

The Mustang Chronicles:

Hellraiser Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

As a rule, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea ate an early dinner at her favorite trattoria then retired to her flat overlooking the Piazza San Rufino, while tourists in Assisi took to the streets for periodically unchristian gluttony, drinking and revelry. This particular Friday, however, two dozen American college students - the syllabus for their “study abroad” program including outings to key sacred sites throughout Italy - wanted to see absolutely everything the town had to offer.

The auburn-haired ex-patriot, through no fault of her own, had been walking since 8:00 that morning. Her blue flannel shirt and jeans clung to her limbs, a layer of dust and grime coated her exposed skin, and her feet throbbed in her sneakers. Trudging from the Porta Nuova, where she’d watched the pilgrims board their bus, impatient for the gangly professor to pay a promised 500 Euros, her stomach grumbled. The bells of various churches, not precisely synchronized, chimed 9:15.

The Gran Caffè bakery closed for the night, she’d have to secure her sugar fix elsewhere.

Music from distinct cultures mingled on the cool late October air. Mustang could count on one hand the occasions she’d danced in her life, and she didn’t desire to add to that number; the distorted shadows of those gyrating in the taverns indicated certain humans enjoyed such diversions.

Another disadvantage to seeking a meal at this hour: crowds observing the traditions of the Continent jammed the tables. She preferred quiet and solitude while she cleared her plate of *ravioli al forno* with a glass of chianti.

Still, beggars couldn’t be choosers. A large group exploded onto the Piazza del Comune a short distance ahead; that establishment should have available indoor seating, she surmised.

The head waiter hailed her from the threshold, his brow furrowed with worry.

“What’s wrong, Paolo?” she queried, knowing he’d hear her in his native tongue, though she spoke in English - thanks to the powers she’d unwittingly inherited from her grandfather, rocket scientist and occult practitioner Jack Parsons.

“I’m exhausted, Signorina,” replied the aging figure. “I’m getting too old for these long shifts.”

“More staff quit?”

“Not quit, but ill. This flu that’s been going around...”

“Yes, I’ve heard it’s... unpleasant.”

Discussing the symptoms of a contagious virus not conducive to a healthy appetite, the pair shrugged at each other. Paolo pointed to a vacant booth in the far corner; Mustang meandered through the chattering diners to slide on the worn bench.

Her order didn't arrive until she'd eaten most of the breadsticks and drained half the bottle of wine. She'd just picked up her fork to lay into the pile of steaming pasta when a commotion from the adjacent bar erupted into the dining room.

The fair, muscular clerk from the grocer's Mustang frequented flew through the doorway, landing beside a staunch matron's feet. She screamed and bolted from her chair, dragging the linens and most of the plates with her, caught on her charm bracelet. The subsequent chain reaction caused the tour guide to repress her laughter at the similarities between old Keystone Kops films.

Paolo didn't find this situation the least bit humorous. He rushed toward the rear of the structure, only to be shoved backward, stumbling over a prone figure and slamming his cranium against the edge of a marble counter, knocking trays of freshly-washed tumblers to the floor.

Seeing this diligent worker bloodied, Mustang left her seat to check on his welfare. En route to him, another body soared past from the other room, nearly impaled on a rack of wine bottles.

Oh, hell... she breathed. Better put a stop to this...

Diverting into the dim sanctum where men congregated in an attempt to hide from their nagging spouses, Mustang immediately detected the source of the disturbance: a burly drunk towering above his foes, shock of tousled white hair contrasting with the black mops of far younger men, denim shirt shredded and drenched with beer.

He seemed to be giving an admirable account of himself, despite the unfair odds. Not willing to give herself a reputation as a brawler, the woman refrained from intervening. She recalled not being on the receiving end of any gratitude during past incidents...

Kicking one attacker in the groin, massive paws seized two others and banged their heads together. They crumpled atop a mound of unconscious forms. His right fist aimed at the last assailant when the bartender slammed a policeman's baton across his skull.

His knees wobbled and he threatened to slam on the boards. Instinctively, Mustang maneuvered to where she could catch his bulk and ease him down, reducing the potential for serious injury.

Hooking him beneath his arms, she had no choice but to call on nature for additional strength, given his weight. Laying him gently on his spine, a sudden burst of ceiling lights temporarily blinded her, so she knelt beside him for more than a minute before being able to distinguish his features.

“All right, clear up this mess!” stormed the paunchy restaurant proprietor, flanked by a squad of uniformed Carabinieri.

Not wishing to be hauled to the Assisi lockup - not that she could be detained in any jail - she favored her charge with a last glance before rising...

Then, did a double-take.

Oh, hell...

One by one, participants in the melee were dragged to their feet by the authorities, handcuffed and led outdoors to have their wounds assessed by paramedics before being incarcerated. That gave Mustang an opportunity to physically carry the victim of the attack through the service entrance and deposit him on stone steps leading past a row of ancient dwellings.

Tenderly, she stroked the abstract geometric pattern of scars on his left cheek, urging him to rouse himself. Heavy lids fluttered eventually; blurred aquamarine orbs struggled to focus.

“What the devil...” he cursed in a midwestern basso profundo.

“After all these years, you still like to cause havoc, eh, Reid?”

A rush of adrenaline propelled him upright; he crashed against the wall, unsteady. Unyielding fingers seized on her collar and swung her toward a lone shaft of moonlight. “You!” he roared.

She grinned at the irony of another misadventure returning to haunt her. Reid Church, a university professor from Indiana - along with internal auditor Jean King - had attempted a casino heist in Sanremo on the Italian Riviera, resulting in the woman’s death and Church instigating a fight he couldn’t win after wagering Mustang couldn’t outdrink him.

“I can’t say it’s good to see you,” she stated. “You’ve... changed.”

Indeed, no trace of his dark mop endured. A bristly mustache obscured his upper lip, as well. Nonetheless, he retained the hard, square jowls - a week’s stubble notwithstanding - the bull neck, broad shoulders and barrel chest.

“You... haven’t,” he countered. “You still look like you’re not old enough to set foot in a bar. And, what’s it been? Eight years.”

The commotion in the piazza attracted a late crowd; Mustang linked arms with Church and led him toward San Rufino. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for my wife.”

She halted abruptly, causing her companion to miss a step and stumble forward, recovering his balance just before crashing onto the paving stones. “Your wife?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Unless you’d prefer to join the others in a cell, we’ve got all the time in the world.”

