

The Mustang Chronicles:

Wanderlust Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Auburn tresses knotted in a bun and hidden beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, Mustang Duryea sat on the stone wall near the Basilica of Santa Chiara, waiting for a group of aging Lithuanian priests to finish snapping photos of the historic facade. Unlike some tourists, they'd wanted to view every nook and cranny of Assisi and its surrounding sites, so the woman had spent an entire day leading them along stone streets, up stairs, and down steep inclines.

Her feet ached.

Not really worth the 20 Euro note the leader tucked in her hand as they parted. Clerics rarely showed their generosity.

Not that she needed cash, still living off the money Johnny Rosemont had paid her to participate in his erstwhile biography of St. Francis. En route to her flat, she passed the money to a flower vendor in the corner of the piazza, who'd been struggling to support an ailing husband longer than Mustang had lived in the ancient city.

She could take tomorrow off, if she chose, but it being close to Easter - a popular draw for foreigners - she relished observing the crowds and their peculiar behaviors.

How many years had people believed *her* strange, due to powers acquired from her grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons? Here, the elaborate rituals and ceremonies, with candles, ornate vestments and processions, made her worst day feel normal.

By the busload, they arrived: every race, color and income level. Some, she gathered, saved a lifetime to make the pilgrimage. They knelt for hours in the churches, and bought cheap souvenirs to take home, proving their devotion.

Mustang's devotion lay in patronizing local grocers and bakers. Fingers coated with powdered sugar from a sumptuous pastry, her tongue savoring the delicate spices, she didn't notice a middle-aged man in green nylon jacket and black trousers break from the flow of pedestrian traffic and pause beside her.

She nearly choked on her last bite when he spoke.

"Are you the tour guide?" he queried.

Wiping her mouth on the flannel shirt sleeve, she countered, "I'm a tour guide, yes, but not the only one."

Their eyes met, and Mustang swallowed hard. Adriatic Sea-blue orbs gazed at her, resurrecting painful memories - again. As much as she would've liked to deny the resemblance, his short, solid stature, along with that unique nose and thin-lipped grin could not be duplicated.

Ray Clayburn.

Former CIA, former substitute teacher at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School in Montana.

“I recommend a newsstand near the Temple of Minerva. They can hook you up with a suitable guide,” she continued.

The crisp tenor responded, “I don’t want a suitable guide. I want you.”

“Oh, hell...”

She’d made him forget her, all those years ago, after they’d confided their darkest secrets to each other, and she’d nearly killed him by impulsively summoning him to the ranch from his home. The lightning which carried him across time and space had charred his flesh...

She cringed at the recollection.

“Your name is Elizabeth Duryea, isn’t it?”

Not spoken confidently, she noted.

“Why do you want to know?”

He glanced around, as if suspicious - which did not bode well. “Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

Brushing sticky digits on her jeans, leaving white marks, she pointed toward an alley leading toward the Piazza San Rufino. Climbing three flights of narrow, creaking stairs, she ushered him into her stark, two-room apartment.

At least, if something untoward transpired, there’d be no witnesses.

“Hot cocoa?” she offered.

“No, thanks.”

“Have a seat.”

The lumpy love seat didn’t meet his approval, but he resigned himself to the discomfort. A linen handkerchief dabbed perspiration from his furrowed brow, his close-cropped greying hair damp.

“A bit out of shape, aren’t you?” Mustang quipped.

“That’s... an odd observation.”

Sucking air through clenched teeth, the woman realized her mistake. This man believed they’d never met...

“What’s your name, and why are you here?” she prodded.

He introduced himself, as expected, but his narrative surprised her. “I’ve been searching for you since your mother died.”

“Why?”

“She and I... met after your father’s death, at a church bazaar in Helena.” The tale almost elicited Mustang’s laughter, so childishly sweet. Clayburn had

become Maggie Duryea's confidante, support and adviser before her untimely end in a car accident. "The night before, I'd proposed to her," he concluded.

The chuckle erupted, disconcerting to the visitor. Mustang could not fathom this man as her step-father...

"Did I say something humorous?" he growled.

She regulated her breathing. "No, sir. It's just that, after so long..."

"Long, indeed. You don't know the lengths - and expense - I've gone through to locate you."

"Why? My parents had the profits from their estate donated to charity."

From inside his jacket, Clayburn drew an envelope. "I promised your mother I'd deliver this."

He would keep his promises; Mustang had grasped that when they'd interacted during her senior year. "How'd you find me?"

"Initially, Roy Talltrees, the family lawyer, told me about your call to his office. He'd been trying to track you down, too. A look at the phone bill for that month showed the Scottish exchange. I traced it to the Inverness district, but ran into a dead end."

"Weird, for someone with ins at the CIA." She bit her lip after uttering the comment, pretending to focus on the pan of warming milk.

Clayburn bristled. "How'd... you know about my ties to that... organization?"

"Let's say, an educated guess."

"Fine. We can drop the pretense, then. Though retired, I'd kept in contact with a few friends, and they were able to point me toward bizarre communications within the FBI's ranks..."

"Ben Espinoza," Mustang supplied.

"You're... very knowledgeable in these matters."

"Not deliberately, I swear." Mixing cocoa and sugar in a ceramic mug, she could hide her expression.

"Anyway, frequent mention of Boleskine House near Loch Ness prompted me to buy a ticket..."

"And?"

"The family of a high level State Department whistle blower currently lives in the mansion. They were... rather frustrated that the premises hadn't been cleaned before they were moved in."

"Really?" Another chuckle. Ben Espinoza, now deceased, must've been quite frustrated himself when he gleaned that she'd fled the Highlands. Then, being terminated from his position, he'd never given the order to destroy all

evidence of her existence - as he had for Jack Parsons after she'd inadvertently killed him.

"They donated your clothes and furniture to a thrift shop," Clayburn added.

"Good for them." Mustang sipped the steaming brew. "That still doesn't explain..."

