

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Detective Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea had contemplated the idea on a number of occasions. Modern-day Franciscans failed to emulate the example of their founder, St. Francis of Assisi - whom she knew quite well, due to accidentally manifesting him in physical form - making the incident not entirely surprising.

International media coverage of the massacre would surely bring crowds to the Umbrian hillside city, while not increasing her business as tour guide. They would flock to the Sacro Convento’s Papal Hall, hoping for a glimpse of blood on the tiled floor where bodies of robed Franciscans, expired across toppled furnishings, had once resembled wreckage after a tornado leveled a trailer park.

Clever, Mustang mused, listening to the Italian reporter highlight the incident - though she heard the woman in English, another result of the power she’d inherited from her grandfather, occultist and scientist Jack Parsons. The assassin had calmly walked into the hall, where hundreds of Franciscans from across the globe were gathered for a meeting called the “General Chapter”. During the day’s opening prayer, all standing at their respective tables, the AR-15 rifle had been exposed from beneath the skirts of a faux hooded brown habit, and those in attendance were mowed down like an overgrown lawn.

Mustang couldn’t help but smirk at the final comment on the tiny television screen: “Unlike some mass shootings, the number of casings collected by the Carabinieri precisely coincided with the number of deceased - 142.”

An expert marksman, she surmised. Someone with military training, no doubt.

Who had gotten away clean.

No clues, no security video, no one alive to identify a face.

“You’ll be having visitors shortly,” came a male voice from near the window overlooking the Piazza San Rufino.

“Request for a tour?”

“No. The police.”

The woman leapt from the battered love seat. “You better be joking, Francis.”

A bony digit pointed downward. The uniformed squad of six paused in consultation on the cobblestones below, Mustang’s portly landlord a nervous wreck in their midst.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered, retreating. “They can’t suspect me...”

The emaciated saint cited logic, “You’re an American. The weapon used was American-made.”

“They know they can’t hold me. They’ve tried before.”

“The very reason they suspect you: the knowledge of how dangerous you are.”

Brushing auburn tresses from her face, Mustang glared at him. “You’re telling me, I must find the murderer myself, to clear my name?”

“Sounds like a mystery novel, eh, *Signorina*?”

“Shut up.”

Changing from her plaid flannel night shirt into a black tank top, jeans and sneakers, she bolted up the narrow flight of stairs to the roof just as the door on ground level burst open. Scuttling over the slanted surface, she reached the Piazza del Comune and climbed down a metal fire escape. Her attempt to maneuver through tour groups milling near trattorias and chapels failed, her hair like a beacon.

“Halt!” shouted an officer, unheard above the din.

Mustang managed to slip down an alley and hide behind a scaffold draped with tarps, waiting until long after the sound of running boots faded.

She emerged, wavy locks darkened to black thanks to her power over nature, and far less conspicuous. Returning to her apartment not an option, she meandered through winding lanes toward the Basilica San Francesco. No matter what, she would discover the truth behind the murder of those Franciscans.

Not that she liked them much. When giving tours through the city, she had encountered many. Their condescending behavior toward lay people irked her. While St. Francis himself understood humility and unconditional love, his followers did not. They preferred to be treated with deference, as if they were superior beings. The friars who wore their brown robes within Assisi’s confines quickly shed them outside the walls - or after official functions - so they could go out, drink and party.

Hypocrites.

A warm breeze blew crumpled papers and dead leaves past her feet as she descended the steep, cobbled incline toward the pink marble structure, which Francis himself despised. Beyond the grand facade lay three levels of prayer space and, farther on, the vast compound marked by arched courtyards and long corridors: the Sacro Convento, where the Franciscans dwelt.

Unlike most days during tourist season, few people congregated around the tall doors, a large poster in ten languages declaring the church and surrounding precincts closed to the public - the first time since a devastating earthquake years earlier.

Mustang shuddered at the memory of her horrible mistake when first exploring the magnitude of her power.

Easy enough to unlatch the gate; not so easy to navigate dozens of coroner's vehicles and hearses parked wherever space permitted, still loading the deceased as they were cleared by officials.

A trio of Carabinieri appeared from a recessed service entrance, carrying boxes of equipment. Snatching a clipboard left on the hood of a green Fiat, Mustang darted through the gap before the door latched.

The first room to her right contained racks of brown robes in every size - just what she needed as a disguise to traverse the halls and investigate.

It didn't take long for the woman to discover where the disaster had occurred. The vast Papal Hall had been emptied, except for piles of overturned chairs, upended tables, and a stack of state-of-the-art headphones.

