

The Mustang Chronicles:

Celluloid Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

A quirky rule Mustang didn't quite understand about the bakery in Assisi she'd patronized for the last six years: to eat in the small dining area, a tax was added to the purchase price of their delectable pastries. To take them from the building and consume them on the street, no such tax was charged.

So, most afternoons, she savored sugary concoctions leaning against the ancient city's stone walls, or resting on steps of the twisting lanes near one of the numerous churches.

Souvenir shopkeepers had come to recognize her, if not know her on a personal level. Since retiring to the Umbrian hills, she'd kept to herself, and caused no unrectified disasters with the powers she'd struggled to control since age 16.

Carlo, the ruddy youth who hailed her from the piazza near the Basilica of Santa Chiara was such a proprietor's son.

"Signorina," he greeted her, "a group seeks a tour guide..."

She'd led a cluster of cackling Swedish grannies to the historic sites that morning, and had enough Euros in her jean pocket to last out the week. She could spend the warm hours up Mount Subasio with the wild horses...

"Where are they from?" she queried.

"America."

"Old, young?"

"Older than yourself."

To a teenager, that was old, Mustang snickered. It would probably be a short excursion, minus the trek down the steep slope to the Church of San Damiano. She'd asked St. Francis, during their evening chess games, how he made that jaunt without screaming in pain.

Seniors preferred to hire a car, taking the long way to the renowned chapel.

Which would still allow time to visit her equine friends.

"Where are they?"

Carlo thrust a bony digit toward a row of refurbished guest houses.

Rising, she wiped her mouth on the sleeve of the tie-dyed "Peace" t-shirt, dusted off her backside, and tossed a wax paper bag containing the last treat to waiting hands. He grinned broadly as she ascended the cobbled incline which constituted an alley.

Though clad in baseball caps, polo shirts and khaki slacks, Mustang could tell the assembly wasn't actually on a leisure excursion. Nor were they priests,

traveling “incognito” - sans Roman collars. The cameras two of them carried boasted heavy telephoto lenses, while others carried sketchbooks and notepads.

Three women, in shoes not meant for distance or speed, were barely visible among their taller companions.

Including one their guide recognized, a shiver running up her spine.

Fortunately, the broad-brimmed straw hat and sunglasses - worn to shield her from the harsh Italian sun - hid the reddish ponytail and most of her countenance. She greeted the troupe with a backward wave, her scarred palms averted from their line of sight.

Critical eyes assessed her casual appearance. “You’re an experienced tour guide?” scoffed a grey-haired executive.

“If you’re not satisfied with my services, you need not pay me at the conclusion of the outing,” she countered.

“Sounds fair.”

Unlike others who relied on flags, brightly-colored umbrellas or sticks to lead their customers through Assisi’s narrow by-ways, Mustang’s voice naturally projected so all could hear and follow. She was also patient enough to wait while they snapped photos or admired window displays and booths.

This lot weren’t that interested in the major attractions or shrines. They spent nearly an hour in the Temple of Minerva, a former pagan site converted to a Catholic church, discussing the exterior, columned architecture, lighting and camera angles. She heard snippets of an exchange indicating they were planning a new bio-pic of St. Francis’ life...

She sidled up behind a lean, black-haired figure as he admired a gold-encrusted monstrance. The acoustics creating echoes of other voices, she whispered, “You going to play the lead, John Vladislav Kowalski?”

He stiffened, nervous fingers combing through his longish mane. “In fact, if we can get the financing, I am.”

“Who’s writing the script?”

“A couple of the best guys in Hollywood, who’re collaborating with scholars from Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio.”

“I only hope it’s true to life.”

He hadn’t turned toward her. “None of them ever are.”

“If not, someone will be terribly... annoyed.”

“Will we be struck down in our tracks?”

“Not by him. By me? I don’t know.”

She knew the actor, Johnny Rosemont on the screen, remembered her from their previous encounters - first, Las Vegas, then a whirlwind promotional tour for his award-winning drama set during World War II.

“What are you doing here?” he pressed.

“Living. Quietly. Off the radar.”

“Successfully?”

“The only facet of my power I use most days is the automatic language translator...”

He chortled, “Which makes you the perfect tour guide.”

“Definitely.”

“And the other?”

“Summoning a certain chess opponent in the evenings.”

“Not Rommel?”

“No. Someone... with local ties.”

Rosemont’s brown eyes widened, reflected in the polished surface of the marble altar. “Can I meet him?”

“Two conditions.”

“What?”

“No kneeling, bowing or treating him like a saint.”

“But, he *is* a saint.”

“Second, you’ve got to keep it a secret.”

“If I don’t, I’ll be carted off the funny farm.”

“You felt much the same last time...”

“With an invisible woman wandering my hotel room, who wouldn’t?”

Finally, he faced her, gently pulling the hat off her tousled auburn tresses. “You look fantastic, Mustang.”

“Never been better.”

“Got... things straightened out?”

“Between yours and the advice of a couple other wise souls, I’ve finally relaxed and accepted what I am. How are you?”

“Bored stiff, frankly. Scouting locations is a drag.”

“Usually the producers and directors handle those, don’t they?”

“I’m one of the producers on this one.”

“Why this subject?”

“Because, no one’s done justice to it.”

“I agree.”

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

“At the guest house? No, thanks.”

“Any of the local restaurants. Homey, intimate...”

She glanced over her shoulder. “With your entourage?”

“No paparazzi, this run. We flew the Monster out of L.A. in the middle of the night, and directly into the Perugia airport. Drove here in a private bus.”

“So, you’re staying off the radar, too.”

They laughed together.

Then, he grabbed her hand. “Please, Mustang. I’ll sneak out seven-ish, and we’ll have the whole evening...”

“Around here, they don’t eat until nine or ten.”

“Fine. We can take a stroll, first.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

At that point, the others converged on Rosemont to consult him regarding technicalities of the shoot. Mustang retreated to a varnished wooden bench, amused by the team’s antics.

“He won’t even have to cut his hair,” she muttered absently, envisioning Rosemont as the 13th century saint.

“He doesn’t look like he’s done a hard day’s labor in his life, much less lived outdoors.”

