

The Mustang Chronicles:

Married Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

“Marry me, Mustang.”

Of the dozens of men Elizabeth Duryea had encountered since receiving the unwanted gift of command over nature at the tender age of 16 from her grandfather, Jack Parsons, only one had ever uttered those specific words: Hugh Callum, Lord Guthrie - a distant neighbor when she lived at Boleskine House near Scotland's Loch Ness.

This voice, wafting toward her through a dense fog-like mist, didn't match his pretentious inflection.

Yet, the baritone's familiar quality made her flesh tingle.

Had she risked professing standard wedding vows before a cleric or a justice of the peace, either Jim Neville, the long-deceased Montana State Police detective, or dancer Jerry Richards would have stood to her right. She suspected Jim would've eventually popped the question if over-zealous FBI agents hadn't ambushed them at a southern California convenience store and pumped bullets into his chest.

Jerry had bought her an engagement ring, but he died when the aircraft transporting his vaudeville troupe to Belfast hit a flock of seagulls and lost both engines.

Groping through a swirling blanket of condensed moisture, Mustang reflected on others with whom she'd crossed paths, who'd tried to seduce her and gain control of her power, or - in rare instances - whose company she genuinely enjoyed.

Thomas Burton, that Welsh rogue of an actor, had been the first to kiss her, after a family funeral in Idaho, albeit in a drunken haze. He remained oblivious to the fact the roof almost crashed down on their heads when her emotions exploded in his embrace. He'd continued to express interest in her during subsequent adventures, bringing a chuckle to her lips.

His boon companion, documentary producer Peter O'Donnell - step-father to her cousin Rachel - concealed his interest beneath a veneer of solicitous concern. A gentleman, he would not take undue advantage of her predicament.

The library maintenance man, Lyndon Bixby, harboring his own secrets, paid the ultimate price when she neglected specifics in her directives to the elements. Then, his son, Don White, seeking answers about his father's demise...

Cal Simmons, the Robert DeNiro doppelganger who'd driven to Canyon Creek from Canada searching for her... an honorable man, stepping between a

thug's pistol and her, taking the bullet when she could've easily stopped the projectile in mid-air. But, he hadn't been aware of her abilities.

There'd been the vile and sanctimonious, like Jonas Fairchild, aka Wilfrid Bailey - a murderous psychopath - and his fundamentalist father, bearing the same name and title of "Reverend." To them, Mustang had represented little more than a target to be eliminated.

Despite the morbid circumstances of their interaction, Campbell Bain and Fergus MacKinnon - two mental patients from a Glasgow institution - had brightened her existence with their youthful enthusiasm and off-beat humor. Mustang often puzzled how medicating those assessed as "different" really served any purpose other than forcing compliance with society's norms.

Representatives from various governments might hope to drug her to obtain her cooperation with their schemes - they'd die, one and all, she vowed.

Wandering through total silence, unable to see her hand before her face, much less her feet and the ground beneath them, she felt the sweatshirt and jeans clothing her body and, wiggling her toes, her sneakers. She stomped the surface: possibly concrete or asphalt.

What the hell? she breathed.

"Marry me, Mustang."

There. Again.

A melodic register, tinged with the Scottish burr that, in its thicker forms, irritated her ears.

Billy MacDonough, for instance. Brother to her former neighbor and fellow horse lover, Glenn, she'd barely been able to comprehend simple sentences, though she relished his twinkling eyes and playful spirit. He'd had an illegitimate son, killed in a multi-vehicle pile-up south of Assisi...

Orthopedic surgeon Denis Sommers, Glenn's nephew, had saved her more than once, including facilitating her escape from Scotland when FBI agent Ben Espinoza would have engineered her death or capture.

Not that any room or restrains could hold her.

Sloan "Lackey" MacTavish, Scottish First Minister, and his sons... of marriageable age... Mustang hadn't been directly responsible for his death except, his vigor revitalized after an outing together, he'd overtaxed his heart on the golf course.

Han Feng taught her the rudiments of Kung Fu in Beijing on her jaunt around the globe then, when he fled his homeland with two children... on the premise of seeking asylum while attempting to secure her services, sparked an international convergence of competitors to either kill or kidnap her.

Dispatched from Boston, contract assassin Ronan McMahon and his twin sons, God's avenging angels by their own account, had vowed to eliminate evil from the world - Mustang included - yet fancied her in very earthly ways.

Bull-necked professor Reid Church had made a right mess of a casino theft on the French Riviera, but exhibited a few endearing traits...

Fingers extended through the fog; she could see their faces - reflections rippling on the surface of a lake.

Something seriously amiss, she couldn't formulate a coherent thought to discern exactly what.

Just as she didn't grasp how Ned Kelly, an occult practitioner from the era of Queen Elizabeth I, had survived over 400 years to present himself at Boleskine as her instructor in those elusive arts.

Defrocked priest Edward Rankin, who also used the name Orson Foster, tried to "educate" her...

At least, concert pianist Stuart MacKay brought a bit of music into her life after the instruments he'd been hauling were wrecked on the side of the road. He, too, died as a result of his acquaintance with her.

Or, so her ethereal companions - St. Francis of Assisi, German General Erwin Rommel, Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, and Mohandas Gandhi - claimed.

This quartet had made a habit of chastising her for her impulsiveness, avoiding her questions about the future, and comforting her with a lively game of chess on nights when she could've sunk in a morass of self-pity and depression.

"Francis, what's happening?" she queried aloud.

No response.

Strange.

Even when she couldn't see them, they remained close.

Granted, upon her relocation to the hillside city Italy's most famous saint called home, the others had made themselves scarce, leaving him to handle her... mistakes.

She'd always rectified her failures, though, repairing collateral damage - though she'd lost count of the number of injuries and fatalities.

Scars on her palms, wrought by traveling via lightning bolt, provided a constant reminder of her shortcomings.

Even those she couldn't see now.