"Francis, what am I looking at?" whispered Mustang.

"Those attending the chapter came from every corner of the globe. They would have been listening to simultaneous translations..."

"From an audio booth?"

"*Si, Signorina.*"

"Which is where?"

No reply.

She took the silence to mean something in this chamber should be studied prior to moving elsewhere. Methodically, she counted the chairs - 143. The headsets also totaled 143.

Hadn't the news reported 142 shots fired, 142 dead?

"Who's the odd man out?" she muttered, staring out blood spattered windows.

The ethereal baritone praised, "*Magnifico, Signorina.*"

"You mean, whoever offed these boys took one of them hostage?"

"*Si.*"

"Oh, hell."

In some ways, that complicated matters, but also provided a vital clue. The culprit's escape would be more difficult if it involved forcing one of the friars from the structure.

And, they wouldn't have walked through town as if nothing had transpired, or ridden the bus which transported tourists to the train station at Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley below.

The individual would've had to possess a vehicle, and knowledge of the roads...

Mustang knelt beside scattered papers: the Minister General's address. Red specks obscured the type.

Why did she not feel sad at such carnage?

Why hadn't any of the men tried to escape, once the first shots rang out?

Straightening, the amateur detective assessed the furniture arrangement.

Those in attendance would have been facing away from the doors, toward the crucifix on the far wall. They would not have seen the assailant enter, or paid attention if the hinges creaked, thinking it an associate arriving late.

She circled the room and stood on the threshold, gazing toward the podium, imagining the assembly with their heads bowed in prayer...

Hearing diminished by the earphones as translations filled their ears...

"Really?" she snorted. "Really? They didn't hear the gunfire?"

Somberly, "*Si, Signorina.*"

She deliberated at length before voicing her opinion. "If whoever was speaking used a microphone - and he would've had to, so those translating could hear what he was saying - then the translators would've heard the noise..."

No affirmation of the statement.

"And, if the technicians were recording the session..."

Fortunately, the wiring for the microphone could be traced along stone walls, having been installed long after the original 13<sup>th</sup> century construction. As she ventured into the corridor, concentrating on the base of the wall, she didn't notice the approaching gurney.

"This floor is off limits," barked the orderly. "You must leave... Father?"

Her long hair visible - the robe's hood having fallen off her head - Mustang reacted instantly, and impulsively.

Stone flooring shifted ominously. Fearful of another earthquake, the attendants abandoned their task and retreated toward the nearest exit.

That left her alone to inspect the hastily vacated audio booth - a converted cloak room, she surmised. Eight stations had been set up, and the translators would have relied solely upon what they heard, because no windows allowed them a view of the proceedings.

A desktop computer hummed beneath the tables. While not comfortable with the technology, Mustang managed to activate the software which had recorded the morning session and its aftermath.

She sank on a folding metal chair, stunned. The prayer had been for guidance and mercy, then the staccato pops of the semi-automatic rifle, almost unending. No outcry, no screams, until a lone tenor cried, "Don't!"

His protests were quickly muffled; he'd been gagged, presumably, and dragged past the bodies, stumbling over chairs.

Then, silence.

Mustang knew a bit about weapons. Living on a horse ranch in Montana, her father had taken her hunting a few times during her youth. She never liked killing animals, or watching them be killed - even for food.

An AR-15 used a clip or magazine, loaded with anywhere from 10 to 100 bullets. In order to murder 142 friars, the assassin would have needed a minimum of two clips, preloaded, and been skilled enough to change them out in a split second. There'd been no break in the rhythm of the shots...

This sharpshooter had skill.

The presumption of military training confirmed, Mustang would have considered checking personnel attached to American bases throughout the European Union, except the prospect of a hostage preempted the suspect from traveling very far. This person had a vendetta against the Franciscans - in a major way - and took this one to complete whatever revenge had been devised.

"Your assumption is not based on facts," cautioned Francis from behind her left shoulder.

She countered, "No, but it's logical. The farther they traveled, the greater likelihood the hostage might escape. It would be impossible to stop for fuel or use the restroom. Since there are no gas stations in Assisi, unless the car was tanked up prior to arriving here, the probable distance traveled is even further reduced."

"Very logical, indeed," the saint admitted.

"Thanks, but that leaves me with another dilemma: I have no idea where they would hide."

"There are many caves on the mountain..."

"It would have to be somewhere the hostage could be contained... secured... escape-proof," Mustang pondered.

