens gave a damn about her. Only tourists interfered with her placid routine, with the ensuing havoc creating quite a predicament for the Italians who enjoyed their serene existence.

"Ah, there you are!"

She recognized the Scottish-tinged baritone without swiveling her head toward the sound.

"Guillaume? What the..."

"Please, I do prefer Bill when I'm not... in the spotlight."

Mustang stiffened.

"I was coming to check on you." He hovered above her, neat in a tan collared shirt and jeans, bluish-brown eyes glinting beneath the hanging lamp. "It worried me when you weren't home this morning. I thought you might've gone to the hospital, after all."

"As I said, no need."

"Indeed. You're a fast healer."

You have no idea, she snarled silently.

"May I escort you to your flat?" he prodded.

"I'm that knackered, as your countrymen say, and in no mood to be polite."

"Is something wrong?"

She explained about Carrie Byers' unusual interest in her behavior.

"Ah, yes! She came 'round the hotel earlier, asking about you."

Annoyed, Mustang clenched and unclenched her fists. "Why would she..."

"She thought we might know where to find you, since you served as our tour guide yesterday. Like any reporter worth her salt, she smelled a story..."

"If she wants a story, she should interview you. I'm sure you'd make a fantastic subject, and the promotional value for the cruise line..."

"That's kind of you," stated Lorimer. "But, I'm too busy for that falderal."

She sniffed. "If you're so busy, why are you wasting your time with me?"

"A body has to eat. I was hoping you'd join me for dinner."

"No, thanks."

"As you wish." He visually inspected her from head to toe. "Now that I know you're ship shape in Bristol fashion, I'll be going."

Mustang snorted at the seafaring reference. She ached to apologize for her terseness, but couldn't justify extending kindness to someone who might draw her into another crisis. "Good night."

That minuscule smile and a half-bow accompanied her across the piazza.

Cranium buzzing with regret and guilt, she vacillated in her resolve; did she not owe William Lorimer the truth about his brother? She glanced over her shoulder, however, at a deserted lane.

Reaching her flat, she had no appetite for dinner, instead retiring to her room.

Thursday dawned cloudy and wet; few would be meandering Assisi's winding. Remaining in her bathrobe through the morning, Mustang puttered about, motivating herself to clean out the wood stove, scrub the floor and make a list of items to be purchased at the grocer's once the weather cleared.

Watching droplets stream down the windows with a mug of hot cocoa to warm her scarred palms, the woman could not dispel the niggling sorrow over her treatment of the chef.

"It's for the best, Signorina," St. Francis invaded her ruminations. "Why should you make an effort to clarify the mystery of his brother's death? It doesn't matter to you that, deep in a corner of his heart, the failure of the Scottish police to discover who staged the crash and bring that individual to justice gnaws at him..."

"What justice?" she countered. "Jeremy died of natural causes. It had nothing to do with me."

"Is that what you honestly believe?" admonished the Little Poor Man. "If you hadn't created the dilemma with the bees, requiring his services, he would not have been in that exact place at that exact moment..."

Her contralto bit, "Have not you, and the others, told me the choices we make play a huge role in our future? Jeremy could have declined my request to relocate the hives. He could have avoided getting drunk at the Dores pub, which would have made it possible for him to complete the task a day sooner. I didn't force him..."

"Your soul cried out to his... two damaged people seeking healing, as you lamented at the time. If you'd kept your distance..."

“I’m not going to argue with you!” she steamed.
“Argue with who?” a familiar voice queried from the doorway.
Mustang whipped around, spilling hot cocoa on her clean floor. “Oh,
hell...”

III

William Lorimer snatched a tea towel off the dish rack and soaked up the brownish puddle as Mustang Duryea, frozen, stared at him.

“I’m sorry if I frightened you,” he apologized. “I knocked, but you must not have heard me, and the door was unlocked...”

Dammit, she cursed silently. I need to be more careful...

“No problem,” she burred. “It’s my own fault.”

Rising from his knees, Lorimer appraised her disheveled appearance. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were talking about my brother.”

“Your brother?” she repeated.

“Jeremy Lorimer. He died under suspicious circumstances in Scotland a decade ago.”

How long she could maintain the pretense of innocence, she had no way of knowing. “Really?”

“But, you’d be too young to remember...”

The advantage of looking younger than her years.

“Tell me,” she urged, ushering him to the love seat.

He settled on the cushion; she pulled a chair from the dinette set.