"Have I gone blind?" she pondered, afraid some calamity had stolen her sight, replacing it with a film of milky incandescence.

"Marry me, Mustang."

“Who are you?”

It wasn't Johnny Rosemont, the Hollywood celebrity, in whose bio-pic of Saint Francis she'd portrayed his companion Clare. Cognizant of his less than stellar past as John Vladislav Kowalski, that type of companionship wasn't possible.

The sole other possibility fitting the parameters: Donal MacLean, the Glaswegian actor who'd been contracted by the greedy scion of a noble house to gaslight a young heiress, convincing her she was receiving messages from “God.”

All he'd wanted from Mustang, however, was a quick tumble on the train northbound from Yorkshire.

Then, how... why...

Those who'd breached the conventions of time and space would not waste their energy with a plea of this sort, she reasoned.

As she struggled to slow the throbbing in her chest, she felt arms encircle her waist from behind. Lips assaulted the nape of her neck beneath her ponytail. Without actually visualizing the scene, she instinctively perceived...

Her nerves tingled with excitement.

The kind of excitement that toppled structures, fractured streets, generated rainstorms and microbursts of wind.

“Stop, please...” she moaned.

“You know you want it.”

“Tell me what's happening!”

His tone lulling her into a sort of trance, accompanied by rhythmic caresses, he droned, “You've entered a realm beyond consciousness, beyond the physical. There's nothing to prevent you from doing as you please, from reveling in every delight, from making your heart's desire reality.”

“But, I can't see!”

“If you wish it, you will.”

What appeared around her was a lush garden of roses and wildflowers, sprawling to a horizon splashed with pulsing rainbows and cartoonish birds. In the center, a fountain spewed forth chocolate...

“This... isn't real.”

“It is, for you.” Insistent digits fired her limbs.

Mustang spun toward this... unidentified companion with the declaration, “This is a dream.”

In that instant, he vanished, as did the landscape.

Except, she didn't awaken in the twin bed of her flat overlooking the Piazza San Rufino.

She remained stuck in the mist...
Had she, somehow, been confined in an isolation tank?
She'd heard of such contraptions, where people spent an hour or so in total
darkness...

Except, this wasn't dark.
She'd go mad in such a prison.
She'd go mad in *any* prison, which is why she'd never let herself be locked
behind bars.

This... this weird, shimmering light...
If her mind slipped away, any tragedy could occur.
The end of the world, for instance.
She'd been tempted too many times to wipe the planet clean of humanity,
fully capable of accomplishing the feat. Then again, she could've drastically altered
history - and almost had, if not for history professor Adam Sainsbury intervening
during an unplanned visit to the battle of Culloden.

That bored educator had dared beg her to travel through time with him,
reshaping the course of civilization...

She would never understand men.

"Marry me, Mustang."

In the midst of this meandering reverie, her rage gradually escalated. One
aspect of her being never to be underestimated: her anger. When angry, she did
horrible things - numerous examples on record confirmed that statement.

"You will show yourself immediately!" she bellowed. "I want to know
where I am and why I'm here."

"Not possible."

A tremor of fear ran through her frame. Never before had nature denied her
instructions - though many were the instances she longed it had after an accidental
utterance that wreaked havoc.

Again, the tender embrace, the amorous overtures. How easily she could
forget her plight if the digits working their way beneath her sweatshirt continued
tantalizing her skin...

She stiffened, compelling herself to focus. Someone wanted her distracted
or, worse, wanted to witness her decimate the countryside in the throes of passion.

"You know you want all the thrills life can offer," whispered her
companion.

"You have no idea your fate unless you tell me what's going on here!"

An abrupt burst of colors - reminiscent of an Independence Day fireworks display - dispersed the mist clouding Mustang's eyes. This... vision?... preceded a very palpable, physical rush of pleasure.

Followed immediately by hell breaking loose.

The very air rent by crackling flashes and booming thunder, she heard shrieks from every direction, male and female, as ceiling tiles rained down, plaster walls buckled and windows shattered. Tile flooring collapsed into a chasm that split the building's foundation.

When the panicked cacophony subsided into stillness, Mustang caught a glimmer of vaguely human shapes, prone among the rubble. Breathing steadily, her surroundings became clear: remnants of a hospital-style room, in which she was strapped to a gurney, an intravenous tube dangling from a plastic bag on a metal stand - now toppled. Blood seeping from her right forearm indicated the needle had been inserted, conveying a clear liquid into her system.

When she raised herself on one elbow, a wave of dizziness nauseated her. She sank back on the unyielding mattress, water dripping from overhead beams.

She'd once told Johnny Rosemont she couldn't be killed unless caught unaware. That could be the only explanation for her being in this... hovel and kept in a semi-comatose state where she'd experienced a series of hallucinations.

Or, were they?

In the distance, frantic voices in conversation.

"Oh, hell..."

II

Thirty feet.

Mustang Duryea contented herself the entire complex hadn't crumbled into the sinkhole, but it would be a dangerous leap from the windowsill to the street with the parking lot entirely gone.

An invisible catwalk manifested to allow her to escape this bizarre captivity.

If she ever discovered who'd concocted this abduction, they would pay dearly.

"Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," she muttered, scanning nearby olive groves and modest cottages. How could she have been carried from Assisi without anyone noticing and reporting it to the Carabinieri? Or, had that police force ignored witness accounts, being on the outs with her themselves,

never able to bring her in for questioning about assorted disturbances for which they believed her the source?

Flecks of gravel rose before her, whisked north on the wind as she sought the best route to her adopted home. She gauged the distance unwalkable and sank on a wooden bench to deliberate options.

Too easy to hoist a car from the pit and restore it to working order, but she didn't drive. Hitchhiking perilous, and in no mood to summon a lightning bolt to shred her palms anew, she consigned herself to the hike...

Until a bus rolled up, electronic message board above the windshield flashing "Assisi."

Without checking her jeans, she manifested Euro coins to cover the ticket price.