Footsteps in the corridor reminded her time was of the essence. Shutting down the computer, she rose and pulled the door inward just enough to peek out.

Four orderlies were pushing loaded gurneys toward the main exit, preventing anyone else from passing. Shedding the brown robe as she bolted, the woman pitched the garment in the storage closet and shoved open the service exit, colliding with Carabinieri on the periphery of a sizeable gathering.

"Our prime suspect has disappeared," she heard an officer proclaim from within the circle, automatically translated from the Italian. "You will pair up and search every inch of the city. We know she does not own an automobile, and the

buses have ceased service for the day. So, unless she's walking her hostage out of the city, you should be able to find her."

Her? Mustang puzzled. What woman would take such a risk to commit this kind of heinous murder?

A persistent, bony finger poked her shoulder. She spun, seeing Francis shaking his shaggy head.

"You mean, me?" she choked.

He nodded.

Petrified, she backed stealthily from the group, wondering how far she needed to go before breaking into a sprint.

At that moment, a utility van bearing the logo of the Rete Sismica Nazionale - the Italian National Seismic Network - rumbled between ornate wrought iron gates.

"Your ruse stirred up a hornet's nest," Francis remarked.

"My ruse?"

"Making the floor tremble. They are very worried about another earthquake damaging the structure."

"Sorry."

The emaciated figure sighed. "If you want to escape, move at a leisurely pace. They will not recognize you with your hair darkened."

So focused on discovering the truth, Mustang had forgotten this alteration to her appearance. She complied with Francis' advice and, to provide an additional distraction, the ground tremored, albeit briefly.

"You know better than to tamper with the natural forces," came the scolding.

She grimaced. "For me, self-preservation still trumps self-control."

Obviously, self-preservation mattered to those loading corpses into the vehicles, and the officials supervising, as they all panicked and tried to flee the area. Amidst such disarray, the woman casually exited through the gate, climbing the stairs and crossing the basilica's front lawn, past bushes spelling "Pax" and a horrible sculpture of a dejected, armor-clad soldier riding a horse.

Up the Via Cardinale Raffaele Merry del Val, knowing she could not return to her apartment for some time, Mustang planned to ascend Mount Subasio and visit the wild horses living at the summit. She paused near the Porta San Giacomo, glimpsing a bundle overflowing a trash bin next to one of the city's many hotels.

Gingerly, she plucked the brown cloth from atop bags of discarded food and papers. As she'd suspected: a Franciscan habit, spattered amply with blood and split up the back.

The hostage's religious habit, most likely, stains from his fallen confreres, since no holes in the fabric indicated he'd been injured himself. He'd been forced to discard it, to prevent passersby from growing suspicious.

Mustang gazed toward to Rocca Maggiore, the ancient fort once used to protect Assisi from neighboring invaders. Not a feasible hiding place, since it was a tourist attraction - and likely to draw more crowds with the basilica closed on this day. Beyond those refurbished walls, however...

Her leisurely afternoon just turned into a hunting expedition.

## II

Mustang Duryea kept her eyes and ears open as she slowly climbed Mount Subasio. Using a downed branch as her walking stick, she scanned pavement and paths for distinctive shoe prints.

Her reasoning: if the hostage friar's habit had been splattered with blood, the soles of whatever footwear he sported must've accumulated some as he was forced across the floor of the Papal Hall.

She'd left the Carabinieri scouring Assisi's lanes and alleys, so her hair again shown auburn in the afternoon sun. Hiking through a grove of trees, she listened as a light breeze rustled thick leaves. Varied bird calls created a lilting melody, yet a singular whistling failed to harmonize with nature's symphony.

The woman slowed her pace, stepping lightly as she neared the human generating this music, perched on a jutting rock overlooking the Umbrian valley.

Had Mustang not known better, she would've identified the skinny, bespectacled man as a mythic elf, with his bristly, sandy grey mustache and goatee, and unkempt dirty blond mop visible beneath the rim of a dusty black bowler. His short sleeve blue dress shirt hung loose from a pair of khaki shorts. White tube socks sagged around the tops of military-style boots.

He didn't see her approach, concentrating on scratching notes in a musical staff folio as he whistled notes in rapid succession.

Mustang admired anyone with such talent, having no tendencies of that sort herself. She hesitated to speak, fearing she might interrupt his creative flow.

Glancing up as he searched for a fresh pencil, the glass in the aviator frames reflected sunlight, almost blinding her. She shielded her eyes and retreated.