Mustang’s head whipped toward the emaciated occupant of the seat opposite, in torn “Save the Whales” t-shirt and jeans. “What are you doing...”

“I’ve a vested interest in this endeavor,” replied Francis. “I heard rumblings about it weeks ago, and now it’s too close to ignore.”

“If they see you...”

He snorted, “They wouldn’t know me from Adam. They’ve maybe seen reproductions of the Giotto frescoes, which don’t resemble me in the least. For all they care, I’m just another tourist.”

Signaling to her as the group moved toward the exit, Rosemont, however, detected the ragged individual’s Italian comment and Mustang’s English rejoinder.

His eyes conveyed the unspoken question.

Mustang nodded imperceptibly.

She murmured to Francis, “He wants to meet you. He’s sincere about being truthful to your life and times.”

“You trust him?”

“More than he trusts me, I think.”

“He... is cognizant of your power?”

“Yes.”

“And he has the courage to make this request.” Francis seemed impressed. “Si, I will meet him.”

She joined the procession into the blazing afternoon heat, ushering the crowd toward their accommodations.

“If we need you tomorrow, where can we find you?” inquired an exhausted blonde.

“Any of the souvenir shop clerks know my hang-outs.”

Those closest deigned to shake her hand, and the distracted executive producer - Mustang assumed - tucked a 100 Euro note in her hand. Rosemont winked at her in parting, surreptitiously pointing to a bench jutting from the city wall.

Mustang tapped the side of her nose in acknowledgment.

Trudging to her apartment near the Cathedral of San Rufino, she had mixed feelings about this encounter with Johnny Rosemont. When she'd lived at Boleskine House in Scotland, it seemed everyone and his brother invaded her solitude. Here, she willingly interacted with visitors to the city and, her duties complete, they left her alone, except on rare occasions. She lived mostly in harmony with the command over nature bequeathed to her by her grandfather, Jack Parsons - something John Barrymore had counseled. She'd found peace, but now...

“I honestly didn't come to Assisi in search of you,” stated Johnny Rosemont - clad in white: gauze shirt, canvas slacks, light-weight sport coat, except for dusty beige, hand-tooled cowboy boots - when he slid beside her as a glorious sunset painted the valley in subtle hues. His hair, freed of its ball cap, hung limply past his tanned jaw.

“I know. If it had to be anyone, I'm glad it's you.”

“How so?”

“Others I... dealt with had what might be called selfish motives. You... never wanted anything from me except stimulating conversation.”

“God, I could use some of that to relieve the monotony of endless production meetings and negotiations with the backers.”

“You'll have plenty. Francis will open your mind to vistas unimaginable...”

The awe was palpable in Rosemont's resonant bass. “You talk of him like an intimate friend...”

“I suppose materializing a person who's been dead for eight hundred years establishes a sort of intimacy.”

“He wasn't wearing that t-shirt when he died,” quipped the actor.

“No, I loaned it to him after he first manifested. His robe was so threadbare...”

“The shirt looks pretty worn, too.”

“He only wears it if he’s out in public.”

“Portraying the beggar?”

“No, to... avoid attention, actually.” She related how, during her inadvertent trip to Assisi, Francis’ presence - and his uplifting sermons - had drawn pilgrims and media from around the world. “Some overzealous jerk tried hauling him to Rome to meet the Pope, after the cable news networks broadcast a gathering on the lawn near the basilica...”

Rosemont shot off the stone bench. “So, that was you?” he choked.

“What was me?”

“When Alf and George sent me the screenplay, they mentioned having seen a report on CNN about Francis appearing in Assisi, which inspired their writing. Between other, more lucrative projects, they worked on the screenplay for nearly ten years, a labor of love...”

“A tribute to their Catholic upbringing?” ventured Mustang sarcastically.

Not religious in the least, the blatantly pious behavior of some tourists, and others she’d met through the years, amused and befuddled her on occasion.

“Something like that.” He gripped the city wall and, despite the fading light, Mustang could see his whitened knuckles. “Sweet mother, what forces of destiny keep intertwining the courses of our lives?”

“I’m the first to deny coincidence, John. It does seem to be a random occurrence, however, that we met in Las Vegas, then again in Scotland, and here.” Still... “Did the writers give a reason why they offered you the role?”

So tight his hold, stone chips cascaded to the ground. “They told me I looked a lot like the man.”

II

Mustang breathed, “And that upsets you why?”

“Because it means none of this is random. You’ve... used your power to maneuver me into an inescapable situation...”

“Inescapable, how? You can pack your bags and leave any time.”

“I’ve already signed the contracts.”

“Contracts can be broken.”

He whirled, his perfect features a mask of anguish. “That’s not my way, Mustang.”

“It’s not mine, either, but if I felt backed in a corner, I’d do whatever necessary to get free.”

“Until five minutes ago, I believed this to be a golden opportunity, another chance to show the skeptics I’m serious about my craft.”

Mustang managed a weak grin. “It’s nothing more, John. Let’s go for that walk, you can meet Francis, and then we’ll have a nice dinner and get drunk on the local wine.” She rose, slipping her arm through his, and steered him past the Basilica of Santa Chiara to a path leading into the lush valley.

“Where are we going?” he balked.

“There’s a rest stop, if you will, half way down to San Damiano. Secluded enough for Francis to appear, and us to enjoy the cool evening breeze.”

The two men shook hands once formally introduced and settled on a curved seat many had used to recover their breath during the tortuous ascent to the city.

Rosemont found himself tongue-tied in the presence of the robed saint.

“You rendered Mustang a great service, encouraging her to meditate,” noted the latter. “We were worried for her well-being...”

The actor sputtered, “We?”

“Samuel Clemens, Mohandas Gandhi, General Rommel and myself.”

“Such wise friends...”

“Indeed.”

Rosemont scrutinized Mustang’s reddened cheeks as dusk faded. “I... never suspected.”

“Don’t envy me, John,” she grumbled. “I’ve benefitted from that wisdom, but wouldn’t have needed their advice if I were some horse rancher’s average daughter.”

“You could never be average.” Francis had spoken.

She snapped, “Don’t you start.” Turning into the wind, she added, “You two wanted to chat, so have at it. Make like I’m not here.”