"I met your neighbor, Glenn MacDonough, in a Dores pub. He mentioned his nephew, the orthopaedic surgeon..."

Another blue-eyed marvel: Denis Sommers. But, the young doctor wouldn't have betrayed her...

Besides, he hadn't been privy to her plans, beyond securing her a ride on a colleague's yacht.

"I scoured the British Isles for any trace of you, and came up empty." Clayburn massaged his sore calves. "You would've remained hidden, except..."

From his wallet, he revealed a copy of her high school graduation photo - a sitting done reluctantly, at her mother's behest.

"You should've stayed off the big screen."

That blasted movie! Mustang swore silently.

"How'd you see it? I heard it bombed in limited release."

"It did. By chance, I was flipping channels one night in a London hotel, and some religious programming network was airing it."

"Oh, hell..."

"A fortunate coincidence, to be sure. Cut my travels short by a year, or more."

"What are you saying?"

"For Maggie, I would've circumvented the globe to find you."

Mustang set her empty mug in the sink. "That's certainly praiseworthy. You must've cared for her deeply."

"I did. She was a kind and loving woman. Very deep and insightful."

Unwittingly, Maggie's daughter guffawed. "My mother? Insightful? Most days, she didn't even know when I left the house, or where I was going."

"That was because of Joe."

"Dad? How so?"

"Maybe you better read the letter. I'll... come back tomorrow, if it's okay, and we'll talk more."

Clayburn rose and limped toward the door.

"Ray!" Mustang hailed, tentatively stroking the thick white envelope.

He spun.

“Did you find my mother attractive?”

“She’d seen better days, of course. Her eyes - you have her eyes, by the way - spoke of untold truths...”

He crossed the threshold, and she listened as he descended to the piazza. In the depths of her heart, Mustang sensed Clayburn’s affection for her mother stemmed from their previous association in Canyon Creek...

She’d related her own truths to him, and they’d clung to each other, tears streaming.

She couldn’t rightly ask him about his heart valve, the ex-wife, or how he’d fared in the wake of his son’s suicide. He’d obviously made a life for himself, found a job...

Securing the deadbolt, Mustang sank on a wooden chair at the kitchen table. She stared at the neat script on the paper: “Elizabeth” - her real name. Thing was: neither her father nor her mother had used it very often. Joe had called her “Girl,” and Maggie used the affectionate term “Hon,” most days. Unless they heard the ranch hands referring to her by her nickname, they may never have suspected she preferred that to her legal moniker.

When this debacle began, the autumn of her sixteenth year, she had no information about Maggie’s origins, or relatives. The grandmother she’d been sent to live with in Massachusetts proved a vague childhood image, and died soon after. The name Jack Parsons had never been mentioned at the dinner table, or on special occasions...

Perhaps, because he was reported dead in the 1950s, and his survival had been kept a secret by U.S. government officials.

Still, it would’ve been nice to have a bit of background before she’d wandered onto the Boleskine House property and mucked up her own future.

That Maggie’s parents hadn’t been married might’ve made the subject taboo, Mustang understood. That Maggie had been conceived during some occult ritual could’ve cast her in a light unacceptable to polite society. If she’d been exposed to her father’s influence, might she have possessed the very power which plagued Mustang’s daily life?

Instinct compelled the tour guide to pitch the letter in a wicker trash basket. Any facts she learned now would only cause regrets, and she had enough of those to haunt her for five lifetimes.

A trail of dead bodies, for one. Lost loves, alienated friends. In Assisi, she interacted with the shopkeepers, restaurateurs and tourists, without a hint of intimacy. She doubted any of them knew her name. She answered to the “Signorina of San Rufino,” if anyone needed her services.

She'd achieved the anonymity craved for nearly 20 years.

Until the likes of Johnny Rosemont or Ray Clayburn interrupted her idyll, dredging up the past.

With a sigh, she changed into hiking boots, anxious to spend the afternoon with a herd of wild horses atop Mount Subasio. They, at least, cast no judgment, and consoled her in ways few humans could comprehend.

A sack of apples and carrots accompanied her on the trek up dirt trails well concealed from public scrutiny. She perched on a large boulder, cross-legged, greeting each animal in turn and presenting a treat. Some nuzzled her, others seemed to bow in gratitude. She caressed their manes, sometimes wishing for a brush to free the burrs, twigs and tangles, but content to be in their midst.

"You cannot run from what has been," stated a quiet voice behind her.

"I know, Francis. I know."

The holy man of Assisi had become a frequent companion, sharing a game of chess on chill evenings, or reveling in these peaceful interludes.

"After my conversion, I never saw my mother or father. That caused me no little anguish."

"They didn't understand you, like mine didn't understand me."

The squat saint settled beside her. "A better explanation would be that they didn't understand the responsibilities of parenthood. They wished to be puppet masters, pulling the strings, making the decisions, rather than letting either of us fulfill our own potential."

"Potential?" grunted Mustang. "My potential seems to be causing disasters, then cleaning up the mess."

"You've come far in this environment. No weather disturbances, no inexplicable miracles..."

"Yet."

"Yet?" he echoed.

"I haven't been provoked. Get me angry, and the consequences are horrible."

"Few aware of your whereabouts, that should not be an issue."

"If Ray can find me, and Ben Espinoza..."

"Both men had the backing of government agencies."

"Neither, you mean. Ray's retired, and Ben had been fired."

Francis slid to the ground. "You're saying..."

"It's time for me to move on."

II

Iron digits gripped Mustang's forearm as she leapt from the rock. "How, exactly, do you intend to accomplish this?" speculated Francis. "You have no passport."

"That's never stopped me."

Her palm flipped skyward, exposing scars from prior travels. They matched the configuration of the saint's own divine stigmata.

"Don't be impulsive. Come, let's get some dinner. A good night's sleep..."

"Since when do I get a good night's sleep?" Mustang snarled. "My dreams..."