She didn’t take him to her apartment; too difficult to navigate the narrow stairs in his condition. After wandering via a circuitous track, they settled on a bench set in the wall near the Basilica Santa Chiara, overlooking the valley blanketed in a light mist.

He commenced his narrative with an accusation. “To this day, I can’t explain what you did to me, or how you did it.”

“A parlor trick,” she chuckled, remembering their last scrap.

“Bullshit! When we parted company, I was a physical wreck. Ten minutes later, I paid off the taxi at the Sanremo airport; all my bruises had disappeared, and my cracked ribs fully healed. I got on the plane for Amsterdam, flew to Budapest, Cairo, Lisbon, then to Chicago, as you’d recommended. I kept thinking I saw suspicious characters following me, but nothing happened.”

“I’m glad.”

“Until I got back to campus, that is.”

“How so?” Mustang prodded.

“Administrative sorts harangued me with questions about Jean’s death, and how I was involved. I was threatened with dismissal though, as a tenured professor, they couldn’t do anything. I... took to drinking heavily, and if not for Shelly...”

“Shelly?”

“Shelly Windom.”

The name rang familiar. “Your graduate assistant.”

“Correct. She... took care of me those days when I didn’t think I could handle my class schedule. I treated her shamefully, but she tolerated my... foibles.”

“I told you, even then, she was in love with you.”

He bristled. “Love? Hah! If she loved me, she wouldn’t be here with another man!”

“You mean...”

His smirk failed to ease the menacing lines of his face. “I’m getting ahead of myself, aren’t I?”

“A bit.”

His tone dropped even lower. “To make sure Shelly and I avoided any semblance of impropriety, I convinced her to join in a variety of campus activities. Stuff the younger set like to do. One night, at a party after a football home game, one of the jocks - as a joke - slipped a date rape drug in her drink, and she ended up pregnant.”

“Oh, hell...”

“She was going to report him to the police, but the coach intervened, since this guy was a star linebacker. Offered her one hundred thousand to keep her mouth shut.”

“She didn’t take it?”

“Oh, I made sure she did. Then, to preserve her reputation, I married her.” Mustang’s jaw gaped.

In their short acquaintance - roughly 12 hours - during her jaunt to Sanremo to replenish her coffers while living at Boleskine House in Scotland, Mustang had witnessed his misogynistic tirades and violence, tempered partially by a well-hidden sensitivity. Any woman who consented to live with him would undoubtedly be subjected to the most antiquated restrictions...

Unless Church had permanently altered his viewpoint.

“What then?” she urged.

“We had to keep the arrangement secret, of course, until her contract with the school expired. We honeymooned on Cape Cod, and bought a bungalow not far from campus...”

“And, the baby?”

She saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “She miscarried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t her doing. We were driving to the mall to buy baby clothes...” His fist dislodged a row of stones when he punched the wall beside him. “Some idiot ran a red light and t-boned the passenger door.”

“Oh, hell...”

He chuckled wryly. “You know how I wanted to steal that money from the casino to fund my retirement? It all went toward medical bills. She lay in hospital for a month, in a coma...”

“But, she recovered,” remarked Mustang.

“Slowly. Things weren’t the same after that. We argued... a lot. I spent most nights at the bar... and when I’d get home... I’d see the bruises on her arms and face the next day...”

“Oh, hell...”

“Then...”

Mustang concentrated on the chill wind until he resumed speaking.

“I’d downed a full bottle of whiskey, a six-pack of beer and a couple shots of rum at a joint on the south side, well away from the places my colleagues drank. A couple carloads of students decided to slum it and, completely hammered, started in on me. I told them to piss off, and one came at me with a busted glass. I landed in the can for five years because I dared to defend myself.”

“That’s not...”

Straight white teeth reflected the light. “I killed him. One punch to his chest, and he dropped dead in front of his friends. How was I to know he had a heart condition?”

“You couldn’t... No judge, no jury would convict...”

“But, they did. The prosecutor made an issue of my service as a Marine, my dishonorable discharge, my training in hand-to-hand combat...”

“So you spent five years in prison?” Mustang’s hazel eyes squinted. “What about a reduced sentence for good behavior?”

He guffawed; the noise echoed off the buildings. “Good behavior, stuck among a mob like that?”

Her lips pursed. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“I’m lucky they didn’t tack on another five, but the security cameras verified I’d been jumped by a gang in the exercise yard and I broke their skulls in self-defense.”

“So, now?”

“Like I said: I’m looking for my wife.”

“What makes you think she’s here in Assisi?”

“That’s the twisted part of all this.” He exhaled slowly. “She visited me every few weeks for the first couple years, then less and less. Finally, I received a large manila envelope from a lawyer stuffed with a divorce petition.”

“Oh, hell...”

“After I was released, I had my work cut out for me. None of my old friends wanted to talk about the mess. Shelly had sold the house and ran off with the money. I couldn’t hire a private detective, the cops were no help, she’d ditched the cell phone I’d bought her and wasn’t using any credit cards, so I had no means to trace her.”

“Then, how...”

“I’m getting to that.” The biting edge of his voice gave her pause. “Whether it was a calculated prank or just innocent stupidity, a staff member at the half-way house where I was living invited me to church one Sunday. In our group sessions, we were being encouraged to engage in a twelve-step program, so I

figured it couldn't hurt. Boy, was I wrong." He gazed across the valley for a prolonged interval, then whipped toward her. "Walking through the narthex, I noticed a very official proclamation on the bulletin board. The bishop was announcing the excommunication of the parish's former assistant pastor, Father Damian Walsh, after he abandoned his post and fled to Italy in the company of a woman with whom he'd violated his vow of celibacy."

"And, you think it's Shelly?"

"I *know* it's Shelly!"

"But, how can you, if she wasn't named..."

A volcanic rage energized the affirmation, "Because I confronted the pastor in front of his entire congregation and he admitted the truth!"

II

Not having attended any sort of religious services in two decades, Mustang Duryea could still envision Reid Church interrupting a pious sermon and throttling the reluctant priest in the sanctuary.

"Then what?" she asked.

"I made my own vow, there in front of the altar: I'd kill them both."

Mustang knew better than to argue with him. Even if he didn't love her, he viewed Shelly as a personal possession more than a partner with equal standing and, if he couldn't reclaim her, no one else could have her.