Talk they did, well into the night. Rosemont detailed portions of the storyline, which Francis critiqued objectively. Debating the saint’s relationship with Clare escalated to a near argument; Mustang subdued a temptation to intervene.

“Love of the deepest kind goes far beyond a desire for sex,” asserted Francis. “I loved Clare for the beauty of her soul, her sincere dedication to prayer and service...”

“Had the situation been different, though,” Rosemont wondered, “had you remained... a man of the world, would you have taken her to wife?”

“I... don’t know.”

The words might’ve been ripped from Francis’ innermost depths, and Mustang sensed his agony.

She also glimpsed Rosemont staring at her.

“My soul is neither beautiful, nor am I dedicated to serving others,” she snapped. “Don’t get any ideas.”

“I’ve told you before how you shine like a beacon...”

“So have many others, who craved a share of my light, my power... whatever.”

Mustang’s discomfort with the tenor of the conversation transformed to trepidation when a half-dozen members of the production crew appeared on the hill, in search of their star. Both Rosemont and Mustang stepped in front of Francis, to shield him from view; when they moved again, he had vanished.

“Nice trick,” Rosemont grunted.

She supplied, “He comes and goes on his own these days.”

“Wish I could.”

“We were alarmed when you weren’t back by midnight,” chided the grey-haired director. “We thought you might’ve gotten lost, or fallen...”

The actor hissed, “Can’t a guy spend a quiet evening with a gorgeous woman?”

Apologetically, the search party retraced their route. Once out of ear shot, the pair embraced, chuckling.

“Had enough for one sitting?” Mustang asked.

His arm draped around her shoulders, Rosemont gazed at the multitude of stars overhead. “My brain feels like it’s going to explode.”

“Try playing chess with him.”

“Or the others?”

“I think I’ve bested Francis twice, and Twain three times, over the years.”

“What about Rommel?”

“He’s unbeatable.”

A pause precluded the change in Rosemont’s tone. “Mustang, I...”

“John, don’t.”

“Won’t you hear me out?”

“Usually, such overtures are followed by a marriage proposal.”

“I’m not someone who wants to bask in your glory.” Rosemont drew her onto the bench. “I’ve too many friends who’ve embarked on relationships with fellow celebrities and couldn’t handle being overshadowed by their spouses’ careers. I wouldn’t want to be known as Mr. Elizabeth Duryea.”

She smirked. “Damn, you remembered!”

“Seriously, I want you in Hollywood with me, working on a revamp of the screenplay with the writers, and in charge of making this an accurate portrayal of a

very human being who suffered more from being put on a pedestal than from his own inner demons.”

“John, you’re nuts.” She tried to say it kindly, failing. “I don’t suffer fools lightly. There’d be nothing left of Rodeo Drive but charred ruins a day after our arrival.”

“It would be a challenge for you, for your self-control. A taste of the real world, rather than this... reclusive haven, though I do envy you living here.”

She remained silent.

“We both want this movie to be a suitable tribute to a complex character. I can’t, I won’t do it without you.”

Through grit teeth, she queried, “Won’t most of the shooting be done on location?”

“If we can get the permits.”

“If *I* can get you the permits?”

Rosemont’s lips twitched. “Using your...” He pantomimed a stage magician conjuring a rabbit.

“Maybe yes, maybe no. The mayor and I have crossed paths now and then...”

“We’d want the writers on site, in any event. Would you be willing to collaborate with them...”

“What does the job pay?”

His face blanched.

“It may be a labor of love for you, but I have to eat,” she contended playfully.

“I... the budget is rather limited. We could afford, maybe, \$50,000.”

Mustang’s jaw gaped, prior to her hearty chortle echoing across the valley.

“I was hoping you’d agree to buy me dinner once or twice a week.”

“Every night, if you say yes.”

Her stomach rumbled. “Speaking of which, we should still be able to finagle some pasta from a little place I know which stays open really late.”

Hand in hand, they ascended to the city, pink marble edifices bathed in moonlight.

“You’re in pretty good shape for an old man.”

“I celebrated my 48th birthday last week. That’s far from old.” He gauged her stride and respiration. “There are some septuagenarians who’d put you to shame.”

“I’m used to riding, John. Spent 26 of my 32 years letting horses exert themselves on my behalf.”

“You had some fine animals in Scotland. Do you miss them?”

“I miss riding. A few wild ones live up the mountain, and I take them treats most days.”

“Is that why you stay?”

“No. I stay because I’ve come to terms with who I am, and I’m content.”

“You don’t get bored, giving tours day-in, day-out?”

“Never. The sites might be the same; the people are always different. Different languages, different interests, different questions. Like your bunch today. Didn’t care a hoot about the shrines. Rather than have a set agenda, I let the group determine the itinerary.”

“Very enterprising.”

“No, just pragmatic. As long as the tourists are satisfied, I know I’ll eat well that night.”

He paused on the gravel track near a deserted parking lot. “What happened to your vast wealth?”

“My ‘wealth’ amounted to winnings I coaxed from slot machines at various casinos. I have no need...”

“You mean, in Vegas, you were...” Again, he wiggled his fingers.

“Yes, except I didn’t have to be so obvious.”

“Didn’t security catch on?”

“The first time, yes. I developed a... a...”

“System.”

She winced.

“Well, well.” He cupped his hand beneath her chin and angled her hazel orbs toward the murky glow of a security lamp. “I wouldn’t have suspected you to be a professional cheat.”

Recoiling, she doubled her pace. “I... didn’t...”

“How would you define such actions, if performed by an ordinary gambler?” he probed, pursuing her.

“No ordinary gambler could...”

He clutched her arm. “I’m kidding, Mustang. I thought you had a sense of humor...”

“I do, but you’re right. I did cheat, and those ill-gotten gains...”

“Would’ve been spent far less wisely in the hands of less scrupulous individuals.” Rosemont flashed brilliant teeth and clouted her shoulder. “You have no reason to feel guilty.”

“Until this moment, I didn’t. At least, not about that.”

“You mean, the deaths you mentioned...”

“The longer it’s been since I’ve wreaked havoc on humanity, the more I’ve come to terms with those. I think, finally, I’ve grown up.”

A rabbit dashed across their path, and she leapt into his arms.

“Evidence to the contrary,” he chuckled.