Hiking side-by-side to the city below, the woman reflected on her most recent nightmare. Traveling on a light rail-style train, recent downpours causing mudslides along the tracks, the cars veered toward a house built on the hillside. It sat above the eroded soil, columns reinforcing each corner, further supported by a sturdy fireplace chimney of stacked stones.

The train had moved beneath this structure, braking just beyond. The driver had switched places with another employee, entering the building, where she was hooked up to a computer in similar fashion to an intravenous tube - all while Mustang watched.

None of it made any sense, and she'd awaken in the darkness, her heart rate dangerously accelerated.

"Can you tell me what it means?" she implored her companion.

"No."

"You mean you can't, or you won't?"

"I can't. I've long since quit trying to analyze how your brain works."

"Thanks," she snapped sarcastically.

The vista should have eased the tension, greens of spring erasing evidence of a cold, hard winter, unusual for Italy. Mustang paused to admire a clump of wildflowers among the grass. Francis waited along the path.

And detected a mischievous glint in her hazel eyes when she rejoined him.

"You've a plan."

"I can avoid the need for a passport by crossing the Alps into France - or Germany, for that matter - well away from border posts. With my ability to mentally translate language, I'd blend in easily..." she remarked.

"Not with that red hair."

An instant later, her tresses had darkened to black. "That's the least of my problems."

“What threat did this man pose to you in Montana?” pressed Francis.

“No threat. He was, maybe, the one honest friend I had before... before I met Jim Neville.”

“Then, why let his coming spark an irrational flight?”

“Not him alone. The likelihood others...”

“You cannot predict the future.”

She glared at him. “You can.”

“I can, but I don’t. Existing in what some call heaven, we see time differently, and to disrupt its natural course...”

“Bullshit.”

“Tell me more about your dealings with this friend.”

Mustang recounted how the substitute teacher had been forced to deal with her distressing return to regular classes, after years of truancy. “Maybe because his own son had died, or he was a truly good man, he behaved more like a father than my own dad.”

“And you wished...”

“I wished, and he nearly died.”

“You’ve matured since then.”

“Not enough.”

Francis seized her shoulders. “You are always so negative. Why not see the positive in this meeting?”

She shook free. “Which is?”

“The opportunity to confide in someone who isn’t out to manipulate your power to his own ends.”

“I have you for that,” Mustang muttered wistfully.

The diminutive figure in his tattered robe pursued her. “It’s not the same, and you know it. A flesh and blood human...”

“Flesh and blood humans are the root of my troubles. I need to steer clear of them.”

Tramping onward, she arrived at her favorite trattoria, being seated at a table by the window. A plate of ravioli and glass of chianti satisfied her knotted stomach, then she trudged home.

More bizarre images filled her dreams that night, and she decided at 3:00 AM to forego sleep entirely. Shuffling from her tiny bedroom to the kitchen counter, the rumble of snoring tempted her to stomp on the floor.

Until she determined the sound originated from within her own walls.

Switching on the ceiling fixture, she discovered Ray Clayburn sprawled on the love seat.

“What the hell!” she shrieked, shaking him.
He rolled off the cushions, groggily raising himself from the boards.
“What? Where am I?” Pale blue orbs scrutinized his surroundings.
“What I want to know is how you got in.”
He belched and smirked, shirt askew and trousers half-zipped. “Oh, come off it, Mustang. You connected me to the CIA. You don’t think I’d be able to pick a lock?”
“Why?”
“The hotels were full. Busy season, so it seems.”
The woman collapsed, nerves frazzled, on the pillow Clayburn had used for his head. He edged beside her.
“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”
“No. Breaking and entering is supposed to soothe my paranoia,” she grumbled.
“Mustang...”
She reared back. “How do you know that name? My mother would’ve never...”
“She didn’t, but the ranch hands did. They talked a lot about you, for that matter. The ones who’d come back year after year. The others... to them, you were some kind of mythical legend.”
“Oh, don’t bullshit me.”
“I’m not. They told of how you could break the most ornery stallions... wasn’t there one called ‘Old Bastard’? You were the only one who could get near him...”
She snorted, “Nobody could get near Old Bastard. Dad finally had him put down.”
“The details have been twisted, as they usually are long after...”
“It hasn’t been that long.”
“You disappeared at 18, without a word.”
“Not my fault.”
“Maggie blamed herself.”
“What?” Mustang squinted at her uninvited guest. “Mom never accepted responsibility for anything I did! Even during parent-teacher conferences, or meetings with the principal, she deflected everything back to me.”
“You sure that wasn’t your father’s doing?”
“He cared only about making money off the horses. He was harsh and insensitive... the exact opposite of you.” She bit her lip.

“How... would you know that?” Almost immediately, Clayburn’s tone brightened. “You’ve read the letter.”

“No, I haven’t,” she admitted. “And, I probably won’t.” She squirmed on the love seat to establish the right angle and distance from this man. “There’s something I must tell you.”

He waited.

“Do you recall serving as a substitute teacher for a few weeks - fifteen years ago or so - in Canyon Creek?”

“Right after I left the CIA? Sure.”

“We... knew each other then.”

“Nonsense! I wouldn’t forget hair like yours...”

“Unless someone clouded your mind.”

“You mean, psychological warfare? That’s... that’s...”

“Ray, trust me. The reason you were attracted by my mother’s eyes is because you had some vague memory of our relationship, of my eyes.”

“What... sort of relationship?”

“Friends. Nothing more. You told me about your heart surgery, your son’s suicide and being unable to attend his funeral. You didn’t spend enough time at home, and blamed yourself. Distracted by the tragedy, you botched your assignment, and the CIA retired you. Then, your wife divorced you, and you landed in Montana with your brother.”

“Oh, God.... Oh, God... And what did you tell me in exchange for this information?”

“It wasn’t so much what I told you, as what I showed you, and it nearly got you killed.”