"Hello," he greeted cheerily - in English, without the need for her mental translator. "It's a beautiful spot, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

He set aside his writing materials, enthused. "You're American!"

Mustang gave a cursory nod, suspicious.

“Even though I speak fluent Italian, it’s good to hear an accent from home.” He scrambled from the rock, extending his hand as he crossed the tall grass.

She accepted the gesture.

“I’m Paul Harrison.”

“A composer?” Mustang queried.

“When I have time. Mostly, I conduct the Boston Symphony.”

She swallowed hard. “Are you on vacation?”

“In a way. The orchestra has been touring Europe. It gave me an opportunity to meet up with my wife, and we’re taking a bit of a break.”

“Your wife was traveling separately?”

“No, she’s stationed at an Army base in Germany. Her last tour of duty before retiring.”

Mustang’s tongue failed. Could a woman be responsible for the murder of those Franciscans?

“You look as perplexed as many of my friends, when I told them about our marriage,” laughed Harrison. “The first for me, the second for her. We met in London, while she was on leave and I was guest conductor for the symphony there.”

“What... does she do in the Army?”

The dreaded answer Mustang expected did not materialize.

“She’s a colonel in the medical corps. Makes sure injured soldiers returning from battle receive the best care imaginable.”

The sigh of relief so deep, Mustang almost collapsed. Why shouldn’t this couple visit Assisi during their travels? Thousands of Americans did so each year...

“Where is she now? Browsing the souvenir shops?”

“Oh, no,” replied Harrison. “She’s always wanted to make a retreat here, so for the next three days, I’m on my own. Trying to finish a concerto I started fifteen years ago.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” Mustang turned to resume her trek.

“Must you go?”

“You’re busy.”

“There’s a cooler full of food under my jacket. I never stopped for lunch, and there’s plenty for two, if you’re hungry,” hinted Harrison.

Mustang realized her own hunger in that instant. “Sure.”

The red Igloo insulated lunch pail contained two deli sandwiches, assorted fresh fruit, and small bottles of chocolate milk. The woman selected beef and cheese and an apple.

Side by side on the rock, the pair gazed at the traffic below. It might have been a typical day in Assisi's annual tourist season, except...

"What are those?" Harrison pointed toward the Basilica San Francesco.

"Satellite news trucks."

"Is something special going on?"

"If you consider a murder something special, yes."

The composer choked on a bite of his banana. "Murder?"

Mustang related the story, omitting the part about her being pursued as a suspect.

"Heavens, that's awful," remarked Harrison. "A small, quiet town like this..."

"You hadn't heard about it?"

"The hostel where I'm staying has no television, and I haven't seen a newspaper in weeks."

Chuckling at the workings of the creative temperament, Mustang sipped her milk. "Around here, it doesn't take the media to spread such news. There's a gossip about every twenty feet."

They laughed together.

"You live here?" Harrison asked.

"For the past few years."

"But, you're American."

She glanced at him sideways. "What does that have to do with it? A lot of - what do they call them? - ex-patriots live in Italy, England, Ireland..."

"Were the States so bad?"

"I'd... rather not go into that." The last thing Mustang wanted to do was tell someone else about her power, and its consequences, and risk them meeting an unfortunate death.

Harrison pressed, "Where did you grow up?"

"A horse ranch in Montana."

"Beautiful country."

"Yes."

"Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes."

"Ever want to go back?"

"I can't go back."

Her sour expression prompted Harrison to raise his hands in surrender. He shrugged and continued, "You married?"

"Nope."

"Maybe if you were, you would appreciate what you've left behind."

"Is that what your marriage does for you?"

"In a way."

Mustang let him ramble after that. He related his wife's history - an abusive husband who drank himself to death at the age of 42, following the untimely suicide of their 17 year old son.

"Erica blamed herself, of course. Being in the Army, she wasn't always home, and things happened in her absence that, if she'd been there, she might have prevented."

"But, now she has you," Mustang commented.

"An incredible coincidence that we ever met, at all. She'd just returned from a deployment in Afghanistan, and the symphony was playing a benefit concert on base. We, literally, ran into each other in the parking lot afterward."

"Your cars?"

"No, our bodies. She'd dropped her keys and bent to find them, so I didn't see her when I cut between two SUVs, and we collided."

"How romantic."

"She thought so. A lot of people criticized our age difference..."

"Really?"

"She's 41; I'm 62."

"That's not so bad."