Mustang giggled, embarrassed. When their eyes met, however, the joviality ceased.

The kiss, intense and fleeting, elicited no tremors, no lightning, no microbursts of wind. The tour guide gasped in astonishment when they parted.

Misreading her reaction, Rosemont bowed slightly. “I will graciously accept milady’s retribution for this breach of propriety.”

When she grabbed him and danced him around the asphalt, he had difficulty maintaining his balance. Nor did he expect her “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He planted his boots firmly, forcing Mustang to halt. “Once before, you thanked me so enthusiastically - for not buying you clothes. What... extraordinary feat have I accomplished this time?”

“Don’t you get it?” She smothered his mouth with staccato kisses. He didn’t dare respond, given her bizarre behavior. “I didn’t destroy anything!”

“I’m... happy for you.” He wrestled her to arm’s length. “What did you plan to destroy?”

She calmed herself. “Nothing. That’s just it. My goal was never destruction. Yet, the men who’ve dared to... get close to me wound up in the midst of near-epic natural disasters.”

“Ah, I recall you telling me, while we wandered the streets of Milan.” He felt his sanity restored. “So, now...”

Her broad smile served as reply. She flipped his wrist skyward, squinting at his Rolex. “Do you like peanut butter and jelly?”

“Not since I had to brown bag it in grade school.”

“Scrambled eggs?”

“Why?”

“The restaurant’s closed.”

“I’m... not really hungry.”

“We should probably both get to bed, then.”

Rosemont regarded the diamond-encrusted display. “I suppose so. Our bus leaves at noon for the airport.”

“That soon?”

“We’ve got meetings every day, including one to finalize the shooting schedule.”

“When will you be back?”

“End of the month.”

They continued toward the Porta Nuova, the arched stone gate. “One thing you’ll want to tell your cinematographers.”

“What’s that?”

“No aerial shots.”

“Why?”

“The bookend basilicas - my name for them - St. Francis and St. Clare, weren’t built until after Francis’ death. Also, the Rocca Maggiore was in ruins during his lifetime.”

“Special effects could erase them from the views.”

“Don’t. Keep it honest. Keep it from his point of view, ground level. Also, you’ll have to build a replica of the Porziuncola.”

“The what?”

“The chapel where Francis and his followers camped during the early years. It’s inside St. Mary’s of the Angels, down the hill. A tiny structure dwarfed by this humongous shrine.”

He squeezed her chilled digits as they neared the guest house entrance. “I picked the right person to keep us honest. How can I reach you if we have questions?”

“I’ll see you before you go, and give you a number.”

What number she’d give him, she hadn’t a clue as she wound her way past San Rufino. She’d owned no technology at Boleskine House, and saw no reason to clutter her routine with it in Assisi. Not that anyone would ring her or view her updates on social networking websites.

Her excitement over the more emotional breakthrough kept her awake until dawn. Memories of the earthquake she caused inadvertently resurrecting Francis, shattering the facade of Santa Maria degli Angeli, had haunted her these many years, despite repairing the damage of her own volition. She’d not been able to escape a deep-rooted anxiety she might repeat that fiasco, in a town which had been devastated by similar events at nature’s own bidding.

She didn’t need to compound the problem.

She hadn’t meant kissing Johnny Rosemont as “testing the waters”, either.

Nonetheless, relief made her every nerve tingle; she’d conquered the last, lingering remnant of her grandfather’s oft-unwelcome gift.

She’d achieved normalcy.

If such a thing existed.

Probably not normal for Johnny Rosemont to be awake at 6:00 AM, after a late night wandering the Umbrian countryside. Yet, there he stood, in Guns ‘n

Roses t-shirt and stone-washed jeans, helping load luggage and equipment on the miniature bus. Mustang diverted from her hike to the bakery, hailing him.

“Director got a late call from New York,” he huffed between suitcases.

“We’ve got to be back in L.A. by tonight, or the backers may pull their funding.”

She suggested, “I could... expedite the trip.”

“Thanks, but no,” he sniffed, catching the joke. “You sure you won’t come along, to help persuade the investors how legit this project will be?”

“Having you play Francis should be sufficiently persuasive.”

“The big question will be: who’s going to play Clare.”

She didn’t like the way he studied her. “Put that little idea right out of your mind, John,” she warned.

He passed a wheeled, carry-on bag to the driver, signaling Mustang with his thumb to follow him around the corner.

“If you want the movie to bomb, go ahead and push the issue,” said the woman, brushing an auburn strand off her forehead as they went toe-to-toe.

Rosemont clicked his tongue. “Hear me out, will you? It hit me while I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Based on the discussion Francis and I had about his affection for Clare, there will need to be definite chemistry between the two for their scenes together to be believable...”

“And, you think we have that chemistry?”

“In a weird sort of way, yes. And, a mutual concern for the success of the project. You, knowing Francis like you do, are protective of him, and don’t wish to see him used by the media or... opportunists. That’s why the cable news coverage bothered you.”

“Not that, as much as the lunatic friar who thought I was an angel, and wanted Francis to reform the Order.”

“Eh?”

“It was complicated. Francis was the first person I... manifested from the dead, totally by accident. Besides wanting to crawl in a hole, I had to be sure he got back where he belonged...”

“Still, in a roundabout way, your involvement and his presence - and the news cameras - were the impetus for this film. Our subsequent meetings...”

Mustang cringed. He’d connected selected dots on a muddled picture to fit his own logic, and didn’t seem willing to alter his approach. “You won’t shut up until I agree, will you?”

“Definitely not.”

He positively beamed, and her heart melted. She didn’t have a chance to speak, though, before a camera started clicking over Rosemont’s shoulder.

“What the hell...” she growled.

“Once the backers see how beautiful you are, they’ll give us all the money we want!” Rosemont soothed.

The implications of what had just happened knotted Mustang’s stomach. Her photo - lots of photos - in newspapers, magazines, at American grocery registers... Ben Espinoza would finally know where she’d fled, and she’d be in a world of hurt.

Again.

“Oh, hell...”

III

Slumped against the rough stone wall, tears streamed from Mustang Duryea’s hazel eyes. Johnny Rosemont wasn’t about to let the greatest achievement of his life be torn apart by some unvoiced obstacle. He drew his soon-to-be co-star into a tender embrace, murmuring, “What’s wrong?”