Not cheap from the outskirts of Rome.

Still a bit groggy and weak, she slept for an hour of the journey, roused by traffic in Santa Maria degli Angeli, a stalled train blocking their route. Listening to chatter among the other passengers - some with mobiles scrolling news updates - a piston had cracked on the engine, and they'd be stuck until midnight or later.

"Oh, hell..."

No sound emitted from her throat, steam belched from the smoke stack and freight cars edged forward, the congestion cleared within 15 minutes.

Trudging from the Porta Nuova to her flat, she glimpsed astonished shopkeepers on their thresholds, waving the Sign of the Cross as if she were a ghost. Carlo, the lad who usually tracked her down with requests from groups seeking a multi-lingual tour guide, ducked behind his father, rearranging souvenirs in his display window.

Pretending to watch the pair, she wracked her brain for the last event she remembered that morning - or how many days ago? She plucked the New York Times off a newsstand rack, reading the date: a week had elapsed since... since...

Her regular stop at the Gran Caffé bakery, selecting from delectable treats in curved glass cases, had started that sunny, humid day. Summer students from the Collegio Sant'Anselmo eagerly accompanied her to the sites, peppering her with questions in languages ranging from Mandarin to Dutch - all of which she heard in English, thanks to her power, her answers automatically translated back to them in their native tongues.

With 500 Euros in her pocket as evening descended, she detoured into Giovanni's shop to buy some orange juice to revitalize her system, another habit. In fact, the bottle awaited her on the counter near the till...

"It's been busy, Signorina," he explained, "but I saved you one."

Indeed, most of the refrigerated cases empty, there'd been a run on cool drinks thanks to the searing Umbrian heat.

She'd not given this kindness a second thought - then. In hindsight, though: "Oh, hell..."

The door eased shut; her sneaker wedged in the gap at the last second.

Carlo, grown head and shoulders taller than his parents in the years she'd known him, grinned sheepishly. "We are closing early, Signorina. My... mother's birthday... we're celebrating with a festive dinner..."

"You've never been a good liar," she countered. "Tell me everything."

Alfredo, balding and weathered, abandoned cases of plastic statues and rosaries, shooing his son toward the storeroom. He leaned his full weight on the wood panel. "You have no idea of the consequences, Signorina..."

"You have my guarantee of protection. I just need the truth."

"You are but a frail woman. You can do nothing against... against..."

"A woman, yes. Frail, no. You've heard the stories..."

"Wild imaginings by drunks and... religious fanatics."

Mustang smirked. "In a city where saints performed miracles, you don't accept the... extraordinary?"

Submissively, the proprietor ushered her across the threshold, poking his head outside and checking for casual observers. Then, he secured the deadbolt and drew her into a shadowy corner beyond rows of shelves holding pious bric-a-brac.

"You must never divulge where you learned this information," pleaded Alfredo.

"I promise."

"Friday last, three men in black suits made the rounds of the cafés and shops in the Piazza del Comune - I heard about them hours before they darkened my door."

"Asking about me?"

"Asking about... strange weather, earthquakes, inexplicable fires." Thick trembling fingers toyed with his unbuttoned shirt collar. "The initial rumors among my colleagues: these were scientists tracking climate change."

"No such luck."

"Precisely, Signorina." A piteous groan escaped his mouth as he collapsed on a stool. "They took my precious Carlo without so much as a word that same afternoon, sending a message that if I didn't provide you with the drugged juice, he would be killed."

"Did they give you the drug?"

"In an envelope."

“A powder?”

“Small squares of blotter paper.”

Mustang swallowed a series of expletives. “Acid?”

Her companion nodded.

“How many did you... use?”

“Three.”

“Are there any left?”

“I... burned the rest. I wasn't going to be caught with them and accused... accused... of accessory to murder.”

“You thought they wanted to kill me?”

“They included a list of your crimes with the ransom note, as justification for using such... unscrupulous tactics.”

“What crimes?”

“Theft, assault, murder, arson...”

Accurate, except for theft. She'd never stolen from... or, if they considered her luck at the casinos in Cannes and Nice as calculated fraud...

“They never mentioned what agency they were from, or any names?”

“Carlo... overheard them in the van while they delivered him to the prison.”

“Prison?”

“Si, Signorina. Abandoned since being bombed in World War II outside the walls of Perugia, he didn't view the exterior because they put a hood over his head. His description of the interior I recognized, though, because I played there as a child. He was confined in a cell without food, a bed or toilet for six days.”

“Oh, hell.” Mustang rested her hand on Alfredo's stooped shoulder. “I never would have put him - or your family - at risk, if I'd suspected...”

“I know, Signorina. These men... have a hard-on for you in a big way.”

In Italian, the phrase may have sounded more... poetic, but how it came through her brain prompted a giggle.

“There's nothing humorous about it,” Alfredo scolded. “You are in grave danger, a danger that extends to every resident in our city, living in dread of being used to trap you in a net of intrigue.”

She raised his chin, gazing into moist brown orbs. “I swear to you: by tomorrow morning, Assisi will be safe once more.”

In spite of his doubts, the shopkeeper's spine straightened.

“Let me speak with Carlo,” she urged.

“He is... too traumatized by his experience. He wants to forget...”

“He will, Alfredo. He will. He'll be his bright, cheerful self before your festive dinner.”

Tanned brow furrowed, “Festive dinner?”

“Your wife’s birthday?”

His turn to laugh. “Apologies, Signorina. The boy... grasped at straws.”

“All is forgiven,” she assured him.

Carlo skulked through the curtains a minute later, obviously pushed by his father. “I’m... so sorry, Signorina...”

“No need for remorse. Please, confide in me what you heard the men saying.”

He settled on the stool, squinting in the dim light. “One was addressed as Doctor. He was charged with keeping you sedated.”

“What language did they speak?”

“Bits of Italian, some German and, I think Greek.”

“Greek?” Mustang echoed.

“Or, possibly, Turkish. Maybe Arabic.”