"What brought you here?"

He grumbled, "You remember how Jean and I secured forged passports for Sanremo?"

She nodded.

"Well, after my stretch in prison, I had scores of contacts for illegal activities. I hopped a freighter and worked my way across the Atlantic, tracking them from Rome to Abruzzo, Naples, Tivoli, Foligno..."

Assisi was the next settlement north where a couple on the lamb could hide in plain sight, given the constant influx of tourists.

Mustang rose. "Look, I've had a long day, and I'm exhausted. I'll let you get back to your hotel..."

Those heavy eyelids framed smoldering aquamarine orbs. "What hotel?"

She swore not to take him to her apartment. For one, his massive frame wouldn't fit on the battered loveseat, her twin bed too narrow...

The 500 Euros in her jeans was meant to last her into the winter. Getting Reid out of her hair posed a more urgent problem. She extracted the roll from her pocket and tucked it in his fist. "There's a guesthouse up the hill..."

He pitched the cash on the cobbles. "I don't want your pity."

"Fine." Summoning a light breeze to collect the loose bills, she squatted to retrieve the neatly piled stack.

"Haven't given up the parlor tricks, eh?" he mocked.

"Good-bye, Reid." She ambled across the piazza. "Try to stay out of trouble."

She felt him closing the gap before she veered onto the Via Semei. If he tried to manhandle her, he'd be on the receiving end of more than the mild electrical shocks she'd used to dissuade him on the Italian Riviera.

"You know this town?" he inquired with a sinister quietude, falling into step as they ascended the incline.

Mustang refused to lie, but she wouldn't supply any details, either. "Yes."

"Where might a couple shack up who didn't want to be noticed?"

"There's no end of hotels, bed and breakfasts..."

"Any of them especially nice?"

"Quite a few."

"Show me."

She stopped short, angry. "At this hour? Are you nuts?"

He glared at her, determined.

"Reid, be rational. You can't bust into every room and drag the occupants from their beds until you find Shelly. You'd be hustled off to the can in a heartbeat or, worse, thrown in a padded cell."

"They can try."

She laid a placating hand on his blood-stained sleeve. "I'll spring for a room, so you can get a good night's sleep. In the morning, we'll tackle this logically."

"On your oath?" he demanded, flipping his arm to grip her fingers.

She flinched at a sudden jolt of pain from her mutilated palm. "No parlor tricks, I promise."

He drew her hand close to his face. "These wounds haven't healed in all these years?"

"The damage is permanent."

Leading him toward a lone exterior lamp, she haggled a good price from the late desk clerk at a less-than-stellar hostel and left Reid to mount the rickety stairs.

He lingered on the bottom plank. "Where will we meet in the morning?"

"Near the basilica. It's a good place to start any search."

"For tourists, maybe."

She twirled an auburn strand wistfully. "Don't underestimate me, Reid. I've got connections, too."

As she drifted into the biting chill, she heard him grouse, "Not of this earth."

His awareness that her "parlor tricks" exceeded mere magical illusions placed Mustang in yet another sticky predicament. Climbing to her modest third floor apartment in a converted residence near the Cathedral of San Rufino, she ticked off her options.

She could darken her hair to blend in more readily with the local populace and avoid another meeting with him.

She could isolate herself until Church abandoned his search, or moved north on the trail of the errant couple.

She could employ the natural elements to locate Shelly and the priest, and deliver them to Church...

Except, she would not be party to first degree murder.

The accented baritone greeted her when she crossed the threshold into the icy flat. "You've committed first degree murder yourself, Signorina."

"Yes, I know, Francis." She switched on a lamp, the weak bulb providing a modicum of illumination in the stark chamber. "I won't debate the issue, or the guilt I still feel over some of the deaths."

"Only some?"

She skirted the loveseat and yanked open the wood stove's iron door, using discarded newspaper and twigs to restart the fire. "You know as well as I do: a few of them deserved their fate."

Once the kindling crackled steadily, she added two split logs and secured the latch, warming herself.

"So, you continue to deem yourself judge, jury and executioner?"

"I'm more ethical than some courts." Craving a shower, she delayed long enough to heat milk on the electric burner, adding cocoa and sugar. The ceramic mug of steaming liquid calmed her nerves and thawed her bones.

"In court, the accused is afforded a proper defense," St. Francis of Assisi chided.

"So, you're saying I should allow men like Reid - who've stolen and beaten others, even killed - to justify their actions? Sanction revenge because his wife sought solace in another man's arms after he abused her?"

The manifested figure dissipated in defeat.

As she stripped off her clothes, Mustang realized helping Shelly flee to safety would be her only alternative.

Vows to some man-made deity meant nothing if a small measure of happiness could be savored in this short span of life.

Toweling dry her hair, she whispered, "Come dawn, show me where Shelly and Damian are staying."

As the days grew shorter, Mustang ached to sleep in, but her body remained on a schedule more suited to tending horses. She watched the city stir - bakers minding their ovens, laborers eating breakfast - from her perch above the Piazza San Rufino. Then, among the wisps of smoke from chimneys heating cozy dwellings, a purple glow hovered above a specific roof.

Mustang had learned as an inhabitant of Assisi: the shortest distance between two points was never a straight line. Lanes curved, dipped and rose, intersected at bizarre angles and doubled back on themselves. Her feet still tender from the previous day's exertion, she strolled at a leisurely pace toward the ethereal marker.

The smell of sweet treats tantalized her nostrils as she passed the Gran Caffè. Once her errand had been completed, she would partake of the delicate pastries, *en masse*.

Traversing the Piazza del Comune, the woman couldn't prevent a laugh escaping her throat. One level above the very trattoria where she'd almost eaten a plate of ravioli, and Church had destroyed the bar, the pair he sought slumbered peacefully.

If he ever found out...

"You're out early," came his bass from the opposite side of the historic stone fountain.

She gulped. "And you're quite the ninja."

"The Marine Corps specialized in stealth."

"I'm glad you don't consider me an enemy."

"Don't be so sure."

A change of subject couldn't hurt. "How'd you sleep?"

"The mattress was lumpy, and the walls so thin I could hear the couple in the next room humping."

"Better than listening to someone snore," she quipped.

He rounded the three lions affixed to the basin, hovering beside her. "You knew all along where they were, didn't you?"