She sobbed at his chest, “I can sum it up in three letters: FBI.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s why you were hiding in Scotland.”

“No, that’s where *they* hid me, until they figured out a way to use me.”

“Use you?”

“Lose the lens jockey,” she directed.

Rosemont waved away the publicity agent, though he withdrew just a few yards, beyond their sight line.

Mustang recounted being shot by Mason Church six years earlier, and Ben Espinoza’s announcement she would be the next great weapon for the American military. “As soon as I could walk, I got the hell out,” she concluded.

“That kind of wound, if not fatal, causes paralysis...”

“Complete paralysis. It couldn’t stop me from nearly killing a hundred other patients when I blew my cork.”

“You’re not paralyzed now. Surgery and therapy, or a miraculous cure?”

“If you can call what I do miraculous.”

“Ah!”

“Anonymous involvement in the film would be no big deal. Plastering my mug on billboards or posters would shatter this peace I’ve come to cherish.”

Rosemont deliberated at length, his fingers drumming Mustang’s collar bone. “We shot a few scenes at FBI headquarters for the Steckling’s detective thriller two summers ago. We tapped a couple of star-struck agents for background material on procedures, too. Once we land at JFK, I’ll have my people

call to - innocuously - check on this Ben Espinoza. He might not even be with the bureau any longer.”

Mustang dried her eyes on her flannel shirt sleeve. “*That* would be a miracle.”

“If he’s out of the picture, then will you...”

Her minuscule grin confirmed his hopes.

He tugged her close and kissed her briefly. “My turn to thank *you*.” Releasing her, he practically jogged toward the bus. “I’ll be in touch!”

The laugh burst forth, unbidden. It would have to be telepathically; he had no other way to contact her.

Telepathically, or telegraphically. While the days of Western Union missives had long since passed in the States, certain businesses still transmitted messages using this method. Rosemont addressed his triumphant note in care of the guest house, believing the manager would catch Mustang before or after giving a tour.

The actor had predicted correctly, although Mustang later learned he’d left a 20 Euro note with the proprietor to cover such a contingency.

“B.E. resigned in disgrace from agency,” she read. “Whereabouts unknown. Will bring copy of disciplinary file upon return, June 30. Backers ecstatic about your participation. Fondly, JVK.”

A load off her mind, or not? Mustang mused. If Espinoza’s failure to deliver on his presidential mandate resulted in a forced resignation, he could be set on a course of revenge.

Assisi would be the last place he’d look, unless those photos made it into print.

Still, airport security wouldn’t allow a civilian to carry weapons aboard a plane, if he came hunting for her. Doubtful he could convince former associates to reactivate her case based on tidbits from entertainment websites, with her original file deleted from the database. He might be a pariah in Washington these days.

No one more dangerous, she realized.

No one more dangerous than her, if she got angry. She hadn’t lost the capacity to do horrible things if she got angry.

If she ever saw Ben Espinoza again, she could foresee herself getting very, very angry.

The medieval basilicas of Assisi might not survive.

A series of deep breaths eased her tension. The future couldn’t be brighter. No longer need she repress her emotions, or deny herself romantic relationships.

She might even be able to marry and raise a family, if the right man presented himself.

Could Johnny Rosemont be that man?

“No way,” she muttered aloud. She respected him too much, admired his down-to-earth attitude, to disrupt his life with her... eccentricities.

The likelihood would be she'd continue as before, enjoying the quietude of this mountain settlement, playing chess with St. Francis, or reading whatever books the shops ordered from their distributors in Rome.

At least, for the two weeks until the Hollywood film crew descended en masse.

The height of tourist season, visiting priests, sisters and pilgrims were dismayed by periodic street and attraction closings, while technicians constructed scaffolding, raised and lowered booms, or blocked scenes. Most of the exteriors were in the can prior to Johnny Rosemont's arrival, using a double for distant shots.

Mustang had imagined Peter O'Donnell making his documentaries in similar fashion, but had never been close to the action.

Viewing the dailies in the hotel dining room/make-shift screening room, Francis usually materialized behind Mustang. No one noticed him, even when he whispered his comments to the tour guide.

“Are they coming back in winter?” he queried one evening. “The harshest temptations occurred when we were near to freezing.”

Mustang replied, “I'll ask.”

She didn't dare confront the director, constantly surrounded by a retinue of assistants. He barely acknowledged her, recalling her services during their scouting trip. The day Rosemont emerged from a modest trailer parked on the Corso Giuseppe Manzini onto the set, costumed in a scruffy brown robe and bare feet, slipping his arm easily around Mustang's waist, the grey-haired elder blinked in disbelief.

“This is our Clare?”

Rosemont quipped, “Weren't you at the meeting?”

“If I'd... Had I... We could've been shooting her close-ups while the second unit was in the valley.”

“I'm glad you didn't,” admitted Mustang. “I would've been far too nervous.”

Caressing her hand, Rosemont declared, “You've nothing to worry about. None of these guys bite.”

She aimed the next toward his ear, visible for once with his longish mane slicked back. "I don't have a script. I don't know my lines."

He roared, right there in front of everyone. "I brought you the FBI report, but not a script!"

An efficient brunette delivered a bound copy of the daunting screenplay into Mustang's hands.

"We'll rehearse tonight, after dinner," Rosemont promised.

Mustang saw scattered, half-swooning fans - having evidently read about the filming and traveled to Assisi to catch a glimpse of their idol - wink and giggle at this statement. They assumed Rosemont meant something different than she knew he did. She carried the book to her apartment and, a pleasant breeze cooling the room, perused the pages.

A manila envelope containing Ben Espinoza's dossier lay on the kitchenette counter. Rosemont had brought it to her before the crew knew he'd arrived.

She'd refrained from unfastening the clasp. Why ruin her mood with sordid details of another man's demise?

Francis peering at the dialogue over her shoulder aggravated her enough. "Who claims such nonsense ever came from my mouth?" he barked, snatching the volume from her grasp at one point.

"Your biographers, supposedly."

"They make me out to be some... some..."

"Saint?"

"It was a title I would not have tolerated when I was alive, and despise now."