“Oh, hell...”

So, unless she was totally off track, this operation hadn’t been coordinated by the FBI or any agency of the U.S. government.

“How many were there altogether?”

“At least eleven.”

So, an international team of scum...

Planning to sell her to the highest bidder?

“Did they talk about money at all?”

“Si, Signorina. Their price for you was one hundred billion Euros.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang slumped against the wall. “You heard no names?”

“Only one.”

“Tell me.”

“I could not sleep on the stone floor of my cell, so I laid awake listening to my guards amuse themselves. They must’ve had a computer or video player. They kept mentioning how funny Billy MacDonough was.”

Biting her lip, the woman tasted blood. She could only agree with this opinion of the Glaswegian comedian who elicited roars of laughter from audiences throughout the English speaking world - she’d witnessed it first hand at a festival in Inverness.

“Were the videos they watched in English, or dubbed?”

“In English.”

She’d tried to teach the boy English in the early days of their friendship, eventually giving up since their exchanges were automatically translated. He’d learned enough to grasp the basics...

And “Fuck off” - one of Billy’s frequent exclamations - transcended dialects.

“Thanks, Carlo,” she remarked, smiling wistfully. “Everything will be okay.”

“Are you sure, Signorina? Those men... won’t give up...”

“Some of them are already dead, and the rest will be... soon.”

“You cannot...”

“As I told your father: you’ve heard the stories. You only need to have faith.”

On that cryptic note, Mustang departed, a crescent moon shining above the Basilica Santa Chiara. She ascended a stone lane to the piazza where the tower bell rang 9:00. Then, three flights of narrow stairs brought her to a cozy two room apartment.

Which had been thoroughly ransacked.

“Oh, hell...”

Milk in the refrigerator spoiled, she satisfied her thirst with a tumbler of water from the kitchen tap. A heaping tablespoon of peanut butter satiated her growing stomach, a sandwich impossible with the bread moldy.

The coffee can where she stashed her tour income had been dumped, her mattress sliced open and feathers from the pillow carpeted the boards.

For what had they been searching, besides money?

Or, had they been hired to cover for others, helping them to her savings as a bonus?

Replacing mutilated cushions on the love seat, she rested weary bones while her mind churned what facts she had obtained.

Someone with medical credentials had been engaged to administer narcotics that would render her docile, after the initial dose of LSD. Closing her eyes, she recalled consuming the orange juice in two gulps, leaving the shop and strolling toward the stone wall in the Piazza Santa Chiara overlooking the valley, to watch the sunset.

“You fainted.”

Francis.

Finally.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“You have made it abundantly clear on many occasions that my interference is not welcome,” retorted the Little Poor Man.

“Fine time for you to pay heed to my suggestion!”

“What would you have expected of me? I could not walk into the room and extract the needle without raising the alarm...”

“If you’d done that, I could’ve defended myself, rather than be... be...”

“You have no clue what atrocities they inflicted on you?”

“Atrocities?”

“When the... leaders of this motley crew absented themselves from the room, your attendants subjected you to... to...”

“You’re saying, they raped me?”

“That was their intent, until your emotional upheaval...”

“Those bastards!”

“At first, they wanted to see how you reacted to artificial stimulæ with the medication. They... ran their hands along your arms and... when...”

“You saw this, and didn’t stop them?” screeched Mustang.

“I...”

“They increased the dosage, and your... responses heightened...”

“So, they *wanted* me to hallucinate...”

“Si, Signorina.”

Her contralto dropped to the basement. “Who were they, Francis?” She shifted to be eye-to-eye with the emaciated being. “And don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“As you told the boy, some of them are dead. The others...”

“I want them, and I’ll have them,” she stormed. “I’ll have their skulls between my hands and crush them, one by one!”

“You would embark on yet another vengeful quest?”

“You think I should let such violations go unpunished?”

“They will face their judgment in due time.”

“Bullshit! They will face their judgment at my hands!” Walls vibrated with the force of her indignation. “Their names, Francis, starting with the doctor!”

“Hamish Sommers.”

“Sommers?” Mustang glared at her ethereal counselor. “Any relation to Denis Sommers?”

“His father’s brother.”

“Meaning... Denis mentioned me at some holiday party, and Hamish...”

“Oddly, no. While Denis makes his living tending the injuries of British football teams, Hamish treats rich and famous hypochondriacs in a posh London suburb.”

“Writing prescriptions for unnecessary sleeping pills or opiates for imaginary pains?”

Francis inclined his shaggy head in affirmation.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang rose and migrated toward the adjacent chamber. “Rather than testify before a medical board, he let himself be blackmailed into... into...”

“Those mystery novels you read when you were young have served you well, Signorina.”

“Oh, shut up!” She rested against the jamb. “Where is he, Francis?”

“Hiding in a palazzo near the Villa d’Este in Tivoli.”

She spun toward the bed. “Wake me at six.”

III

Mustang Duryea frequently fell asleep fully clothed, too exhausted to even kick off her sneakers before landing on the mattress. On her father’s Montana horse ranch, and at Boleskine House, when animals needed to be fed, watered and exercised, that trend outweighed the nights when she crawled into a pair of sweats doubling as pajamas.

While she longed for the effortlessly mended bedding, chemicals still coursing through her veins adding to stress-related drowsiness, her elevated pulse triggered an apprehension about what hallucinations might be repeated if she surrendered to the arms of Morpheus.

She opted for a shower, wrapped herself in a terry robe and propped herself against the headboard, relaxing her body, if not her mind.

When she finally dozed, as dawn painted the sky over Mount Subasio with pastel hues, her system had sufficiently dissipated the sedatives so she rested peacefully.

Assisi a city of late risers, even the bakeries didn’t open until 8:00 or later. Not one to sit idly until she could purchase her morning pastries, Mustang hiked from within the walls toward the Eremo delle Carceri, veering off the pavement onto a packed trail that led up the incline to where a herd of wild horses grazed.