His eyes glazed over, frozen pinpoints unwavering. “The nightmares... more than a decade... the burning, the anguish, the terror...”

“Me. Caused by me. Even though I tried to erase the worst of it, your subconscious didn’t let go, and drew you to my mother, hoping to find answers.”

“That’s impossible!” He rose, pacing frantically. “No human on earth has such power!”

“You didn’t doubt me then. Why doubt me now?” She crossed to the sink, filling a tumbler with water from the tap. “You can’t claim to have been young and foolish the first time around, because you were already old.”

He declined the glass. “It’s just not feasible!”

“Of course, it is. You were fascinated by anomalies reported by the Montana Weather Service. You wanted me to write a report based on research. I didn’t need to do any research, because I’d *caused* the anomalies.”

“You... made the chalkboard fall off the wall,” he stammered.

“And threatened to explode your head, if I remember correctly.”

He sagged against the counter. “You did far worse. You filled my head with horrors no therapist could believe.”

“Therapist?”

“Shortly after the nightmares began, I started seeing a psychologist. I thought I was going insane. Thousands of hours, and the better part of my bank account... wasted!”

“I’m sorry. I thought... at the time, I thought it would be to your advantage.”

“You didn’t *think* about the consequences!”

“I seldom do, until I need to rectify some disaster.”

“Can you rectify this one?” he demanded.

“I... don’t know. I cherished you as a friend, and hated to let you go. People who... get close to me tend to suffer, and I didn’t want that for you.”

“I *did* suffer! I’m still suffering!”

“Would you rather I’d let you die?”

That assertion silenced Clayburn. He considered at length, while Mustang sipped the water and lingered at the window overlooking the Piazza San Rufino.

“Can you fix things now, or is it too late?” he inquired.

“Fix? What’s to fix? The mind is tricky, even when it’s normal. When I tried to heal you from the burns, I almost killed you because I forgot about your heart valve replacement. I can’t fix what happened before we met, or after we parted. And, to attempt an adjustment on that small span of a month or so... it’s like a surgeon trying to remove one polyp from a mass of hundreds.”

His tight-lipped scowl chilled her blood.

“I would like to be your friend. I’d like to show you my world. I’ve... grown a bit since those days, and I believe we could enjoy ourselves without... danger.”

The hardened features softened. “I need to call in the morning to reserve my flight back to the States, so you’ll have two weeks...”

His way of accepting the agreement, without compromising his integrity. Mustang could handle that.

She prepared a light breakfast, and they watched the sun rise. As she cleared the table, she studied his rumpled appearance. “Where are your clothes?”

“In Rome. I hadn’t planned to stay more than a day...”

“Just drop the envelope and run?”

“The welcome culmination of a strenuous quest.”

“I might take that as an insult.”

“None intended. I didn’t know you, except from a photo. I was fulfilling an obligation to a woman I loved...”

Mustang’s chin quivered. Her parents had never displayed any signs of affection in her presence, never mentioned the word “love”. If Maggie had been able to enjoy her final days in the company of Ray Clayburn, after years with Joe Duryea...

“You okay?”

“Fine.” Scrubbing the dishes, she brushed a wisp of auburn hair off her forehead. “I never grieved for my parents. The bonds between us were... nonexistent. I’ve mourned the loss of virtual strangers more...”

“Because you were instrumental in their deaths?”

“Yes.”

“You poor kid.” He slipped his arms around her waist, embracing her sobbing form. As she laid her head on his shoulder, soap suds dripped down his back, soaking his shirt.

Her nightshirt moist with his tears, she broke from his grasp and retired to her room to shower and change. Emerging twenty minutes later, she tossed Clayburn a pair of grey sweat pants and an oversized flannel shirt.

“You can wash in there,” she directed.

“I’d rather grab a few hours sleep.”

“The apartment downstairs is vacant. While you change, I’ll check with the landlord about the rent.”

“You don’t need to...”

“You’ve spent a lot on your search, in honor of my mother. I owe you that, and so much more.”

His upper lip disappeared as he smiled in resignation, closing the door behind him.

Mustang paid the stooped elder extra to provide cozy furnishings in the flat identical to her own. She’d have to be careful, too, about the amount of noise she made, hearing him singing off-key in the bathroom through the ceiling.

While pieces were transported from ground level by the landlord’s two grown sons, she let Clayburn crash on her bed, opting to visit shops along the Via San Francisco to purchase various necessities: underwear, razor, socks, pajamas.

She felt like a New Yorker returning from a Christmas shopping binge, depositing bags on the love seat three hours later. It didn’t matter that she’d emptied one coffee can where she stashed tips from her guided tours. Two more sat behind it on the cupboard shelf above the stove.

“This... is too much!” protested Clayburn when he migrated into the chamber, smelling fried eggs.

Mustang’s impression of him during her high school experience - the consummate professional - transformed when she saw him in the baggy garments she’d supplied, stubble on his chin, hair in need of a comb.

“Hungry?” she hinted.

“Always.”

“After lunch, I’m giving you the grand tour of Assisi.”

“Why?”

“It’s my home. It’s rich with history, and quite beautiful - if you discount most of the people. It’s what friends do, isn’t it?”

She glimpsed Francis in the corner behind Clayburn, shaking his shaggy head. Yes, so much for her plans to move on.

III

“To be a successful tour guide in this town, you need a strong pair of legs,” panted Ray Clayburn, seated at the entrance of the Rocca Maggiore above Assisi.

Mustang sniffed, “To be successful, you need to read your clients and anticipate what they really want from their tour. Mostly, it’s just a cursory overview, without too much strain on their muscles.”

“My muscles are beyond strained.”

“Sorry. I guess my enthusiasm got the better of me.”

“We didn’t have to do everything in three hours.”

“Everything?” the woman snickered. “We’ve barely scratched the surface.”

Alarm tinged his tenor. “What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow, I’ll show you the Eremo delle Carceri, and the horses.”