The cruise ship on which he’d been serving had been docked in Alexandria when the Inverness constabulary contacted him, as Jeremy’s next of kin, the tale began. He left the kitchens in the charge of his three assistants, flying to Edinburgh on the red-eye. He made it to Loch Ness before the van was towed up the hill, concurring with the official stance that the wreck was no accident.

Mustang’s lips pursed.

“The autopsy report confounded me, and the police,” Lorimer declared. “I’d expected a fractured skull, broken ribs, a ruptured spleen, but not the opinion that these injuries were inflicted post-mortem.”

“What does that mean?” she prompted.

“He was dead before the crash.”

She slumped on her seat.

“I... don’t mean to upset you,” murmured the chef.

“No, please. Go on.”

“What was even more perplexing: Jeremy’s internal organs had been burned, as if he was cooked from the inside out.”

“That’s... strange,” she mustered.

“The meteorological bureau reported severe storms in the region that night, but if he’d been struck by lightning, the van’s paint would’ve melted from the heat. Even the sweat suit he wore - and he’d never bought such an outfit in his life - was too small for him, and totally intact.”

“I’m sorry to be so dense...”

Lorimer proclaimed, “Someone changed his clothes, shoved him in the van, and pushed it over the cliff.”

“But, who...”

“The police were absolutely stymied. They questioned dozens who lived and worked along the the loch’s eastern shore - I sat in on many of the sessions, before I had to catch the ship in Athens. They came up empty.”

“That’s sad.”

“I’m not rich by any means, but I offered to hire a private detective. The police commissioner approved the request, so a young woman with a stellar reputation came up from London...”

Mustang shuddered involuntarily.

Her guest reacted, “Are you cold? I can light the fire...”

“Not at all, not at all. This is so mysterious...”

As if from a memorized report, Lorimer noted how the detective had gone over the van in the impound yard with a fine-toothed comb. None of the parts showed signs of tampering beyond the transmission being in neutral; the shifter might have been jarred loose while bouncing over the rocks or coming to rest beneath an outcropping. Her review of the autopsy brought to light Jeremy had been wearing no boxers or briefs, and his hair was coated with dried shampoo, leading her to deduce he’d been taking a shower when the lightning struck.

She traveled 20 kilometers in either direction, tracing his whereabouts. The only leads: Jeremy being drunk one afternoon in the village of Dores, and relocating some bee hives for a wealthy widow.

“She sounds like a very thorough individual,” opined Mustang.

“She did her best, but was unable to bring closure to the matter.”

That much was a given, since no one ever knocked at Boleskine House to charge her with interfering with a corpse or any other felony.

“The case remains open?”

“The magistrate ordered the cause of death to be listed as electrocution by lightning but, some nights, I still lay awake, wondering...”

“I can sympathize...”

Lorimer consulted his wrist watch. “Lord, it’s late, and I’m supposed to go over the final menu with the bride’s parents...”

He rose and, with a perfunctory farewell, yanked the door closed behind him.

Mustang locked the deadbolt. Collecting the half-empty cocoa mug, she squirted liquid soap in the sink to wash three days’ worth of dishes.

She mulled over Lorimer’s saga. This London detective... about the same age, brunette curls, thin... had their paths not crossed?

“Francis, am I right?” she asked aloud.

The saint answered, “Yes.”

Their initial encounter had occurred in the wake of that chaotic convergence of international agents, attempting to secure her services for their respective governments, among them, Chinese spy Han Feng. The two females passed on the hillock above Boleskine House, but neither spoke.

Mustang had traveled to London via lightning bolt to stop a band of vampires who’d been victimizing gullible sorts for decades, after they killed Esther, a paranormal investigator who’d been researching ghosts at Guthrie Manor. The detective had witnessed Mustang torch the gang’s leader, even contributing to his annihilation by lopping off his head with a broadsword.

They’d bumped into each other on the French Riviera, too, while Mustang had been replenishing her coffers at a casino, as she periodically did while in residence at Boleskine. No doubt, the woman had been on the heels of some miscreant...

Mustang had learned her name when she later visited Boleskine on holiday, accompanied by a protective ghostly relative.

Confusion remained, however. Dedicated to unearthing the truth and seeking justice, why had this detective not directed her inquiries to Lady Elizabeth Neville, as she’d been known in Scotland?

“Francis?”