There, she could deal with Hamish Sommers unobserved.

What she planned for him wouldn’t be anything random spectators would appreciate.

Besides, she didn’t want the bolt dumping him in her presence to damage any historic landmarks.

She’d done enough of that in the past.

The physician must’ve been tucked beneath a comfy duvet when the elements fetched him; he landed in the tall grass bare-chested, wearing green and

purple striped flannel shorts. He collapsed in a heap - a human's first ride on lightning took its toll.

Mustang had grown accustomed to this mode of transportation over more than 15 years.

She occupied herself stroking the mane of the mottled stallion who protected the mares, speaking to him as if he grasped her dilemma and could offer advice. When a stream of curses rose from the disoriented form, she smiled and kissed the animal's nose.

"Where the fuck am I?" Damp with morning dew, Sommers hefted himself upright, scanning the pasture.

The woman sidled toward him, hazel eyes deliberately serene, her fury in check - for the moment.

"You!" he gasped, recoiling. "How did you..."

"Get free?"

He brushed droplets from his arms. "Bring me here?"

"Didn't those idiots who corralled you into this fiasco detail my... potential?"

"Look, Mustang..."

Her jaw clenched. "How do you know that name?"

"My nephew is Denis Sommers."

"I'm... know, and I'm also certain he would never..."

"Except in a pneumonia-induced delirium."

"Huh?"

Sommers migrated toward a jutting rock. "Mind if I sit down? I feel a bit... queasy."

"Sure." Mustang studied his tanned countenance, fringed with a neatly trimmed beard and mustache still retaining strands of darker coloring that had faded from his close-cropped wavy mane, now a distinguished - albeit premature - white.

He couldn't be more than 50.

Maybe that's why the London elite trusted him to feed their addictions with the stroke of a pen.

"Do you mind telling me where we are?"

"You've been here before, when young Carlo was snatched, and I was slipped an acid mickey."

"Assisi?"

"Smart boy."

"You realize, it wasn't my doing..."

“Bullshit.”

“Those guys...”

“Just who *are* those guys? I need names, and if you cough them up, you might survive to resume your... rather unorthodox practice.”

“Oh, that’s over and done. They shopped me to Scotland Yard when I initially refused to assist them, and I was left with no alternative than to flee before the investigation froze my assets and ruined my reputation.”

She frowned at his bloodshot eyes. “Does... Denis know you’re dependent on the very pills you prescribe to your clients?”

“He will, soon enough. The British media loves milking these types of exposés to increase their subscriptions.”

“What were you saying about pneumonia?”

He sniffed. “Oh, right.” A shaft of sunlight broke through threatening clouds and illuminated Mustang’s auburn tresses; he marveled briefly at her aura. “Denis got himself drenched at a Manchester United match in London, must be almost two years ago. He caught cold, which developed into pneumonia. I wasn’t his attending, but I sat with him as he thrashed about with a 104 degree fever. The only phrase I could make out from his ramblings was ‘Marry me, Mustang.’”

“Oh, hell...”

“After his discharge, I called ‘round to his flat and asked him what he meant. He wasn’t very... forthcoming about you, except for your quiet beauty and how you shone like a beacon.”

“You thought he was in love with me?”

“Oh, I’ve no doubt about that, Mustang. In my short and colorful life, I’ve traveled to the four corners of the earth and met a lot of people. I put two and two together, more from what he didn’t say than what he did.”

“And, what about the rest?”

“The rest of what?”

“Me.”

“I’m not one for riddles, kid. If you want the gory details: a fortnight ago, I was queuing at Gatwick for a flight to Spain, when I was hustled onto a private jet and flown to Perugia. Myself and a dozen or so others loaded into vans and drove across the valley. I stayed behind with most of the crew while a pair of apes grabbed the kid - Carlo, was it? - and then we doubled back to Perugia, parking at a ruined fortress.”

“The old prison.”

“Is that what it was?”

“Yup.” Mustang perched on a smaller rock. “You didn’t drug Carlo, did you?”

“No. They wanted me to dose him with heroin, get him hooked, but I filled the syringe with saline.”

“Good for you.” Then, a flash. “Are these guys part of a cartel?”

“Mobsters, to be more precise. Have their hands in a lot of pies: drugs, prostitution, gambling, you name it.”

“Espionage?”

“That’s a safe guess.”

“An international crime syndicate?”

“You watch too much telly.”

Mustang guffawed. “I haven’t seen a television... in ages, and even then, I preferred old movies.”

Sommers’ expression softened. “Mobiles, computers... you find that trash everywhere.”

“Don’t have those, either.”

“Seriously?”

She nodded. “But, getting back to the matter at hand: why did these guys want me incapacitated and trussed up like a chicken?”

“They were going to sell you on the black market.”

“Oh, hell...” Mares frolicking with their foals distracted her momentarily. “I kept hearing a man’s voice saying, ‘Marry me, Mustang.’ What do you know about that?”

“Before the sedatives kicked in, you were struggling against the restraints, and it reminded me of Denis’ situation...”

“You told those... jerks?”

The reluctant admission: “Yes.”

“So they took it upon themselves to mock me while...”

“I left them to guard you, so I can’t be positive.”

“Left the room for what, a cup of tea?”

“A professional consultation. The date for an in-person inspection of the goods and auction was being finalized, and they wanted to know when you... you...” He shrugged.

“‘Inspection of the goods’?” she hissed, ire simmering. “And what would that have entailed?”

“You... proving your worth with a series of... tasks, from what I overheard of the discussion.”

Suspicious, she prodded, “What languages?”

“French, German, Arabic, Mandarin...”

“You were able to translate...”

“Like I said, I’ve been to the four corners of the earth, and I have a quick ear.”

“Did they know you were wise to their plans?”

“They referred to me as the ‘medicine man’ and ignored me the rest of the time.”

“Names. Now.”