“Horses? You have a stable here?”

“No. They’re wild, free, and magnificent.”

“Right now, I’m starved. How ‘bout we get a bite to eat?”

“Sure.”

Down the incline from the ancient fort, their route bathed in pastels from the setting sun, they reveled in nature’s symphony. Mustang hadn’t felt so calm in ages.

Clayburn treated her to dinner at a trattoria near the Piazza Santa Chiara, tourists still crowding the streets. He offered her wine, which she sipped tentatively.

“You don’t like the vintage?” he queried.

“It’s fine. I just want to keep a clear head.”

“Me, too.”

Delicious pasta and salads preceded cannoli and tiramisu for dessert. They strolled stone lanes to a recessed doorway near the Cathedral of San Rufino, where Clayburn groaned against the prospect of mounting the stairs.

“How’d you find this place?” he wondered.

“The night I arrived, I was beat to my socks. I’d been on the go for three weeks, dodging border guards and hitting the casinos. I chanced upon a shopkeeper locking up for the evening; his brother owns this place. I got lucky.”

“You got a ready-made stair stepper.”

“It’s only two flights to yours, so quit complaining.”

Slowly, they made their ascent. On the second landing, Clayburn kissed Mustang’s cheek. “Good night, and thanks for a spectacular adventure.”

“Night.” She continued to her flat, trodding carefully to prevent noises from reverberating below.

Day two of their excursion around Assisi had to be postponed. Clayburn’s spasming thighs prevented him from even getting out of bed. He notified Mustang of his difficulty by banging on the water pipe with a wrench, left by the landlord after assembling the furniture.

The woman couldn’t hide her amusement, remembering their first ride together at her father’s ranch, and the saddle sores Clayburn endured. She left him with a hearty breakfast, a bottle of aspirin, some American magazines and newspapers, opting to earn a bit of money by giving a tour to a delegation of Polish environmentalists.

The 100 Euros paid for her services she spent on groceries to stock Clayburn’s cupboards. Meat, cheese, noodles, freshly baked bread, juices and milk were being arranged when he peeked through the cracked bedroom doorway.

“What time is it?” he drawled, face pinched.

“About three. How do you feel?”

“Like shit.”

“You want a massage?” Not that she’d trained as a masseuse, but such activity would give her an opportunity to instruct nature to heal him without any fanfare.

“Sure.”

Twenty minutes later, the retired CIA agent sprang to his feet, revitalized.

“You’ve got fantastic fingers,” he praised, oblivious to the truth.

“Ready to head out?”

“Where?”

“Nothing strenuous, I promise.”

“Let me get cleaned up, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Most of the bussed-in tourists had vanished by that hour, chartered vehicles transporting them to their night’s lodging. Mustang liked that about Assisi: no room for commercial development beyond small scale enterprises. Large hotels had to build elsewhere, meaning the streets maintained a homey feeling after dark.

She and Clayburn, wearing black trousers and a polo shirt which highlighted his Adriatic Sea-blue eyes, wound their way toward the Basilica of San Francesco at a leisurely pace. The vendors had packed up their carts for the day, residents hung their laundry above the lanes to dry. Clayburn drank in the atmosphere - exactly what Mustang intended him to do - and broke into that singular grin.

She heard the disturbance before he did. Voices raised in fear and anger, and running footsteps, coming their direction.

“Question for you, Ray,” she ventured idly.

“What?”

“Have you ever clotheslined anyone?”

“Of course.”

“Right side, in three, two, one.”

Clayburn’s arm shot out horizontally from his shoulder, causing the fleeing criminal to slam into it, flip awkwardly and crash on the stone pavement, stunned. A squad of Carabinieri converged, apprehending their suspect and handcuffing him.

The sergeant in charge confronted the couple, thanking them profusely in Italian. He also babbled other phrases, which Clayburn didn’t comprehend.

Mustang, however, replied in English, the official unfazed.

The fracas ended, they stood alone on the thoroughfare, staring at each other.

“How’d you know what would happen?” accused Clayburn.

“I heard the shopkeeper yelling he’d been robbed.”

“In Italian.”

Mustang grit her teeth. “I suppose.”

“I speak six languages, but I’ve never witnessed such cunning linguistics.”

“Eh?”

He spoke next in Arabic. “You are a magnificent woman.”

“Thanks.”

“Ah, ha!”

Confused, she glared at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Is there any language you can’t understand?”

“Ray, it’s the one aspect of my power I use constantly. No matter what language people speak, I hear it as English.”

“And they hear you in their own tongue?”

“Yes.”

“Extraordinary.”

“It’s provided my bed and board honestly the past few years. No more raiding the casinos.”

“You could have a grand career in the diplomatic corps...”

“Why? I... don’t play well with others, for lack of a better description. Here, I give my tours, then hole up in the apartment. It’s... safer.”

“Except when someone like Johnny Rosemont coaxes you into a film?”

“Don’t remind me.” She shuddered visibly. “I anticipated signing that contract would be unwise, and I’m not yet convinced I was wrong.”

“Because it helped me find you... again?”

“Again? You mean, you...”

“Last night, the dreams made sense, for once. I could finally distinguish the features of the person who...”

“Me.”

He nodded.

Agitated, Mustang veered around a corner. “Let’s stop by the bakery and buy a couple pastries for dessert, then I’ll cook you dinner.”

Clayburn followed, uncertain of this mood shift. “You’ve done enough. Let me cook for you.”

“You cook?”

“Living alone, I had to learn.”

“I don’t like mac and cheese.”

“Maggie liked my stuffed peppers.”

The mention of her mother made Mustang flinch. “I prefer steak and potatoes.”

“Done!”

The easy companionship they’d shared earlier had disintegrated, Mustang’s future clouded by reels of celluloid. Given that she had, in the past,

dropped engines from cars, flattened tires, destroyed and repaired buildings, commanding nature to eliminate all copies of Rosemont's bio-pic would be no more difficult than uttering the proper directive. The actor would forgive her...