“Her logic blinded her to your singular power with tasks at which others would fail. She - wrongly - theorized the wealthy widow who employed Jeremy would not have the capacity to move a dead body or concoct such a ruse.”

“Where is she now?” pressed Mustang.

“She died a few years ago in the midst of smashing a criminal enterprise operating from Southampton.” He warned, “I advise you not to consider rendering her in tangible form.”

“That’s a mistake I’ll not make again,” she assured the ethereal spectre.

“Glad to hear it, Signorina.”

The tea towel on the floor where Lorimer had discarded it after wiping up the spilled hot cocoa, she fetched a clean one from the linen cupboard. “Was she happy?” came unbidden.

“Why should that matter to you?”

“It has no... direct bearing on anything. I... just...”

“Then, she was not. She suffered from severe bouts of depression after a man she loved took a bullet meant for her, and she sought respite by using illegal substances.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Her brain was... an incredible asset, but she also lacked self-control.”

“Did she have friends to mourn her?”

Francis’ eyebrow arched. “Her closest friend died because of her.”

Mustang dropped on the wooden chair. “How horrible!”

“It is life, Signorina. For every decision, there are consequences.” His hand squeezed her hunched shoulder. “If you learn from her errors, though you barely knew each other, her life will not have been lived in vain.”

Hazel orbs contemplated his emaciated visage. “Did she not use her intellect to help others?”

“*Si*. Many others, even government officials.”

“Then, how could her life have been lived in vain?” Mustang bolted upright. “Am I to be judged a failure because I lack restraint?”

The diminutive saint averted his gaze.

Enraged, she shed the bathrobe - beneath which she wore a ratty Beatles t-shirt and green sweat pants - jammed her feet into her sneakers and tore open the door. Dashing out to the empty piazza, she lifted her head and yowled.

A hideous wail, jarring those at their dinner in the surrounding dwellings.

The bell in the tower above the cathedral spontaneously rang; those in hearing distance checked their clocks and mobiles. Curiosity aroused, heads popped through windows and doors, a three-foot wide shaft of flame shooting skyward causing them to swiftly duck inside.

Her frustration thus vented, she sucked air through her teeth and collapsed on the stones. Within seconds, a convoy of news vehicles rolled toward her, Carrie Byers hanging out the passenger window with a Steadicam’s red light flashing in record mode.

“Oh, hell...”

So much for staying off the radar.

“It’s my own fault,” she mumbled, slowly getting to her feet.

As she prepared to address her outburst, a strong pair of hands whisked her from the middle of the square along an alley, leaving the reporters baffled.

Mustang tugged her rescuer to a halt beyond their sight. "Wait a minute!"

"Hurry!" Lorimer - clad in his chef whites - yanked her arm, urgency sharpening his tone. "If they catch you, you'll become a public spectacle!"

"Did you even *see* what happened?"

"A gas main ruptured, and you were nearly killed."

She stood fast. "You go down there, this minute, and inspect the stones. There's not so much as a scorch mark, or any evidence of a broken pipe."

He released her, dark chocolate hair dangling over his sloped forehead, nostrils flared. "Eh?"

"Go on, get lost. You should be prepping for the banquet."

Offended by her brusque rejection, Lorimer sauntered up steps built into the lane. Mustang retraced her steps toward the piazza, to find the priests from San Rufino and city officials holding an impromptu press conference.

Not one could offer a plausible explanation for the incident.

She muffled a snort as she circumvented the crowd and slipped into the apartment building.

St. Francis loitered near the window. When he started to speak, she raised a cautious finger.

"Don't ever rile me like that again," she croaked. "If you do, I'll find a way to silence you, permanently."

"Further proof you have made no progress on the road to self-control."

"I will not be treated like a child!"

"Even when you act like one?"

She flopped on the love seat, dejected. "Is this how you treated your brothers, back in the early days? Or, when they flaunted your leadership and defied your rule?"

"That... was different."

"Because they were men?" she hinted.

He gazed at fading rays of light beyond the glass. "No. I was one; they were many."

"So, a mutiny," she guffawed.

"You may term it as such."

"Fine. I may be only one person, but I have the elements on my side - meaning I outnumber you. If I want to incite a mutiny, you better not stand in my way."

Brown eyes glowered at her audacity. “You summoned me back to this plane, and I stay because you are in need of my wisdom. If you no longer wish my counsel, I will go.”

“Then, go. You’ve been free to do as you please since I took up residence at Boleskine. You’re welcome to the doldrums of the afterlife, and good riddance!”