“How could I, Reid? I’ve never met either of them, don’t know what they look like.”

“You knew her name.”

“I’d forgotten until you mentioned it.” She guided him to a dew-coated table outside a café, righting the upturned chairs. “Be rational. How could I know every individual who comes and goes from this town?”

“You hinted you have connections...”

“For certain... purposes.”

“Tracking fugitives, for instance?”

Hopeless to get through his stubborn resolve, she mused. “You want some breakfast?”

His expression softened slightly. “I haven’t eaten in six days.”

“Huh?”

“I spent my last dime in Naples. Been hitching and shoplifting ever since.”

“Oh, hell...”

The bruised grocery clerk was stocking a vegetable bins when the pair approached. He recognized Church from the barroom fracas, and ducked beneath the shop’s awning.

Mustang purchased milk, cheese, prosciutto and bread, surrendering the sack to her companion, who created a mammoth sandwich, which he devoured in five bites.

In lieu of gratitude, he stared at her. “You don’t wear the black pearl I gave you?”

She recalled the trinket pilfered from a Sanremo jeweler, smiling. “It... didn’t survive my travels.”

True enough.

His filthy shirt and tattered jeans hadn’t survived *his* journey. A few shopkeepers opened early, even in the off season...

Recognizing her as the multi-lingual tour guide, Stefano cut her a good deal on not just garments, but a backpack in which to stuff the spares. “Before we do anything else,” Mustang instructed Church, “get back to your room and change. If you walk around in broad daylight looking like you do, you’ll be arrested as a vagrant.”

“Gee, thanks,” he spat.

“Take a shower, comb your hair. When you see Shelly, you don’t want her screaming in fright and bringing the entire police force down on you.”

“After I take care of her and that... that... scum, I don’t care what they do to me.”

Depositing him once more at the hostel, she hustled back to the Piazza del Comune. A hushed utterance unlocked the deadbolt securing the door to the lodgings; she took the stairs by twos and didn't bother to knock on the sturdy oak panel.

The couple's nakedness concealed by a heavy quilt, they bolted upright at this intrusion.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" squeaked the buxom strawberry blonde, clutching the fabric to her neck.

Mustang grasped the pile of clothes on the armchair and thrust them on the bed. "Just say I'm a friend. You've got five minutes to get dressed and get going, before Reid finds his way up here."

Damien, salt-and-pepper mop tousled, an athlete in decline, swung his legs onto the floor, snatching his boxers from the tangle of fabric. "Are you sure it's him?"

"We've had... dealings before."

Shelly hesitated in her own scrambling to assess the messenger. "You're the gal he met in Sanremo..."

"He told you about that?" Mustang retorted.

"He talks in his sleep."

Peeking through a gap in the door, Mustang glanced over her shoulder. "Don't bother to pack, just take off. Get as far from Italy as you can; hop a ship for Malta, India, Bangkok."

"If he tracked us this far, he'll find us wherever we go," lamented Damien.

"He'll never set foot outside Assisi." With that assurance, she withdrew.

Outdoors, she inhaled the delightful aroma of sausages and potatoes frying nearby. She arrived at the hostel as Church emerged, white mane damp, jowls shaven. The red polo shirt strained across his barrel chest, though the khaki trousers fit well. A tan leather jacket, with intricate stitching across the yoke, protected him from the near-freezing temperature.

"When did you go grey?" queried Mustang.

"In prison, where else?"

"I know a good barber..."

"No time."

"You'd look much more respectable with a decent trim..."

He grumped, "I don't want to look respectable. I want to put the fear of God in both those..."

Long strides propelled him toward his goal; Mustang glimpsed a buck knife and sheath hanging from his belt loop. "Where'd you get that?"

“I stole it from a street vendor in Rome the day I jumped ship.”

So much fury, festering for weeks, months... with his bulk, his heart could burst at any moment.

She caught him up and slowed his pace with a firm grip. “You just going to crash in there and whack them while they sleep?”

“You stand off me!” he barked, shaking free and marching onward. “I guarantee: I’ll make sure they’re awake and fully cognizant of their sins before I send them to hell.”

She let him go, her own gait bringing her to the fringes of a gathering crowd as Church ransacked the empty room above the piazza. Goose feathers from the pillows wafted out an open window; a cheap figurine shattered the glass pane, raining shards upon the recoiling throng.

The owner - the same paunchy miser who’d summoned the Carabinieri to his establishment the previous night - preceded a fresh, uniformed contingent up the stairs, weapons drawn. Church evidently heard the boots, leaping from the smashed casement 15 feet onto uneven stones. He had no clue Mustang cushioned the impact, preventing him from fracturing his ankle.

He fled past the Temple of Minerva, the Carabinieri reversing course from the structure to make chase.

In the meantime, Mustang joined the distraught gentleman moaning over destruction to his property. “Who will pay for this?” he whined repeatedly, picking through bits and pieces of splintered wood and fragmented porcelain.

The one intact furnishing: a mirror above the chest of drawers. On it - unwisely, perhaps - Shelly had scrawled, “Fuck you, Reid!” with neon red lipstick before departing.

III

Shelly’s message held definite ramifications. Reid Church could not fail to realize his wife had been forewarned of his coming.

The only person who knew of Reid’s presence in Assisi - and his purpose: Mustang Duryea.

Regardless of the danger, she burst out laughing, drawing the perplexed attention of the hotel’s owner. Sobering rapidly, she whisked from among the clutter.

Church would hide from the Carabinieri, but not for long - she grasped that much. He being unfamiliar with Assisi, and the hour early, the places he could avoid capture were few and far between.

Add to that his lack of funds...

That left the nearby churches, or the Rocca Maggiore.

His recent unpleasant clash in a sacred space wouldn't make the blessed edifices of the town conducive to his flight. Resigned to the inevitable, she made her way to the restored fortress adorning Mount Subasio, feet protesting the strain.

The tour guide never anticipated an ambush. Church might've been expecting the police, and he struck with the buck knife in a frantic arc.

Her martial arts training instinctive, Mustang dodged the blow and, off-balance, Church bounced on the ground and rolled downhill. Once before, when he'd nearly plunged off a hotel roof, she'd rescued him. He'd offered no thanks for that kindness.

How often had people she encountered sought favors from her without gratitude? she pondered.

Ending up dead.

Maybe once, she could rectify the chaos without inflicting carnage...