It had been viewed by how many thousands - or millions - around the globe, though? Such an inexplicable phenomenon would merit intensive investigation, and could easily lead to public exposure on a massive scale.

Leave it be, she mused, hovering beside Clayburn as he whipped butter into the boiled potatoes and broiled prime cuts of beef.

"I've upset you, I'm sorry," he apologized, setting platters on the oval, polished oak table.

"Like you, I have painful memories. Time does not heal all wounds, even if people like to believe it."

"Amen." He sat in the gold upholstered chair opposite her, and patted her hand. "What can I do to help?"

"This is fantastic," she muttered, admiring the aromas mingling with the evening breeze. "I usually slap together a peanut butter sandwich."

Slicing his portion of the steak, he chuckled, "I do that, too. It's nice to cook for real."

Dishes, pots and pans washed and restored to their shelves, the pair settled on the leather sofa - a clear extravagance on the landlord's part. "What's the night life like in Assisi?" asked Clayburn.

"I don't know. I'm a homebody."

"Would you like to explore?"

"Not... really."

"You're young. You should be out with people your own age..."

"Ray, I've mentioned that those who get close to me often end up hurt."

"True."

She filled the hours which followed with details of her relationships with Jim Neville, Lyndon Bixby, Rick Shimoto and others who had died as a result of her interference. She sensed Clayburn inching away from her on the cushions, orbs conveying unmistakable fear.

"That's why I count no friends among the living," Mustang concluded.

His brow furrowed. "That's an odd differentiation."

"You wouldn't say so, if you knew..."

"Knew what?"

She revealed how she'd manifested St. Francis of Assisi, Erwin Rommel, Mahatma Gandhi and Mark Twain at various points. "They've provided solace in my self-imposed solitude, including games of chess."

Clayburn's jaw gaped. Rising, he crossed the room, grasping the doorknob as if to flee. Then, he whirled. "You can raise the dead?"

"Purely by accident, I assure you." Then, she amended the statement. "For the most part."

"Meaning?"

"There was once... a son yearned to reconcile with his father..." The Christmas at Boleskine, where she'd brought the deceased Lyndon Bixby to see his son, Lyndon Bixby White.

"What if a father needed to apologize to his dead son for the errors..."

"I couldn't, Ray. There's too great a risk..."

"What risk? No one need know."

"I'll let him explain." Mustang pointed to where the robed Francis shown in ethereal light - not of her making.

As many pilgrims did before the saint's tomb in the basilica named for him, Ray Clayburn fell on his knees. "Oh, my God..."

"Relax, Ray," soothed the woman. "He's just being dramatic."

The glow faded, and Francis lent his hand to raise Clayburn. "The Signorina is correct, Signore," he remarked. "To deliberately bring a soul forth from its rest is... hazardous."

"How so?"

"If the individual decides to remain in the earthly realm, convincing him to resume a celestial existence can prove impossible."

"But, you... you're here."

"By choice. We... remain part of Mustang's life, so she's not totally alone."

"Kind of you." Clayburn scanned the emaciated image. "I never had the chance to tell my son..."

"Once a soul passes over, there is no need for verbal communication. He knows your heart, and wishes you to be at peace."

"How... do you know this?"

"If you doubt me, ask him yourself."

Mustang had retreated from the sofa; in her place sat Eric Clayburn, a chunky teen with bleached hair, multiple piercings and a colorful fiery skull tattoo on his neck.

His father knelt anew, weeping on the boy's chain-accented pants. "Oh, God, Eric, I'm so, so sorry I wasn't there for you..."

With genuine sensitivity, a hand stroked the greying hair. "It's okay, Dad. It wasn't your fault. I thought I was smarter than you and Mom. I made some stupid decisions, and hurt you both, and myself. If I had a chance to do it over..."

Instantly, Clayburn's eyes found Mustang's face. She shook her head solemnly. "It's not me this time, Ray. Suicides... are a whole other ballgame. Francis did this himself."

"But, to give him his life..." moaned the father.

"How would you explain his reappearance? The consequences would be more serious than the worst disaster I've caused."

"Don't worry, Dad," interrupted Eric. "Things come right, in the end."

Ray gazed lovingly at his offspring for a full five minutes, before he accepted the situation's ramifications. Together, the pair straightened, embracing affectionately.

In the background, Mustang muffled her chuckle. Eric, at 15, had already stood a good six inches taller than Ray.

The elder Clayburn finally released his son, cheeks wet. "I love you, Eric."

"I love you, too, Dad. I wish I could've shown you how much."

"You just did."

The lanky lad dissipated, leaving Clayburn reaching toward empty air.

Francis vanished, as well, and Mustang distracted herself by rifling the pages of an old copy of *Time* magazine, while her companion wiped his nose on a linen handkerchief and regained his composure.

"Thank you for that," came the eventual whisper.

She tossed the periodical on the end table. "Like I said, it wasn't me."

"You brought Francis, though. He..."

"Francis... comes and goes as he pleases. He was right about how he and the others keep tabs on me, however. Their valuable advice probably helped me grow up more than anything my parents ever told me."

"Did you read Maggie's letter yet?"

"No."

"I think you should."

"Do you know what she wrote?"

"I've no idea what she said, or when she did it. But she unloaded a lot of her own guilt to me, over many dinners and while dancing..."

"Dancing?" Mustang chortled.

"She liked to dance. You didn't know that?"

"I never would've guessed."

Clayburn glanced at his wristwatch. "It's late. I need a good night's sleep after... this. See you tomorrow?"

"Bright and early."

Ushering her out the door, he brushed her cheek with his lips.