“I... honestly don’t know.” When his body levitated off the mossy surface, he panicked. “But, I do know where they’re holed up!”

“Where?”

“The Hotel de Russie in Rome.”

As soon as his pajamas hit the hard surface, he scrambled to the ground, panting.

“Like to live high, these bastards?” remarked Mustang.

“Five stars, all the way.”

“One last bash before they go their separate ways?”

“Oh, no,” Sommers burred, then covered his mouth with a guilty hand.

His companion gripped spasming biceps and squeezed until he flinched.

“They’re... working on Plan B.”

“Can’t they take a hint? Six of their lot snuffed, their hideout demolished...”

“Simply whet their appetite.”

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang slid off the rock and trekked across the clearing. Sommers jogged after her, catching her t-shirt sleeve.

“Where are you going?” he queried.

“Rome, of course.”

“What about me?”

“You want to come along and watch the fun?”

“Fun?” He shivered. “These are the sort who pack automatic weapons and don’t hesitate to use them.”

“Fine. Where do you want to go?”

He considered. “Back to my bed.”

“So be it.”

The woman didn’t twitch a finger, but her demeanor terrified Sommers. “Not that way!” he implored, dropping to his knees. “I’ll be scarred for life!”

She raised her palms, bearing the deformed flesh of multiple journeys via lightning. “You mean, like this?”

He clasped her wrists. “My God! How can you bear the pain?”

“You... get used to it.” She wriggled free and moved toward the trees. “Be glad you’re alive, Doc, and dedicate yourself to doing good for others, instead of catering to their weaknesses.”

She didn’t even peer over her shoulder when the crack sent birds airborne. Hamish Sommers would wake in his London flat where, she presumed, constables from the Metropolitan Police would take him into custody on a myriad of charges.

He should’ve agreed to go with her; death would be less onerous than a lengthy prison term.

Hunger and thirst took precedence when she reentered Assisi, the bell of San Rufino ringing 10:00. Crowds bustled up and down steep narrow lanes, trying to pack in as many sights as possible before their bus departed for the next attraction. The Gran Caffé jammed, Mustang inched her way through the throng, selecting two eclairs and a brownie to tide her over until lunch.

A meal she might grab in Rome, depending if complications arose while tackling the next item on her to-do list. She remembered Otello’s in Trastevere with fondness and their delicious tiramisu, though she’d lost count of the years since she’d dealt with the fanatical Brother Luigi...

Powdered sugar coating her hands, she stared at the constant reminder of her impulsive tendencies.

A fine line drawn between impulse and vengeance, and she’d crossed it far too often.

At this second, she didn’t care.

A lightning bolt scorched centuries-old stones in the Piazza del Comune.

She landed on her feet beside an Egyptian-engraved obelisk topped by a cross in the Piazza del Popolo, the Hotel de Russie a short walk in the direction of the Spanish Steps. Tourists scattered like frightened cockroaches when static electrified the air, fearing retribution by an irate deity.

In a way, the description fit this woman who could’ve wiped the corrupt from this “eternal city” without verbalizing a syllable, along with the many edifices built to honor ideals long since discarded by the masses.

A uniformed concierge eyed Mustang with disdain when she slipped past the doorman - hailing a taxi for an expensively clad couple - and traversed the lobby. “May I help you, Signorina?”

He must've assumed her a beggar, given her faded attire, committed to preventing her from disturbing the guests. When she tucked a silently manifested 100 Euro note in his fist, his attitude transformed.

"I have a message for the men who arrived last night," she declared.

"You may leave it with me and it will be delivered to their suites."

"Not likely."

"I cannot allow you..."

She clucked her tongue. "You cannot afford to deny me. Their wrath if they are deprived of the news I bear..."

When the employee averted his gaze, Mustang sensed he'd judged the character of these... glorified thugs and dreaded antagonizing them. He signaled to a brass-buttoned bellhop, who bowed upon being instructed, "Picasso Suite," leading her to the lift.

"Classy pile of rock," the visitor quipped as they ascended.

His tenor bit hard. "More than you could ever afford."

"Wanna bet?"

"Don't make me laugh, putana."

The 500 Euro note passed before the teen's nose, withdrawn when he reached for it.

"I most humbly apologize, Signorina," he stammered. "I had no idea."

"No, you didn't, but you shot off your mouth anyway. You're lucky I don't have you sacked for such impudence."

"Oh, please, no! My mamma and sisters rely on the tips I earn..."

"Then, be more polite in future."

Currency fluttered to the carpet as the doors retracted; the bellhop bent to retrieve this bounty, receiving a swift kick on his backside that launched him from the car. He face-planted in the corridor; Mustang breezed past.

A well-groomed butler exited the suite as she approached, towing a linen-draped trolley. "Who let you in?" he snarled.

"Don't go there," she warned.

He lunged toward a wall phone. "I'm ringing security..."

Frozen digits suspended above the keypad, he yelped in anguish.

"Trust me," she grunted. "And don't come back for an hour."

"But, if they order from more room service..."

"They won't."

Wide brown orbs blinked twice before he was released from invisible constraints and scurried toward the housekeeping cupboard, abandoning the collection of empty liquor bottles.

Mustang twirled toward arched oak panels, licking her lips to muffle her snicker.

“Let’s do some damage.”

IV

A major advantage of wielding incredible power over nature - among disadvantages of Mustang’s own making - no language barrier. When a broad-shouldered, paunchy Asian answered her knock, she didn’t worry that he wouldn’t understand her greeting.

The same with his associates, lounging on expensive furniture in the sitting room.

“Hello, boys,” she hailed. “Is this everyone?”

“We were... alerted to the arrival of an important communique,” replied an Aussie. “Who sent it and what does it say?”

An African, skin so black it reflected mid-day light with a blue cast, rose, mein contorted with recognition. “You! How did you...”

His comrades drew weapons from holsters and coats slung over chairs, leveling them at her. She didn’t flinch.