"Why? You set an excellent example of how people should live."

"They do not live it, do they?"

"In small numbers, perhaps," Mustang conceded.

"My goal was to transform the world from its preoccupation with wealth, property and status. Long before my death, I knew I had failed, so why deem me a saint?"

"People may not be able to match your example, but they admire your effort."

"Bah!" Spinning on his heel, Francis nearly collided with Rosemont, crossing the threshold of the two room flat. For an instant, a casual observer might've mistaken them for the original and his reflection in a full-length mirror.

"Scusa, Signore."

"No harm done." The actor flopped on a battered love seat opposite Mustang's armchair. "I've heard one opinion. What's yours?"

Mustang shrugged. "A good draft, but it needs work."

"Glad to hear it. Alf and George are at the guest house, waiting for you."

"I thought they'd be filming all afternoon."

"In this heat? The crew is taking a siesta, then moving the equipment up to the Eremo delle Carceri, so we can shoot the nice, cool cave scenes."

"If the schedule is dictated by the weather, everything will be shot at night."

Rosemont stroked his stubbled chin. "Not a bad idea."

Francis interspersed, "In actuality, we would usually wait until evening before embarking on our travels. Most of the gatherings where I preached were late in the day, or early in the morning."

"Good to know."

"But how, pray tell, will you convey this insight to the director, without being branded a madman?" puzzled Mustang lightly.

"Using the same pragmatism you employ. It's not healthy to be out in the heat, so why not take advantage of the other hours?"

Her forefinger tapped her temple. "Smart, very smart."

"Just because I'm an actor doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"That's not what I meant."

He rose and stretched. "I know. Are you coming to the press conference?"

"Press conference?" she practically shrieked.

"Usually, to mark the beginning of principal shooting, there's a press conference. Gets the audience hyped for the release date."

"A year down the road?"

"Christmas, since there's no extensive special effects."

"Ah, bene, bene," Francis praised.

Mustang poked Rosemont's palms. "Just the stigmata."

"Maybe you should play Francis, and I'll be Clare," snorted the lead, exposing her scars to the light. "We'd cut a ton from the budget."

"Shut up. You in drag would turn it into a slapstick comedy."

"Been there, done that."

They navigated dim, narrow stairs to the Piazza San Rufino, hurrying through the mid-day swelter to the air-conditioned hotel. The lobby bustled with journalists and videographers, from both religious and secular news services. Flash bulbs popped the moment the pair entered, and persisted until every question had been answered twice.

Mustang - introduced as Candida Donato, making use of her middle name - endured the crush, clutching Rosemont's hand beneath the cloth-draped table the

entire time. Neither dwelt on the variety of languages, nor on the fact the reluctant actress responded to each without aid of a translator.

Media accounts highlighted her linguistic prowess, however. German, Italian and Dutch channels broadcast her in their native dialects without dubbing or subtitles. It hadn't occurred to her that recording devices were impacted by her power.

"Here's my dilemma," drawled the actor during an extremely late dinner Saturday fortnight. His battered tan fedora drooped low over his forehead; his red tank top exposed muscular arms adorned with multiple tattoos. "When the movie hits theatres, the audiences will hear me in English no matter which country it's playing. Will this... gift of yours make it a repeat of that incident at the Vienna airport, where the bar sounded like the bloody Tower of Babel?"

Mustang would not allow his gruffness to spoil her enjoyment of the ravioli. "I'm sorry, John. My first trip to Italy was when this trait exhibited. It happened in Japan, too, but on both occasions I had to consciously, albeit accidentally, will it. The more I made use of it, the more it became automatic."

"You're just one big accident, aren't you?"

Laying aside the fork, her fingers flexed into a fist. A row of wine glasses on a shelf above the bar shattered in rapid succession. "You have no idea."

"Can you stop it?" Rosemont queried.

"You can apologize."

"I don't mean the dishes. I mean the auto-translator."

"Maybe."

He trapped her hands between his. "I *am* sorry, Mustang. For Francis' sake, mine and yours, I don't want this film marred by controversy, or sensationalized in any way. I want it to be a masterpiece, capable of standing on its own merits, a tribute to what humanity might be if they stopped to consider the road they're traveling."

"Okay." Her scowl softened.

They finished eating in silence, the wait staff sweeping shards of crystal while speculating whether a mild tremor had shaken the region.

In Italian, of course.

Which Mustang heard in English.

How could she untrain a brain which had trained itself to transcend the language barrier? Might it not be within anyone's power to do likewise, which is why technology "heard" what its operators had heard?

They strolled the Via San Francesco, devoid of most tourist traffic.

Only certain sections of Assisi remained noisy and busy after dark, the rest rather like some American Midwestern towns which “roll up the sidewalks at 9:00.” Mustang preferred it that way, though she could sense Rosemont was itching for a livelier atmosphere.

“How long until shooting wraps?” she prodded.

“Three weeks.”

“Then, what?”

“The print goes to the editors in L.A., and if any retakes are needed, or voice overs, we schedule some studio time.”

“Me, included?”

“Ideally, yes. You object?”

“To flying all that distance.”

“You’re not cut out for this business, Mustang.”

She nudged his arm. “I told you that, John.”

“As a producer, I should’ve listened. I let my actor’s instincts take the fore...”

“How bad would it be if you replaced me?”

“At this stage? It would be impossible to get a name without going way over budget. Delays, overtime for the crews...”

“Never mind.”

“If we do need you on the coast, you can stay at my place. Won’t cost you a cent.”

“That’s not what bothers me.”

“What, then? Leaving here? There’s nothing here you can’t find elsewhere.”

“True. But, this has become home, moreso than Scotland, or Montana. Traveling like you do, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Says who? Home for me is probably aboard that monster of a DC-10, where I can crash and relax without anyone hounding me...”

“Would you give up your career if you could feel that way 24/7?”

“I doubt it. I like creating the characters, exploring their philosophies...”

“Which is why I’ll never be an actor. I’ve had to get inside people’s heads to ensure my own survival - or theirs - and I don’t find the prospect fun.”

“This will be your one shining moment of glory, then,” Rosemont proclaimed. “And, I’ll accept any awards in your name, and air freight them to you. It’ll drive the tabloids crazy, trying to find ‘the elusive Candida Donato.’”