A stand of weeds arced from being trampled by many shoes, forming a solid barrier to attenuate Church's descent. More enraged than relieved, he lay on the damp grass, glaring at her.

"You bitch!" he yowled. "How could you tip them off..."

"Remember what I told you in Sanremo, Reid?" she hissed. "You don't want to make me angry, because I do horrible things when I'm angry, and you're pushing real hard..."

"You remember I told you not to contradict *me*, or think you know better..."

"And you didn't believe I could drink more whiskey than you..."

"A parlor trick," he snarled.

"Then, what about plain, brute strength? You didn't think I could lift you when the pigeons caused you to fall..."

"What are you proposing?"

Mustang sneered. "Any contest you choose."

"You're insane."

"You'd be insane not to accept my terms."

He shifted to a sitting posture. "What terms?"

"If you win, you kill me, and continue your hunt for Shelly and Damian. If I win, I snag you a stash from some casino and you find yourself a little corner of the planet to live peacefully."

On his knees, thick digits clamped around the hilt of the knife in the dirt beside him. "I have no stomach for such nonsense."

“Neither do I, frankly.”

Gathering speed on the upslope, Church lunged at her. One deficiency in his Marine Corps training: analyzing his opponent. He might be able to creep up on an unsuspecting sentry and slit his gullet, but when dealing with a woman who wielded the power of a god...

His shoes froze to the earth and he plunged forward, landing prostrate before her. Planting his hands to raise himself, an invisible weight on his back stalled the movement.

“What the devil...” he growled.

She sank, cross-legged, next to his reddened face. “Listen to me, Reid, and listen closely.”

In no mood for obliging, his struggle persisted amidst grunts and expletives.

“If I walk away, I know some hungry wolves who’d like nothing better than you as a meal,” she snickered. “So, what’ll it be?”

“Liar!”

Ear splitting howls reverberated on the breeze. Church drained his last ounce of energy in desperation, a futile effort.

“You’ve got ten seconds,” declared Mustang.

The saliva splashed on her cheek. “If I ever get my hands on you, you wily...”

“Farewell, then. If I see Shelly, I’ll let her know you pose no further threat to her or Damian.”

Deftly rising, she flounced down the hillside, ticking off seconds as she went. His yelps reached her before she mouthed ten.

“I’ll listen! I’ll listen!”

Not that she relished torturing other human beings, but she’d been tortured enough in her day to not return the favor. Freed from the uncomfortable position, he rested on his haunches, brushing mud from his elbows and knees, grimacing at his captor.

“You don’t seem to be in the proper frame of mind,” she observed, sinking beside him.

“How can I be, when you’re being such a... a...”

She shushed him by placing a finger on his lips. “Calm yourself, Reid. Letting yourself stew in your grief will do nothing but aggravate your blood pressure.”

“Grief?” he echoed.

“Yes, grief. You’re grieving the loss of something you thought would last forever.” She averted her gaze from that scarred countenance. “Nothing lasts forever. You’ve got to acknowledge that, take responsibility for your failures, and let Shelly go.”

“No!” he bellowed.

“Why? You didn’t love her, married her only to protect her, then practically abandoned her in favor of the bottle.”

He straightened, looming over her. “What do you know, you ignorant shrimp? Have you ever allowed yourself to be in a relationship...”

“You don’t want to go there, Reid...”

He ignored her advice. “You wouldn’t tell me your right name in Sanremo. You’re so afraid of being emotionally compromised, you didn’t even want me to kiss you...”

She shot up like the stream of a fountain. “You want to know why? I’ll show you, but not without full disclosure that you’ll be dead within an hour if I do!”

This declaration took him aback; the volume of his basso profundo reduced 80 percent. “What, you got some kind of communicable disease?”

Still hot, Mustang sputtered, “Nothing that simple.”

She noticed bus loads of tourists pulling into the Rocca Maggiore parking lot and reconsidered displaying her power in public view. Entwining her fingers with his, she tugged Church further up the mountain.

The wild horses she visited would understand her reticence.

Weaving through underbrush and evading low branches, both looked the worse for wear when they emerged in the lush clearing.

Church marveled at the animals for a scant moment, his mood still foul. “Now, what was this crap you were trying to lay on me?”

The horses accustomed to receiving treats of apples or carrots, Mustang had none to give. Groping in the boll of a pine tree, however, she materialized a burlap sack of golden delicious fruit.

Her companion’s eyes widened at yet another parlor trick. “You’re good, I must say that much.”

“I suppose so. I can be very, very bad, too.”

“Like threatening my life?” he scolded.

“You would’ve driven that knife into me without compunction.”

“Only because you...”

“What? Saved a couple lives?” She choked on her emotions. “It’s the least I could do, after ruining so many.”

“Including your own?” he accused.

Her jaw hardened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re nothing but a cheap replica of a woman, unreal. You talk tough, but you really just want to be possessed by a man...”

Her teeth clenched at this misogynistic tripe. “No man could possess me if he tried, and here’s why.”

Despite conquering nature’s response to her passions in the arms of Johnny Rosemont months earlier, Mustang hoisted herself onto a flat rock, level with Church’s oft-broken nose, and yanked him to her by his shirt collar. She let fly, assaulting his lips with near-savage force.

The ground lurched beneath them; a microburst of wind bent trees at 90 degree angles. The horses trotted to safety as spontaneous rain showers drenched them, while no clouds obscured the blue sky.

She hadn’t foreseen what transpired next.

Rather than dissuade Church from his antiquated views, her enthusiasm served to stoke the fires of his resolve. Ignoring the weather anomalies, he wrapped Mustang in a tantalizing embrace, raising her off her perch and lowering her to a sheltered fissure in the stone.

“Now *that’s* how a woman should behave!” he praised, nestled beside her once his lust was sated. “A mouse in the kitchen, but a tigress in bed!”

Her lungs heaving, Mustang chastised herself for thinking she could convince one so bullheaded that he should be more respectful of females and allow them their independence.

When he pinned her beneath him as she sought to extricate herself from the tight space, she grasped he’d become an albatross around her neck.

Not for long.

A crate of dynamite could have no more effectively demolished the rock overhang, projectiles diffused in all directions above them. Then, Church shot straight into the air, unwittingly suspended between two pines.