IV

A rainy start to the morning didn't dampen Mustang's resolve to lead Ray Clayburn up Mount Subasio. Their tour of the Eremo delle Carceri, one of St. Francis' favorite hermitage caves, complete with low ceilings and rock walls, failed to impress either, being mostly non-religious. Along hidden trails to where descendants of horses - plundered during the Crusades, perhaps - grazed on fresh spring grasses, they breathed in the scented air and relaxed.

Mustang carried a stash of snacks for these friends but, instead of crawling onto her regular perch, she insisted Clayburn hoist himself on the boulder and feed the animals himself.

"I... don't do well..."

"They won't hurt you. They know we're not here to tame them, simply enjoy their company."

Atop the rock, adjusting his balance, he crossed his ankles and waited for the white stallion to approach. The huge mouth gingerly clamped on an extended carrot, withdrawing in well-mannered solicitude.

Mustang laughed at how Clayburn beamed, his expression and posture reminding her of Buddha statues she'd seen in her travels through Asia. From that moment, she thought of him as "The Smiling Buddha."

Lunching at an outdoor café in Santa Maria degli Angeli, they hiked over to San Damiano. Mustang sneaked Clayburn into the cloister garden, sharing the beautiful flowers with him while the friars who ran the site slept through their siesta.

"You're... you're... a little devil," he commented as they debated whether to climb the steep hill to the city, or hire a cab to drive them.

She corrected, "I've met a few devils in my day. I'm nowhere close."

"Literally or figuratively?"

Her lips twitched, answer enough for the man.

"How do you stay sane?"

"It's tough. The first time I came to Assisi, I nearly destroyed the city. I had to deal with fanatics, assassins, news crews... That, more than anything, drives a person to the edge."

“More recently, it was a film crew, actors and producers.”

“I trusted Johnny Rosemont. I’ve... trusted too many people.”

“Who’ve betrayed you?”

“Not on purpose, always. Other times, deliberately.”

“That’s when they die?”

“I’m not a murderer... in the strictest sense. Remember the comedian, Rob Wilson?”

“Sure.”

“He and his manager, who turned out to be undercover CIA, died in an avalanche while filming at Glacier National Park in Montana after...”

“The news channels made a big deal of it.”

“Who do you think caused it?”

Clayburn’s pale blue orbs narrowed. “You?”

“You’d taken me to the comedy club in Helena, when I got the hiccups.”

“Oh... yeah...” Another recollection drawn from his fogged subconscious. “The roof almost caved in on us.”

“And that flunkie threatened to turn me in.”

“You didn’t have to kill them.”

“I only meant to scare him.”

The retiree withdrew from Mustang. “Are you telling me I’ll...”

“I was young and impulsive then. Nobody’s died because of me since... well...”

He exhaled loudly. “Good to know.”

“Come on. I’m tired.”

“You, tired? I thought you were used to this exertion.”

“Tired of life, Ray. Tired of making sure my power is kept in check.”

He wrapped her in warm, strong arms. “I’m sorry, Mustang. I trust you. Really I do.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

She didn’t retract the statement, didn’t consider it until much later, when she lay in her apartment’s twin bed, the only illumination moonlight through the window. How often, as a kid, she’d wished Joe Duryea would’ve comforted her, hugged her. She’d fallen off horses, gotten splinters helping repair corral fences, and he never acknowledged her distress in any tangible way.

Ray Clayburn, had her mother survived, would’ve become her step-father. Her entire life might’ve changed, if that had happened.

If she’d been privy to the event. From the day she fled to Scotland, she’d received no letters or news from Montana, except vicariously.

Clayburn's diligence in honoring Maggie's final wish indicated he would've searched her out and reunited her with her mother, for the good of both. Her power notwithstanding, the dynamic might've been worthwhile.

Listening to him imitate a buzz saw through the floor, Mustang snickered. The noise prevented her from sleeping, so she let her mind wander, fantasizing about living on the ranch with the couple, and possibly raising a family of her own.

Moisture soaked her pillow well before morning, the notion of marrying and giving birth to children ludicrous. Though she'd overcome the tendency to cause earthquakes when in the throes of passion, the potential for creating chaos during an extended labor - to the point of demolishing the hospital - could not be denied.

"You look rotten," observed Clayburn, joining her for breakfast mid-morning.

"Lack of sleep will do that."

"I didn't get much shut-eye, either."

"Snoring to the contrary."

Gripping her fingers, he led her to the love seat and pulled her down beside him. He positioned her head on his shoulder. "Stop worrying about the what ifs and rest yourself."

"But..."

"Hush. I've something to tell you, but not until you've recovered your strength."

She forced herself upright. "That's a nice incentive to sleep, dammit!"

Laughing, he hugged her briefly. "Okay. You'll need to crash awhile after we've discussed this."

"Discussed what?"

"Promise."

She sighed. "Promise."

Clayburn cleared his throat and squared his solid frame. "I phoned the American Embassy earlier."

"Okay..."

"I fortunately still have enough contacts to pull a few strings."

"What kind of strings?" pressed Mustang.

"Getting you a passport, for one."

She stiffened. "What?"

"I want you to come back to the States with me."

"Ray, I can't..."

“You mean, you won’t.”

“Can’t, won’t. What’s the difference?”

“I want you to be my daughter, in the traditional sense.”

“I’m... too old to be adopted.”

“There are a few legal loopholes, but matters can be arranged.”

The whimper escaped Mustang’s lips, unbidden. Touched to her core, she hid her face in his sweatshirt. “I... don’t know what to say.”

“Yes will be sufficient.”

“I’m honored that you want me...”

Ray cupped his palm beneath her chin, bringing her nose to nose. “We need each other, Mustang. We’re two wounded hermits who could experience life more fully if we shared it.”

“And, the first time my temper flares... what, then?”

“Like any father, I’ll support you in whatever way necessary.”

This sincerity could not be feigned. Mustang, moved and confused, blinked repeatedly to fend off the tears.

“You’ll have to let me think about it,” she breathed. “Your flight isn’t until next Saturday...”