Mustang heard the click before pinpointing its source. She shoved Rosemont between two buildings.

The bullet ricocheted off stone, too close to her ear for comfort.

“What the hell...” barked her companion.

She panted, “I’m giving odds it’s Ben Espinoza.”

IV

Despite a feeble cross-breeze, a pall of humidity hung over Mustang's apartment. So much for living on the topmost floor, on the side of a mountain.

She'd allowed Johnny Rosemont to escort her home in a circuitous fashion - not a difficult feat in a city where lanes and byways intersected and curved in every direction. Settled on a stool at the kitchenette counter, she shredded the manila envelope and poured over Ben Espinoza's file.

Notations from FBI Academy instructors cited his exceptionally high I.Q., insubordination and lack of cooperation being major issues. Only a distant relative's political influence prevented his expulsion from the program.

He graduated last in his class and, rather than being assigned to a field office, was retained at the Academy to escort new recruits on training exercises.

In other words, a glorified hall monitor.

Espinoza's chance encounter with Jack Parsons at Boleskine, during one such mission, became the source of an additional series of bureau policy violations. The junior agent developed an obsession with the occultist/scientist, launching unauthorized investigations of his family members.

He saved himself from termination by promising his superiors he would deliver into their hands "the next best thing to a nuclear warhead." What the agency listed as his delusions were tolerated for a decade, as he was shifted from department to department.

Until he diverted a security squad to Scotland, while the diplomat they were supposed to guard was assaulted by protesters in Dublin.

"You're going to have a visitor," announced Francis, suddenly standing beside her.

"I know. I heard him."

Espinoza wasn't totally careless in his approach to her door; the scraping and creaking reminded Mustang more of a neophyte ninja.

"I really need to remember to lock the deadbolt," she shouted to empty air, swiveling on the stool to watch his entrance.

He kicked wide the panel, pistol drawn. His curly dark hair was drenched in sweat, as were his blue dress shirt and black trousers. A chunk of thick rope protruded from beneath his supporting foot.

"A bit hot for you, Ben?" Mustang greeted.

He growled, "More for your boyfriend, than for me."

Maintaining pressure on the rope, he shuffled aside so she could view Johnny Rosemont - mouth gagged and hands tied behind his back - dangling on tip-toe over a rickety wooden chair in the middle of the corridor. A hangman's

noose was draped around his neck, reaching over the splintered rafter, twisted along the balcony railing.

To Espinoza's highly-polished Hush Puppies.

"Good one, Ben, but he's not my boyfriend."

Rosemont's terrified expression confirmed he viewed the threat to his life as very real. Mustang remained tranquil, knowing her adversary acted from desperation.

"You know you can't kill me, Ben, so you think you can use John as leverage to get... what? Jack's anti-grav formula? I've long since forgotten the equations."

"I can deliver you to Washington, and be reinstated at the bureau."

She thumped the stack of papers beside the sink. "I don't think they'd want you, even if you delivered the names and location of every terrorist on the planet."

"Watch what you say, Mustang. I'm getting a cramp in my foot."

"You've got a cramp in your brain."

The pistol fired. Espinoza didn't flinch when the projectile bounced harmlessly on the floorboards.

He did release the rope.

Which promptly unraveled around Rosemont's neck, leaving him to crash through the chair and land amongst the pieces.

Mustang brushed past the stunned Espinoza, loosing the actor's bonds and lending him a hand as he crawled upright. He was fuming, spewing a stream of expletives when she untied the bandanna-cum-gag.

"He could've killed me!" Rosemont thundered prior to running out of breath.

The woman bowed submissively. "He's all yours."

One jolting left to Espinoza's jaw laid out the former FBI agent on the threshold. When he didn't move, didn't groan, the pair squatted beside him.

Fingering his carotid artery, Mustang squinted at Rosemont. "You pack quite a punch. He's dead."

"No way!"

She withdrew her hand, offering him a chance to verify her diagnosis. He declined.

Forcing open Espinoza's mouth, she presumed he might've swallowed his tongue on impact. A broken pill capsule was wedged between his lower molars.

She chortled, struck by the irony.

Rosemont believed she'd lost her mind from the shock. "What could you possibly find humorous at a time like this?"

"When you hit him, he must've bitten down, swallowing the poison."

"Poison? That's a CIA tactic."

“Only in movies.” She inhaled slowly to ease the hysteria. “This idiot predicted, if he didn’t succeed, he’d either be going to jail, or facing a meaningless future. Neither appealed to him.”

“Idiot, indeed! Can’t you...” he hinted, with the magician’s flourish.

“Sure.” She mimicked the gesture, then abruptly halted. “Why would I want to?”

“True.”

One of Mustang’s neighbors in the building, returning from a family party, summoned the police. The narrow streets precluded driving an ambulance to the building, so three officers carried Espinoza’s corpse down the stairs, to the coroner’s morgue on the hill behind San Rufino.

Exhausted by the obligatory investigation, Johnny Rosemont and Mustang Duryea witnessed this trek from her window.

“How did Ben get his mitts on you?” asked the latter, drawing the curtains.

“Crept from an alley not a block shy of the guest house and shoved a pistol between my ribs. Threatened to have me charged as a traitor for harboring a fugitive, besides rattling off a litany of ridiculous theories on how to trap you.”

“Poor guy.”

“Who, him or me?”

“Him. He never... understood.”

The couple fell asleep on the love seat, propped against each other. A production assistant roused them Sunday morning, in time for their ride to San Damiano, near which a replica of the Porziuncola had been constructed.

The scene involved Clare running away from her home in Assisi to become the first of Francis’ female followers. Pledging herself to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience, Francis cuts off her long hair and places the veil atop her head.

With other scenes requiring her auburn locks intact, Mustang pondered how they would achieve this feat, especially with the dangerous-looking sheep shears provided by the prop department.

“A double, wearing a wig,” supplied Rosemont. “We shoot from the back, so they never see it’s not really you.”

Mustang exhaled loudly.

The crew laughed.

During close-ups, she tapped the boom microphone, pretending to perform a sound check. Instead, she commanded in a low tone, “English only, my friend.”