Beating on the door silenced her; Francis faded into oblivion.

“We know you’re in there, and we want an interview!” Carrie Byers’ shrill soprano.

Regulating her breathing, Mustang kept silent for 20 minutes. The reporter knew better than to break into the flat - even though the deadbolt hadn’t been secured. The Carabinieri strictly enforced laws regarding trespassing and burglary, charged with keeping Assisi’s residents safe from criminals who preyed on tourist enclaves.

Hearing the crew’s footsteps receding on the stairs, Mustang crept to the window, peering from behind moth-eaten curtains until they loaded their van and sputtered back to the Piazza del Comune. A bowl of cereal sufficed for dinner before she crawled into bed.

Friday’s clear skies and pleasant temperatures augmented the tour guide’s rebellious mood. The last pastry from the Gran Caffè and hot cocoa served as breakfast, Euros stuffed in an old coffee can spread on the dinette table so she could tally her assets before embarking on a spree.

The promised hourly wage for Tuesday’s tours with the wedding party, plus individual tips and previous holdings, totalled over 3,800 Euros.

Plenty to enjoy a little fun and show her neighbors life wasn’t meant to be staid and humdrum.

Not that what she had planned would cost anything.

Harkening back to her days in Montana, Mustang’s chief complaint about the current state of the world was how most adults had lost their child-like innocent wonder at random marvels taking place around them, every minute of the day. While others might rebel by defacing public property with graffiti, or forming a picket line with placards bearing painted slogans, her ideas would raise the spirits of those busy in their shops or at their desks.

They only needed to raise their eyes and notice.

A shopping list tucked in her jean pocket, she hiked to the grocer’s, filling a reusable polka-dot cloth bag with milk, cereal, sugar, sausages, bread and other staples. Her route included a stop at the Gran Caffè, fresh pastries - chocolate

dipped, creme filled, and whatever else struck her fancy - were arranged in a box and tied with a string.

These items consigned to the kitchenette cupboards, she opened the window beside the wood stove and inhaled deeply, concentrating on coordinating this massive effort. When the bells of San Rufino chimed the hour, she uttered the command.

Panes throughout Assisi - domiciles hotels, restaurants, shops - flew open simultaneously. Kitchen faucets activated, filling sinks with cold water. Dish soap containers mixed their contents with the flow, creating bubbles of all sizes that floated into the streets, no differently than a youngster blowing through a small ring that came in a sealed bottle.

Dogs began barking, drawing their owners' attention to the phenomenon. Within minutes, heads leaned out to see a myriad of bubbles dancing on the breeze, glimmering with rainbows as they twinkled in the sunlight.

Phone cameras captured the scene from numerous angles, including in the Piazza del Comune, Mustang surmised. While she didn't own a television, radio or mobile, she heard others listening to live broadcasts as they oscillated from their electronic devices to the what their own eyes registered.

Toddlers and teens rushed outdoors, gazing skyward, some trying to catch the flitting bubbles with their hands - only to pop at their touch.

Mustang didn't prolong the event; when the supply of dish soap ran out, the first act ended.

To be followed by another show-stopper: fading flowers in roof gardens, boxes suspended from window sills, or in ground-level plots, burst forth as if the early days of spring. In the Bosco San Francesco, a vast park below the imposing pink limestone Basilica San Francesco, leaves tinted with autumn colors reverted to green while the gardeners' paused their rakes mid-stroke.

In the midst of this, the wedding party processed at a leisurely pace to that edifice, in anticipation of rehearsing the impending ceremony. The hotel's staff had formed an impromptu honor guard, their real purpose: raving at the miracles taking place in every direction.

William Lorimer, head and shoulders taller than his colleagues, felt his jaw drop as he gaped at the sight.

IV

Mustang wore a huge smile as she exuberantly pranced along the Via Portica toward the church Francis had long since confided should never have been

constructed. Men and women milled about, muttering in Italian about miracles, while children frolicked along the lanes and alleys, stooping to smell the fresh blossoms.

Lorimer glimpsed her - she being hard to miss with her auburn wind-tousled hair - and waved to capture her attention.

When that didn't work, his long legs served him well, catching her up before she reached the grassy lawn with its bushes planted to spell "PAX" and a statue of the dejected Francis on horseback.

"Good morning!" he hailed in that Scot-tinged baritone.