“This is what all the fuss is about?” boomed a rotund Mexican. “She’s not worth her weight in tacos!”

“Been a long time since I had a decent taco,” commented Mustang - since she fled to California with Jim Neville. “Know where I can get a few that don’t taste like cardboard?”

Insults hurled only augmented her grin, driving nails deeper into their respective coffins. A wiry subordinate, emerging from the toilet, crept up behind her and pinned her in a choke hold; no additional strength was required to shift her balance - based on her Kung Fu training - and pitch him into this horde of testosterone, landing four of them on the floor.

“Jesus Christ!” yowled one of the injured.

A sly, middle-aged Turk retorted, “She’s... a kid, for Christ’s sake! She can’t take all of us.”

Revolvers cocked, Glocks’ safeties deactivated as barrels extended.

“Knock it off, idiots. Don’t waste the ammunition.”

A dozen sets of eyes swiveled toward the lanky, dirty-blond figure in Savile Row suit holding a gin and tonic in the kitchen doorway.

“But, boss...” muttered a trio.

“Who’s in charge of this lunatic operation?” he spat, Scottish inflection evident. “Anyone who thinks I don’t know what I’m doing better speak his piece...”

A faint recollection surfaced inside Mustang’s skull. She’d accompanied Johnny Rosemont on a promotional junket for his World War II film, flying in a DC-10 called the Monster. She’d only greeted the pilot in passing...

But, here he stood.

“Don’t earn enough flying film crews from location to location?” she scoffed.

He glided toward her with a distinctive elegance. “Are you kidding? Rosemont and his partners pay shit. But, with half the cargo hold empty most runs, I... well...”

A lieutenant grumbled, “Boss, don’t be tellin’ her our secrets...”

“Just seeing my face, she’s already put together the pieces of this puzzle, you dolt. I told you: she’s bright though a bit naive, and could turn you to dust if she chose.”

“You eavesdropped...” concluded Mustang.

“That, and pure deduction. At last summer’s press conference for the film, everyone else facing the reporters relied on translators, but you didn’t. You spoke nothing but English, though everyone understood your answers.”

“Smart boy.”

He sneered, “In Vienna, when you played that little prank on Johnny...”

“Prank?”

“My room was down the hall. I was my way to dinner, when I saw his door open and close without anybody around. I stood outside, listening, and heard you two talking about... the inexplicable feats you’d accomplished.”

She wanted to throttle the opportunist bastard. “And, you saw a chance for some easy dough...”

“My... global network of associates drummed up quite a bit of interest in the proposal.”

She surveyed the assembly, noting sarcastically, “An impressive bunch.”

“We’ve got bids in the ten figures for your services...”

“A deal on which you could never deliver.”

He drained the tumbler. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“Well, drugging me didn’t work. What other tricks have you up your sleeve?”

“I’ve been mulling over a few possibilities...”

The Asian on the far left of the semi-circle crumpled on the carpet.

His peers ogled the corpse, jaws agape.

“If we could have a few moments alone...” petitioned their ringleader.

Blue-tinted flesh moist with sweat, the African flopped atop his associate.

“Pretty soon, you’ll have your wish, through the process of elimination,”

Mustang chortled.

“You’re enjoying this!”

“Aren’t you? With each stiff, your share of the take increases...”

The pilot squirmed. “At this rate...”

“At this rate, you have about five minutes to make your peace with God, if you believe in such nonsense.”

Prayers in many languages were being mumbled, in fact, by those who, rightfully, expected their hearts to stop within seconds.

In Mustang’s opinion, they deserved their fate. Of what practical use were these types, who preyed upon the innocent, the addicts, the poor? They qualified as bullies, needing a dose of their own to teach them an enduring lesson.

Except, she acknowledged, their ilk - steeped in violence from an early age probably - would never learn.

The Mexican, the Turk...

“Oh, come on, Mustang...” whined the fidgeting organizer.

“What’s your name, anyway? John never properly introduced us.”

“Randy... Fullerton.”

An exodus toward the foyer disrupted their conversation; pistols clattered to the floor in the mad rush to escape summary execution, whimpering like wounded puppies. Oak panels swollen shut, desperate mitts yanked at brass handles.

Mustang signaled Fullerton to the sofa; she sank on a matching recliner as the chaos continued, dangling her legs over the arm. “How much does a joint like this run per night?” she wondered.

“Five grand.”

“Oh, hell, Randy! You could have a bed, a bathroom and a nice view for a couple hundred anywhere in this city. Why waste the money?”

He couldn’t ignore the commotion beyond the threshold. “There’s no sense having it if... you can’t be comfortable.”

The kid who’d assaulted her toppled against a plant stand, potted fern dumping soil atop his ebony curls.

“True. But, explain why you felt it necessary to... get your hands filthy.”

“Have you any notion how boring a pilot’s life can be, especially when there’s lots of down time between flights? A pusher in L.A. approached me in the

hangar - shit, years ago - with a plan to import certain... illegal goods amongst the cameras and sound equipment. I saw no reason to refuse.”

The woman wanted to slap him. “What about the teenagers dying of overdoses from tainted crack, Ecstasy, meth? Did you ever consider those reasons?”

“Hey, that’s on their own heads. If they’re stupid enough to try the stuff and become slave to it, it’s none of my business.”

Three more bodies prone, four remained upright, petrified motionless. “Boss, can’t you *do* something?”

“How much, Mustang?” Fullerton ventured.

She cringed. “Are you nuts?”

“Then, what?”

“You have nothing I want.”

“What *do* you want?”

Wistfully: “Peace and quiet. Not to be bothered by the likes of you... skulking around, trying to use my power for your own selfish ends...”

Stacked cadavers resembled a small mountain.

“But, don’t you *see*? You’d be heralded as a god, with every human subject to your slightest whim!”

The last pair huddled behind the terrace curtains.

“So I’ve been told, many times. There’s always some knothed wanting to stand beside me and bask in my glory...”