A myriad of languages would be edited from the elegant masqued ball scene. Additional extras were hired from among international visitors to fill in the crowd, their banter to be covered by an appropriate soundtrack.

Mustang’s “shining moment” - if sales of gossip magazines to Rosemont’s swooning female fans were any indication - came during an intricately

choreographed minuet beneath thousands of candles. Hidden behind a papier mache hawk's beak, Francis steals a kiss from Clare before she realizes his identity.

The saint himself had recounted the event for Mustang while outmaneuvering her at chess one summer's eve, and the writers added it to the script.

The balcony set - a three-story pseudo-stone facade supported by scaffolding, occupying part of a cordoned-off piazza away from most tourist traffic - originally caused Mustang to swallow her snickers. "We are doing Francis, right, and not *Romeo and Juliet*?"

Garbed in an elegant 13th century-style gown, she took her place at the flimsy railing, as a crescent moon rose over the buildings. The young Francis, before his religious conversion, paraded down the "street" in kelly green tunic, tan breeches and suede boots, accompanied by drunken friends, idly strumming a lute and singing bawdy poetry. Upon sighting Clare, he intones a love poem set in a minor key and, surprisingly, Johnny Rosemont had a decent singing voice. He also played guitar, easily adapting his skill to the four-stringed instrument.

The poignancy of the phrases, and how he expressed them in his clear bass, moved her. She bent to get closer, slight pressure on the faux-column rail crumbling it into chunks, which rained on Rosemont and his cohort.

"Cut!"

Mustang had jumped away from the balcony's edge, fearing she might fall, cowering against the painted styrofoam "window frame". Rosemont abandoned his mark and scaled the ladder behind the set, pulling her to safety before her panic could do more damage - human or otherwise.

"I thought... I thought..." she stammered.

He held her tight. "It looks very real, until you touch it. A tribute to the designers' ingenuity."

Below, the director bellowed to his set decorators, hoping to facilitate repairs before they lost the natural illumination - albeit augmented by precisely placed spotlights.

Her chest still heaving from fright, Mustang kept her eyes averted from the mutilated foam.

"You don't have vertigo, do you?" Rosemont inquired.

"I could've died..."

"I thought you couldn't be killed?"

"If I see it coming, no. This... this... I wouldn't have had time to stop my fall."

His mien sombered at this truth. "If I'd known that, I would've cautioned you."

"It's not your fault, John."

“In a way, it is. We’ve been lucky to use real buildings up to now. Sets are a different animal. I assumed...”

“I was indestructible?” she forced a chuckle.

“I guess so.”

Her legs less gelatinous, she straightened. “Just ninety-nine percent. Creep up on me from behind, and I’m completely vulnerable.”

“That little incident in your apartment evidence to the contrary.”

“Ben wasn’t exactly silent in his preparations.”

Within the hour, Mustang had resumed her place, “Take 2” successfully completed.

Day by day, equipment was transported and erected, snow created for winter effects when necessary - astounding Francis - scenes rehearsed and recorded, dailies assessed. Come a blustery Tuesday, they climbed Mount Subasio for the last time, to enact the day Francis received his renowned stigmata, the wounds of Christ.

Mustang observed the process from the fringes of the gathering below a clearing where wild horses grazed. Rosemont knelt on jagged stones, feigning ecstatic prayer, preceding the vision of an angel - to be digitally rendered by a computer. Abruptly, he spread his arms and let out a piteous yowl which petrified those present, including the director. The camera continued rolling as the actor crumpled to the ground.

“Cut!”

Six technicians rushed forward to check Rosemont’s well being. He waved them off, jumping to his feet like a 20-year-old.

He and Mustang ambled back to Assisi, pausing to feed the horses a few apples, and again beneath an ageless ilex tree at the Eremo delle Carceri to watch the brilliant gold sun descend over the Umbrian valley.

“What did you visualize to make your pain sound so real?” the woman had to ask.

“You, and the lightning bolts you travel on.”

She studied her palms. “They only hurt after...”

“Why, if you can heal yourself and others, did you never make the scars disappear?” he wondered.

“I probably could, now. They kept my stupidity fresh in my mind, rekindling the guilt on a daily basis.”

“You still feel guilty?”

“Not so much.”

“Will you ever leave this place?”

She gazed at the multi-colored sky. “Are you kidding?”

“I wish I could stay.”

“You love what you do, John. You can’t deny who you are. Nor can I.”

“A little tour guide?”

She shrugged.

Assisi grew quiet after the crew vacated the city in mid-August. Quieter, anyway. Tourists clogged the lanes and basilicas, and kept Mustang well fed.

The movie never made it out of limited release. Critics panned it wholesale for a lack of relevance, praising only the stigmata scene for its authenticity. More than one interviewer supposedly checked Johnny Rosemont’s hands for actual wounds.

No awards were forthcoming. The producers and investors recouped their money only through brisk DVD sales to religious organizations, who held private screenings.

These tidbits Mustang read in American newspapers, carried by some of the souvenir shops and hotels.

Rosemont revived his career with the next project, inspired by another Rolf and Greta Steckling novel. The hype surrounding “Candida Donato” faded rapidly, though Mustang occasionally overheard passersby questioning her resemblance to “Clare”.

Stuffing a tasty pastry in her mouth, she doubted it.

Except, perhaps, in loving these old stone edifices and reveling in her freedom.

She’d paid a high price for that freedom. More than a decade of anguish, confusion and death. The loss of her greatest love, Jim Neville, and subsequent friends; becoming a target for spies, governments and mad men.

Countless women would envy her time with Johnny Rosemont, the kisses they shared. Such expressions of intimacy, minus earthquakes and storms, merely proved to her she’d established firm control over her affinity with nature. The weight of that burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

Communication from the actor came in late March, a one-word telegram: “Sorry. JVK.”

“I’m sorry, too, Francis,” she sighed to the spring wind.

He replied from the recessed doorway. “You made the effort. That’s what’s important. Even in my day, those who might’ve benefitted most from my words refused to heed them. Nothing changes.”

Much had changed, nonetheless, for her. She could journey into the future with an open heart.

Wiping powdered sugar from her lips, Mustang bent to smell herbs sprouting in a window box before heading to the Piazza del Comune, where a motley assortment of students awaited their tour.