Mustang dusted herself off, staring up at this captive. If she left him there, he would be dead within an hour, given the temperature and the hawks who would find him prime picking. His bones would be scattered by foraging wildlife, leaving nothing for the Carabinieri to investigate - if anyone bothered to report him missing.

“This is why I do what I do,” she addressed Francis, knowing he’d hear her. “People like this do little except harm others. No one will claim him; he’ll be buried in a pauper’s grave, his life forgotten.”

Church heard her, as well, petrified by his predicament, yet unable to comprehend the flaw in his reasoning. “Why reject the pleasure we can have together?” he ventured. “We can make a career of hitting the casinos, with your little parlor trick of fixing the dice, and live high on the hog. We can travel the globe...”

“Already done that,” she remarked.

“Then, we can settle down in some remote village and raise horses, when we’re not at the craps table...”

“Already done that.”

“Then, what do you want of me?” he hollered.

She propped herself on a slanted stone, stroking the manes of the horses and they nuzzled her for more treats. “Nothing you can give!”

“But, didn’t you enjoy...”

Silently, Mustang confessed she still felt the heat of his body coupled with hers, his lips setting her nerves a-tingle. “I would’ve enjoyed it more if you thought of the experience as something other than just your right as a man - especially when you came here to reclaim your wife! What a hypocrite you are! Shelly can’t seek her happiness elsewhere, but you can bed any woman you fancy!”

Totally spent, feet throbbing, she trekked down the mountainside and through bustling lanes to the Piazza San Rufino. Bells struck 1:00, and her stomach reminded her she hadn’t eaten. A peanut butter sandwich would suffice; a trip to the Gran Caffe would tax the last of her strength.

“You can’t leave him up there like a load of old laundry,” St. Francis admonished as she munched the bread and sipped from a mug of hot cocoa at the kitchenette table.

“He served in the Marines. He’ll find a way to escape.”

“Your heartlessness knows no bounds.”

“It’s self-protection of the most basic sort, Francis. He’s heartless, so I must emulate his attitude in order not to get involved.”

“But, you *are* involved.”

“Purely by accident.”

He clucked his tongue. “You could have left him in the tavern for the Carabinieri...”

“I didn’t know then what I do now.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Hey, I thought him just a misguided fool. Those sorts can be... educated. His mind is not only closed, but locked tight. If his intention to track and kill Shelly has been diverted, it’s only because he’s set his sights on me.”

“Not that you haven’t dreamed of being with a man many a-night,” Francis taunted.

She carried her plate and mug to the sink. “Geez, I know you can get in my head, but that’s a bit personal...” She squirted dish soap into a warm stream from the faucet. “Anyway, I dream of Jim Neville, Jerry Richards... men honest enough to want to marry me.”

“Thomas Burton?”

“Can a woman ever forget her first kiss?”

“What about Johnny Rosemont?”

The blush hidden by her bowed head, auburn locks dangling loose, she confessed, “He’s more a trusted friend.”

“Though he betrayed you?”

“There’s no proof of that.”

The Italian saint watched the sun fade through the smudged window. “Ah, child, when will you face your flaws honestly? You strive so hard to present a facade of detachment to the world, when you’re really a frightened infant...”

A dish slammed on the counter, cracking in pieces. “Frightened? With this power? Why should I be frightened?”

“Because you know you’ve used it improperly, bringing more harm than good, and the consequences scare you.”

“I always clean up my mistakes!”

“By letting carnivorous fowl peck out this man’s eyes?”

Mustang dumped the broken china in the trash. “Oh, all *right!* So I’m a heartless bitch!”

“And, if he does extricate himself, you know he’ll seek vengeance.”

“You think he’ll be merciful if I go to him and apologize?”

“If he has his way, he’ll vent his ire on every inch of your body and leave you for dead.”

Stunned by this frankness, Mustang gawked at the usually mild-mannered manifestation. “That’s pretty... brutal.”

“He’s pretty brutal.”

“You’re saying I’ve fouled this up royally.”

“Indeed. So much so, you may not survive.”

“Unless I kill him outright?”

A weak grin curled the edges of Francis’ mouth. “Unless you get him drunk.”

“Huh?”

“Make arrangements for a reconciliation, at some hotel. Buy a plentiful stock of liquor, to which he naturally gravitates. Once he loses consciousness, you can put him on a bus for destination unknown...”

“And make him forget he was ever here?” Mustang supplied.

“It’s less harsh than murder.”

“It’s reprehensible.”

Riveting brown orbs bored into her soul. “How would you achieve a viable resolution to this dilemma, then? A physical altercation that could leave both of you bloodied and in hospital?”

“Enough!” she squealed. Scurrying into the bedroom, she shut the door - not that tangible structures could keep out those she’d raised from their graves over the years. She shed her green hoodie, jeans and sneakers, reveling in the shower’s pulsating heat.

The sensation resurrected caresses that had ignited her soul: Scottish First Minister Sloan MacTavish, the defrocked priest Edward Rankin, Peter Ray IV among them... and Reid Church.

Mustang suddenly understood how so many women, attracted to men who exuded such animal magnetism, remained with them after being subjected to cruelty of the worst sort. Psychologically, spiritually and physically unhealthy, such bonds - yet an enduring ache for that - frenzied mating mitigated the urgency to sever the connection.

If Reid Church had walked into her room that second, she would’ve fallen into bed with him, even if it did mean bringing the roof down atop them.

A towel soaking moisture from her crown, another encompassing her torso, she determined Francis’ idea of getting Church intoxicated and sending him elsewhere might be the only solution. She buttoned on fresh jeans with a purple sweatshirt, plucked 50 Euros from the coffee can where she stashed her take from assorted and sundry tours, and headed out the door.

Her progress across the Piazza San Rufino, however, was blocked by a massive skirmish, a familiar white head in the midst of the fray.

IV

No less than two squads of Carabinieri converged on the square, their highly polished boots creating a military-style rhythm on the stones. Innocent bystanders - those who understood Italian, at any rate - retired to the perimeter, joined by others who didn’t grasp the language but recognized the process. A dozen bodies writhing on the ground from Church’s blows were carried off by

pairs; ambulances collected them in a staging area beneath San Rufino's famous bell tower.

That left Church himself to be corralled by the remaining officers - more difficult than breaking an ornery stallion, Mustang opined. A quartet had their traditional hats knocked off; a few suffered contusions and broken bones. Yelling commands at the irate American didn't help; they finally resorted to tackling him wholesale.