Nothing could shatter her joy after the transformation she'd witnessed while traversing the city. "You're not part of the rehearsal, are you, Bill?"

"No, but neither are you."

"I figured I'd watch, since I won't be allowed inside tomorrow."

He drew her toward a stone wall overlooking the Piazza Inferiore, or lower courtyard. "Since you live here," he whispered, "can you tell me if today is some kind of feast or festival?"

"Why?"

"No one I've asked can tell me what... all this is about." He spread his arms, symbolically encompassing the buildings, streets and people.

Mustang leaned her elbows on the stones, gazing over the valley. "What makes you think I can?"

"I get the impression you're privy to... inside information about what goes on in these parts."

"My suggestion would be to ask the mayor, or one of the priests wandering about. If all this... has any civic or religious significance, they'd know."

Cupping her chin in his paw, he swiveled her neck toward him, gazing down with smoldering, bluish-brown orbs. Suspicion added an extra-sharp edge to his voice. "You know - more than you're willing to admit."

"A wild theory you can't prove." She didn't flinch, or avert her eyes.

Lorimer slipped elegant fingers inside his chef coat and extracted a photo from the t-shirt pocket beneath the starched fabric. He studied it briefly before presenting it to Mustang.

The picture - despite being grainy - showed her at the inlaid chess board where she'd spent most evenings while living at Boleskine House in Scotland.

Her heart caught in her throat. "Where'd you get this?"

"Jeremy texted it to me. Part of the last message I received from him before he died." His statement, in that tone, could have decapitated her, had it been an actual knife.

“Oh, hell...”

She recoiled; Lorimer seized her arms with unyielding vices.

“You spill the works, or I turn you over to the cops.”

Mustang subdued the urge to chortle. He had no clue the Carabinieri periodically attempted to take her into custody, but she eluded them with ease. She couldn't be confined to a cell, either.

Or held in anyone's grasp, if she generated an electrical current to shock her captor's system.

Which she refused to do in this instance.

Lorimer was entitled to the truth about his brother, the dedicated beekeeper from Aldourie.

“Not here.” Bells from nearby churches announced the noon hour. “Not now. I don't think I'm wrong that you have a rehearsal dinner to serve, as soon as this mob finishes going through the rubrics?”

“I'm not letting you out of my sight...” Lorimer pledged.

She chuckled. “I'm not good in a kitchen.”

“Perhaps not, but you're crafty. If I let you go, you'll vanish.”

A deft move drawn from her erstwhile kung fu training trapped his wrists while also freeing her. “I swear, Bill, I'll meet you here at six o'clock tonight. We'll find some out-of-the-way spot to talk...”

He nodded, and she released her grip before galumphing across the lawn to the basilica's main entrance.

Lorimer didn't budge until she crossed the threshold, enveloped by the shadows.

The bride and groom, their attendants, parents and the bishop and four priests, along with a pair of brown-robed Franciscan friars, went through the wedding rite in the sanctuary, surrounded by frescos illustrating - inaccurately, according to their subject - the life of St. Francis. His thin frame and narrow face did not resemble Giotto's vision in the least. Painstaking restoration following a massive earthquake in the region had not improved the depictions, either.

Positioned behind the last of the wooden pews, Mustang focused on the young couple's faces, obviously smitten with each other and nervous about their future. The bride's mother fussed over details with the wedding planner as the red-capped prelate demonstrated where the various segments of the rite would occur.

She realized nearly two decades had elapsed since she'd attended a family wedding, feeling a tear trickle down her cheek.

From lit candles in ornate gold candelabra on either side of the altar, smoke wafted toward the vaulted ceiling, forming distinct hearts.

An audible gasp from those in attendance - clergy included - reverberated between the walls.

“Your Excellency, what does this mean?” demanded the groom’s father.

The response: “I have no idea.”

“Given the earlier...” interspersed a cassock-clad priest.

An index finger bearing a large episcopal ring waggled toward him for silence. “We can make no official pronouncement, especially since this isn’t our home diocese.”

The junior cleric visibly bit his lip, chin drooping.

Mustang snickered and moved toward the exit, her sneakers squeaking on the tile floor.

The afternoon siesta had cleared out the few tourists milling about the grounds; the tour guide’s stroll to her flat required no rush. She avoided the Piazza del Comune, where a flurry of activity involved the news vans, each crew hoping to obtain a scoop about the origins of the day’s exploits before their competitors.