“Well, you can’t blame a fella, when you’re so beautiful...”

“Oh, shut up.”

When she bolted upright, he anticipated a resounding backhand across his cheek. Instead, firearms melted into puddles of useless metal and the remaining minions expired.

Fullerton quavered in his expensive shoes. “Please... no...”

“You can take me to lunch. I hate eating alone in restaurants. Then, I’ll decide...”

This abrupt shift in Mustang’s demeanor rattled the pilot. “Oh... kay...”

Managing their exit required no little effort, bodies left in a row, arms crossed in blessed repose. Locking the door, Fullerton croaked, “What about them?”

She mimicked, “What about them?”

They’d already been reduced to the dust from whence they’d come. Hell on the cleaning staff, but...

Traversing the Piazza del Popolo, Mustang drew Fullerton's attention to the fringes of society, reliant on tourists for spare change or the charity of robed priests and black-habited women. "These are the people you've hurt, from whom you must seek forgiveness."

"I'll donate every cent, if you just..."

"And, if I spare you, what will you do with your life?"

He gulped, "Become a hermit?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're a pilot, with access to a huge aircraft."

An idea dawned. "Shuttle supplies to countries facing drought, war..."

"Without seeking notoriety?"

"I've never... You think I want the cops to know what I've been doing?"

"You could still wind up in maximum security for twenty years or more."

Fullerton glanced over his shoulder. "The guys who might've ratted on me are... conveniently... dead."

The trek took them on a winding route. Along lanes too narrow for even the smallest vehicles, they passed the Pantheon and glimpsed the dome of St. Peter's Basilica, finally crossing the Tiber into Trastevere, a table at Otello's open onto the bustling street.

"Why this dive?" scoffed Fullerton.

"It beats those gourmet joints you frequent, with portions that would leave a child hungry."

Platters of pasta were presented, the aroma enticing, and they laid into the entrees with gusto. Mustang detected her companion's nervous palsy; this being his final meal, she imagined him suppressing nausea.

Generous portions of tiramisu capped off the experience, and the woman relished every bite. Fullerton slumped on his chair, watching her devour the dessert, a slight smile curling his full lips.

"You like good food?" he probed.

Fork paused over the plate, she replied, "I like basic food, well cooked. Meat, potatoes... chocolate."

"You're... one in a million." Spoken with genuine awe. "Maybe one in a billion."

"When your teachers are some of the wisest men who ever lived..."

"Like Erwin Rommel?"

"You... know about him?"

"I was in the diamond circle at the Berlin theater for Johnny's film presentation. In lieu of a decent salary, he secures VIP tickets to his premieres. He thinks it's a fantastic perk, though I don't give a damn about such spectacles."

“So, you overheard that conversation, too?”

“I *saw* him. I wanted to ask Johnny about our time of departure, but when I opened the door, there he was...”

She grunted, “I’m surprised you didn’t see Saint Francis...”

“In the ‘Save the Whales’ t-shirt?”

Mustang’s hazel eyes rolled toward the ceiling. “Why didn’t you just come to me... I would’ve...”

“Submitted to blackmail?”

With a sigh, “I suppose not.”

“You would’ve offed me on the spot.”

“And, this way, you’ve had a couple... profitable years.”

The waiter approached, removing plates scraped so clean the dishwasher would barely need to touch them.

“Check, please,” Fullerton stated.

“Si, Signore.”

Draining her glass of chianti, Mustang studied pigeons flitting about the piazza. “This has been... quite pleasant.”

“Then... marry me, Mustang.”

Auburn tresses whipped toward Fullerton so fast, he thought her neck would snap. Her hazel eyes met his - that unique combination of green, brown and gold - and grit her teeth.

It hadn’t been Denis Sommers voice she’d heard through that comatose fog, his quack of an uncle Hamish, nor her less than ethical attendants hoping to violate her. Randy Fullerton had purred in her ear - hoping to plant a subliminal message in his favor? she mused.

“Oh, hell...” She ditched the linen napkin. “Thanks for ruining it.”

A 100 Euro note slammed on the table as he raced to catch her up near the Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere. A blue velvet jeweler’s box clutched in his fist, Fullerton pulled up short to avoid a collision with child on a blue bicycle, swerving between pedestrians.

The pilot folded like an accordion.

Just as a bolt of lightning scorched the paving stones from a cloudless sky.

Alfredo, the souvenir shopkeeper, was sweeping trash into a dustpan near his front windows when the jagged electrical charge arced over Mount Subasio.

A quarter hour later, Mustang appeared at his door. “How’s Carlo?”

“He’s well, Signorina. He seems to have forgotten about his... ordeal.”

As she’d directed nature.

“Good.” She selected a bottle of orange juice from the refrigerated case.
“Any tour groups looking for a guide?”
“Earlier, yes. But, we could not find you in any of the usual places.”
“I was... out of town. Tomorrow...”
“Si, Signorina.” Alfredo rang up the purchase and accepted her coins. “No hard feelings?”
Her smile tense, she replied, “If I ever hold a grudge, you’ll know.”
“Grazie, Signorina.”
He noticed how she held the bottle gingerly as she whisked from the building.
Mustang wanted to scream, the anguish shooting up both her arms so intense. She’d made a point of not summoning lightning except in emergencies since her move to Assisi, and twice in one day...
“You can heal the wounds,” Francis reminded her when she trudged into her apartment, bottle already empty and discarded in a rubbish bin.
“You know why I don’t.”
“Si, Signorina. You want to be conscious of your failings... and, yet, you repeat them.”
Inspecting cupboards above the kitchenette sink, she scowled. No food, no cash handy after being burgled by parties unknown...
Yet... she’d had 500 Euros in her jeans when Randy Fullerton’s gang had snatched her, and she’d shed those clothes after her escape, leaving a pile on the bathroom tile.
Relief as tentative fingers slid into the pocket and extracted enough funds to restock her supplies.
And buy some pastries at the Gran Caffé.