“Our flight. I booked your ticket after the embassy agreed to expedite the paperwork.”

A glimmer of anger at this presumption lit her hazel orbs. “Whoa, there! What if I don’t...”

“It’s only money. I just didn’t want any tangible issues to play into your refusal. The road is clear; you need only agree to travel it with me.”

Such a temptation! The woman fidgeted, her brain already arguing the pros and cons within her skull.

“Where would we live?”

“Your choice.”

“What about the tickets?”

“The flight is from Rome to Chicago. From there, who knows?”

“Where... were you planning to go?”

“I hear Oregon is pleasant, especially along the Pacific coast.”

“Not Montana?”

“I’ve nothing there anymore.”

Mustang gulped, “Neither do I.”

“Off to bed with you,” instructed Clayburn. “I’ll wake you before dinner.”

“I won’t be able to sleep.”

A knock on the door provided the ultimate escape. The landlord's nephew, son of the shopkeeper who initially befriended her, carried the message that a group of Bavarian senior citizens wanted to hire her as their guide.

"So much for sleep!" she snorted, slipping into her sneakers and flipping her straw hat off its hook.

Clayburn chuckled as she bounced energetically down the stairs after the boy.

For Mustang, the tour distracted her from nagging thoughts. The pace leisurely, her two dozen tourists barely made it from the Basilica of Santa Chiara to the Basilica of San Francesco by late afternoon. No question of including San Damiano or the Carceri in this excursion.

They expressed gratitude for her solicitude in both word and deed. Every participant slipped her a 20-Euro note as they wrung her hand in parting.

That would repay Clayburn for the airline ticket.

If she decided not to go with him.

Trudging up narrow stairs, she realized returning to the States fell in the category of pipe dreams. Even with Ben Espinoza dead, the likelihood government entities remained interested in her whereabouts - and power - loomed large.

Delightful smells emanated from her apartment. Clayburn had prepared a small pot of chili, hot dogs, and french fries. They feasted on a checked picnic table cloth, laughing like children as drips of tomato-based sauce splattered their napkins and shirts.

No mention was made of their previous conversation. Mustang took that as a sign of respect, and attempted to chase the matter from her mind. With each passing day, they embarked on various adventures - to visit the horses, or trekking to the valley below, patronizing clubs in Santa Maria degli Angeli.

Father and daughter, or close friends - to Mustang the specifics of their relationship didn't affect her view of Clayburn. She learned not to fret about her next mistake, and be present to the moment.

A true gift from her Smiling Buddha.

He washed his laundry Thursday evening, folding the clothes she'd purchased for him and stacking them on her kitchen table.

"You don't want them?" she queried.

"Mine are waiting in Rome. If I wanted to take these with, I'd need to buy another suitcase, which is a burden when traveling."

"I... wouldn't know," she giggled.

"I've heard of traveling light, but you... defy words."

Her tone melancholy, she reminisced, “When I first flew to Scotland, I carried one backpack. Even going ‘round the world, I didn’t bother with luggage. I buy what I need...”

“You haven’t felt ‘at home’ for a long time, Mustang. I swear, once we’re settled, you’ll never have to worry about moving again.”

Moving. Hadn’t she told St. Francis she wanted to move on? Her idea then was a remote Greek island, perhaps, not the U.S. The U.S... too many variables.

“Ray, if I asked you to come with me... to Greece, or Peru... would you be willing?” she proposed.

“I... wouldn’t be able to pull any strings, if that was the case.”

“Your travel’s not restricted. You could fly, and I could meet you.”

“Oregon isn’t a done deal. What about California?”

“A strange breed, that.”

“You’re turning me down?”

“I may be saving your life.”

Clayburn frowned. “It’s for me to save your life. To give you a life. To be a father to you...”

She gently caressed his cheek. “I have a life here, of sorts. While I’d love the chance to call you ‘Dad’ for real, that wouldn’t make me happy. Happiness isn’t something I’ll ever attain. All I can ask is a day free of aggravation, and you’ve given me a week’s worth.”

“You sent me away all those years ago, without any memories to cherish. Are you going to do the same this time?”

“Back then, the memories wouldn’t have been worth cherishing, only bitter. I nearly killed you, remember. There’s no reason for me to make you forget now.”

“I suppose I should thank you for that.”

A sarcastic edge to his tenor? she puzzled.

“If it helps, I’ll be hurting just as much at not seeing you anymore.”

The pressure on her biceps shocked her. “Then, come, dammit! Life is too short to deny ourselves a drop or two of joy.”

“You don’t know how much I want to say yes,” she confessed. “If I could ditch this power and be normal, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Just... don’t use it. You’ve done nothing untoward since I’ve been here...”

“It’s not that simple. The slightest casual word and, poof! another avalanche, or worse.”

Dejected, Clayburn released her. “That’s that.”

“I’m sorry, Ray. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“Sorry that you’re so selfish?”

“Selfish?” she croaked. “Is it selfish to not want to harm those I care about, or the planet as a whole?”

“Selfish to not be willing to control yourself, and brighten the lives of those you claim to care about.”

Riled, she seized his sleeve and dragged him to the window. “Watch, and learn.”

The pane raised, she let out an anguished wowl, directed upward. The stars near Orion’s belt responded, exploding like fireworks and blinking into darkness.

“Oh... my God,” gasped Clayburn.

“Every night, when you look to the heavens, you’ll know that gap was caused by my heartbreak at not being able to say yes.”

“Astronomers won’t know how to explain...”

“To hell with them.”

“Good-bye, Mustang.”

He backed from the flat; she didn’t turn. Her knuckles whitened gripping the sill, a second agonized cry creating supernovas among the Big Dipper’s neighbors.

So close... so close to being normal once more.

And the chance eluded her like water running through her fingers.

She collapsed, shaking with sobs, wishing she were dead, and dreading the dawn.

In the wicker trash basket, Maggie Duryea’s letter disintegrated into dust.