Carrie Byers had staked out the Piazza San Rufino, and pounced on Mustang as she emerged near the apartment building’s entrance. If she’d let her temper flare, more than a shaft of fire would have drawn spectators.

Let this pest have her interview, she determined inwardly, spend the time editing the footage and, when called upon for broadcast, suffer the embarrassment of the tape being irretrievably corrupted.

Not that Mustang disclosed any secrets under what could be rated a far more stringent questioning than some defense lawyers peppering witnesses during a murder trial. She stressed her ignorance at the cause of the unusual episodes, and recommended the team research past anomalies with the Carabinieri.

Unable to snag her subject in a web of her own deceit, the blonde journalist signaled her associates to pack up.

“Have a nice evening!” Mustang shouted after them, her contralto dripping with sarcasm.

Up the stairs, she shed her t-shirt and jeans, showered and selected a blue scoop-necked blouse, grey slacks and black flats from her closet. From a hand-painted trinket box, she produced a thick gold earring, tucking it in her pocket. Her auburn locks damp when she set out for this engagement, they’d dried well before she reached the far side of the city.

Haggard, Guillaume the chef had also shed his uniform in favor of a maroon henley-style shirt and tan Dockers.

“The bride’s mother give you a hard time?” Mustang quipped, reading his expression.

He grunted. "Nothing satisfies the woman."

"Leave it, now." She patted his arm. "I'm hungry, and I know a little place..."

"Where I can get a nice glass of white wine?"

"Sure."

Ten minutes later, they were seated in a corner at a homey bistro, the only customers - the evening crowd accustomed to eating no earlier than 8:00. Mustang ordered a plate of ravioli al forno with chianti; Lorimer contented himself with a tossed salad, breadsticks and the house white.

When the waiter confirmed their selections in Italian, the chef stiffened.

"What?" queried Mustang.

"You spoke in English, but he..." She raised her hands in reassurance; he noticed her scarred palms. "What the devil?"

She grimaced, lowering the discolored flesh to the checked tablecloth.

"That's exactly how Jeremy reacted."

Lorimer's fists slammed the surface; his tone escalated. "Then, you *did* know him!"

Behind the bar, the staff glared at his roar.

Mustang, flushed, dug the earring from her slacks and placed it beside his fork. "I was the wealthy widow who hired him to move five beehives off my property."

"You, wealthy?" Tentative digits twirled the gold circlet, eyes wide with amazement.

"Hear me out, please."

He gradually relaxed. "All right. Get on with it."

The narrative commenced with Jeremy's arrival at Boleskine House, and his request to store his equipment onsite - and stay onsite, as well.

"Cheeky sod," his brother grumbled.

Mustang concurred. "I suspected as much, but I needed the job done."

"When he texted me the photo, he mentioned his plan to propose to you."

"We were... debating whether to take a holiday together, but nothing else."

"He was a hopeless romantic, that Jeremy."

"Despite his painful experiences with women?"

"It was a tug-of-war with him. He wanted someone to be with... beyond the physical, while despising the notion at the same time."

"He was... very open, and very special," she remarked as their orders were delivered. "He realized we were both damaged..."

"You? Damaged?"

“Living alone for an extended period... I wasn’t accustomed to being around people.”

Lorimer prompted, “Is that why you moved here?”

“No.”

“Then, why...”

“That’s not why we’re here,” she chided. “Jeremy...”

“How did he die?”

“He’d returned from relocating a hive in the middle of a horrendous storm. We... both got drenched...”

That flash of a grin projected Lorimer’s interpretation of the declaration.

“Nothing like that,” she retorted. “I sent him to shower, while I threw our clothes in the washer. The rain stopped temporarily, then got even worse. Lightning struck a tree near the house, and the current jumped...”

“While Jeremy was in the shower.”

Hazel eyes closed solemnly.

Lorimer drained his glass. “What, then?”

“For a... variety of reasons, I couldn’t have a naked corpse in my bathroom. I... arranged for the sweats, then loaded him in the van and sent it over the cliff.”

“There’s more to it...”

“Not that I’m willing to divulge.”

“Why not?”

She smirked. “Have you ever heard the old saying, ‘If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you’?”

“You’re not...”

“You saw the fire last night, and the... festivities today.”

“A gimmick to draw tourists...” speculated Lorimer.

“Nope.”

He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin, tossed it onto the salad bowl and shoved away from the table. “I don’t understand...”

“I can only verify that Jeremy died due to a tragic accident.”