A black van braked a few feet from the scene; Church was shoved roughly into the back, accompanied by six shaken underlings.

The officers who avoided the tussle were tasked with interviewing witnesses. Mustang slipped behind the cluster of those eager to lend their insights, bound from the grocers'.

From this vantage point, she watched Church unloaded near police headquarters in the Piazza del Comune, a no less tumultuous ordeal. In the States, he would've been tased already - multiple times.

Whatever he told his interrogators, they wouldn't believe him. Any mention in Assisi of a red-haired woman met with derision. They'd tried to question her at random intervals, always unable to take her into custody.

Rumors circulated among the residents that the division chief had ordered his men to discount her existence as a myth, a ruse to deflect suspicion from the real culprits of whatever crime had been committed.

Mustang was fine with that.

She debated pursuing her plans for the evening, since Church would probably be jailed until a hearing come Monday. He might even be transferred to a maximum security lockup elsewhere, if he continued to stir up trouble.

Preferable to her pretended apology, and plying him with alcohol in feigned contrition.

The wrong word in the right ear, though...

Ambling downhill didn't hurt her feet as much as the return journey would, she consoled herself. This good deed might get St. Francis off her back for awhile, too.

She'd been in Carabinieri headquarters more than once while living in Assisi, and knew the layout quite well. The occupant of the duty desk mostly ignored the door opening and closing on its own, attributing the phenomenon to a chance wind. In the main office, staff lounged about - coats unbuttoned, hats discarded - until a superior demanded attention. An interrogation room to the right near the row of cages where suspects were detained boasted a sign, "Occupied."

Mustang slipped inside when the sergeant in charge of questioning Church stepped out for a cappuccino.

Frazzled, the erstwhile mechanical engineering professor reminded her of a balloon ready to burst. Chained to the metal table, escape reigned as an absolute impossibility. He nervously flexed his fingers - not a good sign.

She sidled up behind him and, abruptly, he felt his shoulders being massaged.

He jerked away from the motion. "What the..."

"Shut up," Mustang murmured. "Security cameras are recording you this minute. Do nothing; say nothing. Just listen, for once."

He swiveled that bull neck in both directions, trying to see her. "Why should I?"

She clamped her hands on his jowls and positioned his face toward the two-way mirror fitted in the wall opposite. "One of these days, you're going to have to admit that you're not always right, and trust someone to do what's best."

"Not you. Never."

She flicked his nose; he flinched.

"Okay, okay. What parlor trick have you in mind?"

"That's better." She bent to his right ear. "The sergeant's coming back. Answer his questions with one word, concisely. Don't mention my name..."

He squirmed. "I don't know your name!"

True. She'd never revealed her identity to him - not that it mattered. "Don't tell him about Shelly or Damian..."

"You think I'm an idiot?"

"You've been acting like one for the past 48 hours, I'd say."

"And, where will you be?"

"Sitting there in the corner."

"If I do as you ask?"

"You'll be free in due course."

He sneered, the scars on his left cheek shifting into strange geometric shapes. "You said I'd be dead in an hour... about three hours ago."

"You've been reprieved on that score."

"No thanks to you."

"You find it tough to thank anyone for anything, don't you, Reid?" she mumbled.

"Because I fend for myself."

He heard the metal chair scrape vinyl. "Fine. I'll leave you to fend for yourself."

The door swung inward; the sergeant carried an insulated cup to the table. A corporal shot the deadbolt from the corridor.

“Are you sufficiently calm to explain your actions?” the official asked in clipped English.

“It’s all a mistake.” Church forced a chuckle. “This is my first time in your fair city. I got lost. All I did was ask a guy how to get back to my hotel. He called me a dirty American pig, so I slugged him, then he and his buddies jumped me.”

“That may well be the truth, Signore Church, but a check of our database shows you did not enter Italy legally. That, in itself, is a serious infraction of the law.”

A tiny contralto let slip, “Oh, hell...”

The sergeant scanned the chamber, then studied audio speakers suspended from the ceiling grid, writing the sound off to a malfunction. Church, recognizing the outburst, hid his smirk by bowing his head.

“You’ve also been accused of trashing a hotel room not 50 meters from here, Signore,” the charges continued.

“I... was drunk...”

“So it seems, in the trattoria immediately below those accommodations. Somehow, after both incidents, you disappeared.”

Church shrugged.

“Who are your accomplices?” pressed the sergeant.

“I don’t...”

“You must!” The stress of his position began to weigh heavily upon him. “You said something in the van about being tied between two trees on the mountain, and the marks on your arms verify some type of altercation beyond the fight near San Rufino. Who are you protecting?”

Church felt a soothing hand caress his neck and felt her breath on his hair. “Watch how you answer, or you may be trussed up in a straight jacket on your way to the regional asylum.”

“A hallucination, I’m afraid,” replied the prisoner. “I wandered up on the mountain in the middle of the night, and thought I was being attacked by monsters. Turns out, they were just trees.”

The sergeant’s facetious grin did nothing to reassure Church. “You are lying, Signore.”

Nimble fingers managed to clutch the uniform sleeve and jerk the man within inches. “If I tell you the truth, I’m a dead man!” Church croaked.

Ceiling tiles broke from their framework and plunged onto the table. Church’s shackles simultaneously disintegrated, allowing him to retreat from the

impact. The sergeant, totally confused, failed to restrain the fugitive when he wrenched the mysteriously unlocked door free of its hinges.

After that, none of the squad saw a thing.

Mustang had grabbed Church's hand, enveloping him within her sphere of invisibility. They didn't even bother to run, carefully trodding past the cohort and out onto the square.

"Not one of you is off duty until that man and his confederate are in custody!" raged the sergeant.

Dozens tripped over each other for their hats and coats, rushing the exit.

The afternoon siesta winding down, crowds were sparse on the piazza.

Mustang ushered Church along winding lanes to her favorite trattoria, where they enjoyed a quiet meal in a private dining room and drained three bottles of chianti.

"There's something I didn't tell the cops," Church admitted between bites of Tiramisu.

"What's that?"

He ripped open his tattered red shirt. A nasty, jagged scar ran along the middle of his chest.

"Open heart surgery?" gasped Mustang.