“Bullshit!”

She didn’t make chase as he exited the trattoria, instead finishing the delicious ravioli and sipping the wine, then partaking of tiramisu for dessert.

Paying the check and venturing into the night, she spotted Lorimer at the intersection, lingering in the glow of a overhead lamp. She strolled in his direction.

“I’m sorry,” his voice barely audible. “Working on a cruise ship, rumors run rampant, among the passengers and crew. I should’ve known better than to pry...”

“You’re forgiven, Bill. You just need to be aware that I was very fond of Jeremy, and probably would have gone on holiday with him, but my life - as a whole - is very complicated.”

“Whose isn’t, these days?” he snickered.

“So, this matter is closed?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Good luck with the wedding.”

She extended her right hand toward him - had she not done the same with his brother to seal their deal a decade earlier? He sandwiched it between his manicured digits and raised it to his mouth, planting a hasty kiss.

Navigating through the gloom to the Piazza San Rufino, Mustang wondered if William Lorimer could be trusted. He’d hired a detective to root out the facts about Jeremy’s death; all it would take is one phone call to the authorities, and they would breach her door, ruining a fairly amenable life in this city high on the side of Mount Subasio.

Saturday, music drifted over the rooftops during the parade to the basilica, from within the church itself, en route to the banquet venue and well into the night. The melodies seemed an extension of the extravaganza she’d orchestrated the previous afternoon. Mustang contented herself sitting near the window, listening to the revelry.

She slept well that night, dreaming of the gourmet delicacies Guillaume would have served to the wedding party. More a meat and potatoes sort, she could still enjoy a tasty meal.

Sunday dawned solemn and quiet, as if a pall had been draped over the settlement. Church-goers, usually animated and gossipy before and after Mass in the cathedral, milled sullenly in the piazza below until the tower bell heralded the service’s commencement.

Odd, unless the amount of liquor imbibed as the whole city joined in the revelries - and who needed an excuse to drink, really? - had a collective hangover.

Intending to tramp up the hillside to visit the wild horses, she pulled her hair into a ponytail, layered a purple t-shirt beneath a red hoodie and blue jacket, with jeans and sneakers. She grabbed the sack of carrots and apples from the refrigerator.

She didn’t make it beyond the Capuchins Gate.

The six-column headline within the glass of a newspaper vending machine froze her in her tracks - and froze her blood.

“Fire erupts during wedding dinner.”

Mustang squatted beside the metal box, scanning the print. Italian translated into English in her brain: “A celebratory gathering turned fatal when the flaming dessert served during a wedding at Assisi’s premier hotel ignited decorative curtains and table linens on Saturday evening,” the article’s first paragraph summarized.

Reading on, the reporter - oddly enough, Carrie Byers, whose oral coverage of the marriage was transcribed into print - listed 28 guests with minor injuries, due to a panicked stampede from the premises, the bride and five ushers in critical condition at Assisi’s hospital, and four dead.

Chef Guillaume fell into the latter category, credited as a hero for rushing into the fray with a fire extinguisher, dousing the bride’s blazing gown and dragging her to safety before succumbing to the extensive scorching of his own flesh.

“Oh, hell...”

Additional details absolved Mustang of any responsibility for Lorimer’s demise. The sous chef, substituting for the pastry chef - who’d earlier scalded his hand with boiling water - stumbled on a crease in the carpet while transporting cherries jubilee flambé, spraying flames in all directions. The fire spread so quickly, most defensive measures proved useless.

Mustang sank on the pavement’s shoulder. The irony that both Lorimers died as a result of burns - caused by lightning and torched alcohol, respectively - sparked fits of giggles that swelled into full-blown hysteria.

Fortunately, no passersby were about at this hour to brand her insane.

Her emotional balance restored after more than a quarter hour - noted by the bells from San Rufino - she remained in that spot, respiration steady. When she finally rose, she reversed course toward the flat.

“Well, Francis,” she muttered facetiously, “I suppose this will be added to your repertoire as another cautionary yarn about allowing people to get close to me, and my lack of self-control.”

From this vantage point, she glimpsed a stream of news vans passing through the Porto Nueva, bound for their next assignment, no doubt. She still couldn’t fathom the human craving for attention - like destination weddings - or what inner gratification people received watching sensationalized coverage offered by media outlets, whatever their slant, from around the world.

She trudged home, stomach growling, realizing she hadn’t eaten breakfast.