"Nothing so glamorous." He flipped the buck knife - which he'd snatched off a filing cabinet as they left Carabinieri headquarters - onto the table. "Fight with another inmate in the prison shower."

"Oh, hell..."

"You said it, kiddo." He slumped on the wooden chair. "To put it mildly, the docs in such facilities are the dregs of their profession. They stitched me up without properly repairing the damage. During my final medical check before being released, the records noted I had less than a year to live because of their malpractice."

Mustang bit her lip. She'd been correct in her prediction his heart could burst if his rage escalated...

The moan originated in the depths of his soul. "I just wanted to spend my final days with Shelly, making up for lost time, for all the pain I'd caused her..."

The temptation to heal his wounds faded immediately. St. Francis had explained during a previous interaction with the long-lived Leslie Steiner how reversing badly treated injuries could actually do more harm to the victim.

"I'm so sorry..." she drawled.

His massive paw stroked her hand. "Ah, I'm the only one to blame."

The difference between getting drunk on wine, and hammered on hard liquor: the former prompted Church to take responsibility for his actions; the latter thrust the responsibility on others.

“Will you stay with me?” He snorted. “Or, more accurately, let me stay with you until...”

Once he sobered up, he'd be impossible to deal with if she agreed. Let him have one last fling before... mercifully putting him out of his misery.

Francis' words rang inside her skull: “Judge, jury, executioner.”

So be it.

The check paid, she supported Church by the waist into the crisp night. Saturdays in Assisi not unlike those in the States, music flooded the streets, with dancing and singing in abundance.

“If I remember, you don't dance,” Church slurred.

“It's not that I don't, it's that I don't like to.”

“Because the modern stuff really isn't music, and all those gyrations not really dancing?”

“Pretty much.”

“Anyplace 'round here play the slow stuff?”

Mustang had never heeded the styles of after-hours entertainment in the city, beyond their general ethnic roots. “Let's find out.”

The better part of an hour elapsed as they meandered main roads and byways, ears attuned to the various melodies. A violin, accordion and drums offered some hope, providing a three-quarter beat in a rathskeller-type dive.

Church drank beer - lots of beer - when not holding Mustang close on the warped dance floor. He made no untoward advances, exhibiting an absolutely tranquil demeanor as he caressed her flowing auburn tresses while moving side-to-side.

About as uptempo as the musicians got was a German polka, and the woman could barely breathe as her partner whirled her around. They collapsed together at their table when the song ended, laughing loudly.

“You know,” Church panted, “you never proved you could best me with the bottle.”

Mustang beamed. “We had quite a large wager on that, didn't we?”

“They serve vodka, if I heard right. We could...”

She refused.

“Why not?”

“Because I like you as you are this moment, not...”

“Ah, you prefer a lapdog, not a Rottweiler.”

“I like peace and quiet, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then, why the devil did you fight on my side at that bar in Sanremo, and help me convert the cash into jewels? Why didn’t you make a hasty exit from the restaurant last night, instead of wading in and risking your own skin?”

“To your first question: ten to one is never a fair fight, even for an ex-Marine. To the second: Paolo, the waiter, is a good man with a family to support. I couldn’t stomach his boss taking the damage you caused out of his pay.”

“Now, wait one minute! Those drunks attacked *me*...”

“Unprovoked, I suppose?” she hinted.

That hard-line smirk made his mustache twitch. “I... may have spoken out of turn.”

She changed the subject, waving toward the band. “Are you satisfied?”

“Yeah, I’m beat.”

They wound their way to the Basilica Santa Chiara, leaning on the stone wall and listening to the chatter of birds and coyotes in the valley below. At the edge of the piazza, two cats fought over scraps of fish in a trash bin.

Mustang sucked in the air like a tonic. Sunday morning, she could sleep; tours didn’t start until after a full schedule of Masses at the many churches dotting Assisi’s landscape.

“I know what you’re going to do,” Church interrupted her reverie, laying the buck knife in its sheath near her arm.

“You think I need cold steel to do it?”

He grunted, “Probably not.”

Twirling to a sitting position on the broad surface, she met his gaze. “If only you weren’t so... when you’re sober, that is.”

“I’ve told you before about my past, what I went through just to get an education. I swore I’d live without regard for the feelings of others, since too many had trampled on mine.”

“That’s... understandable, I guess.”

“With women... I suppose watching my mother break her back to keep home and family together tainted my outlook. All I’ve ever wanted to do is make any woman I’m with feel loved and protected. When she’s ungrateful, or contrary, why shouldn’t I put her in her place?”

“Women are more than objects, or servants to be fed, housed and... well...”

“Not on my watch.”

“You’ve made that abundantly clear.”

“If not for... my failing health, I could show you what life might be like...”

“I’m content with my life as it is.”

“A fugitive from justice?”

She sighed. “You remember that, too?”

“I always wondered if you were on the level.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Then, we part as we met, set on our solitary paths.”

A strange proclamation, she mused.

“Do you recall our first kiss?” came the addendum.

“You purported it would be our last.”

“What coincidence brought me here to ask for what *will* be the last...”

She allowed him to scoop her off the stones and press his lips tenderly against hers. She landed lightly on the pavers, to contemplate his sedate departure. Enveloped by the darkness, she set off toward her flat.

The Carabinieri, still hunting for the escapee, discovered Church’s corpse near the Rocca Maggiore in the wee hours on Sunday. Mustang learned from one of the shopkeepers who served as a contact for tour groups that Monday’s autopsy showed heart failure.

Francis glared at her when she returned from escorting a group of Norwegians to the major historical sites.

“I didn’t do it!” she pledged.

“You convinced him you would, and that’s why he climbed to the fortress. He wanted to watch the moon rise before his end.”

“He didn’t make it.”

“No. Thirty-six hours of extreme anger and excessive physical exertion took its toll. Your contribution...”

Mustang lofted a ceramic mug at the wood stove. “Would his death have been delayed if we’d never...”

Francis scrutinized the wood pile.

“No,” she answered tersely in his stead. “He would’ve died sooner, in fact. Once he’d caught up with Shelly and Damian, and slit their throats - or whatever tactic he’d decided to use - he would’ve used that knife to kill himself, am I right?”

Silence.

“I’ll take that as a yes. At least his final hours weren’t marred by hatred, and he experienced a little...”

“Passion?” the saint proposed.

Mustang grit her teeth, tramping to the bedroom and slamming the door.