Harrison grinned, augmenting his elfish appearance. "Thanks. The grief she deals with on a daily basis makes her, spiritually and mentally, a lot older than me. Since being stationed in Germany, she's treated men with their limbs blown off, traumatic brain injuries... the pathetic results of unnecessary wars. That's why I wanted to give her time for this little retreat. She needs to recover her own spirit."

"Where's she staying?"

"A hermitage up the mountain a ways."

"The fresh air and marvelous view will do the trick."

"I hope so."

Mustang detected doubt in his tone. "How long have you been married?"

"Three years."

"How long has she been in Germany?"

"Two."

"Wow. Long distance relationships, from what I've heard..."

“You don’t know how many people warned me we never should’ve tied the knot,” Harrison lamented. “But, despite all her personal baggage, she’s a wonderful, caring woman. She’s inspired me more...”

“Then, don’t listen to what anyone else has to say.”

He inhaled deeply, then managed a smile. “Since you live here, would you show me around? Not the tourist traps, but the real city?”

Mustang snickered. “No better choice, given that I’m a tour guide.”

“Really? For English speaking groups?”

“For anyone.”

Sliding off the rock and gathering his possessions, Harrison eyed her, the sun again glaring off his glasses. “You’re multilingual?”

The woman grit her teeth. She couldn’t explain how she heard others in English, regardless of what tongue they spoke, and they understood her in their native language, even though she spoke only English. That would open the door to countless other questions...

“I get by,” she bluffed.

“And make a decent living at it?”

Another misconception. “I don’t charge a set fee. Whatever compensation a group sees fit to give me, I take.”

“So, some days, it’s less, and others, more.”

“Exactly.”

She started up Mount Subasio, while Harrison lagged behind.

“What’s wrong?” she prodded.

“Nothing. Just... weren’t you going to show me around?”

“Sure. If we start at the top, it’s all downhill from there.”

He chortled, “True. True.”

The ascent went - deliberately - at a leisurely pace, which allowed Mustang to scan the ground for signs of the murderer and hostage, while exercising her profession for Paul Harrison. She avoided showing him the wild horses, fearing exposure would lead to their capture or death. Plenty of other wildlife crossed their path, however, and songs of the birds filled their ears.

“Father Murphy would love this,” breathed Harrison when he slowed, rotating to capture the full view.

Mustang echoed, “Father Murphy?”

“The Catholic chaplain from Erica’s base. He drove down with her, since he’d never been here before, along with one of her nurses and her fiancé.”

“Fiancé?”

“From one of the infantry units.”

Infantry, Mustang mused. Weapons.

Harrison continued chattering, but she missed much of it while theorizing how a soldier with a rifle could massacre so many...

“What do you say to that?” concluded her companion.

“Sorry. What?”

“St. Francis. Seeing how so many people flock to his shrine and honor his memory.”

“Oh, he doesn’t like it.”

The elfish figure’s head cocked left. “Eh?”

The woman didn’t stop to consider what she was saying, or how. “If he’d been alive to stop it, the basilica never would have been constructed. He would’ve made certain his followers lived simply and helped the poor, rather than focus on buildings, books and tourists.”

Harrison froze in his tracks, staring at her with intense blue eyes.

Finally, she realized her mistake.

Too late.

“You talk as if you have intimate knowledge of his views,” the composer drawled.

Mustang stammered, “There are always new biographies being published.”

“You read them?”

She didn’t approve of lying, so she didn’t respond.

“You also used the present tense, as if he were alive today.”

“His spirit lives on.” No fabrication there.

“Is the reason you live here so you can be closer to that spirit, because you’re a psychic medium in contact with those who have passed over?”

Wanting to laugh at such a ludicrous idea, Mustang suppressed the sound. Yet, how ludicrous, compared to the truth?

She stopped, reversing course. “That’s enough for today.”

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“You’re a total stranger.”

“I’ve a reputation for honesty, integrity...” Harrison boasted.

“Like they say in the gangster movies: if I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Her attempt to make the statement sound like a joke failed.

“You’re in hiding, then, because of some incident involving the saint’s relics?”

She whirled on him. “Would I be a tour guide if I were in hiding?”

“Good point,” he conceded.

Descending another hundred meters, they reached the main path back to Assisi. “You can find your way from here,” announced Mustang. “Enjoy the rest of your stay.”

“You’re not coming?”

“I... have something I need to do.”

“In the middle of nowhere on the side of a mountain?”

“St. Francis used to pray in the middle of nowhere on the side of a mountain.”

Harrison acknowledged the fact with a slight nod before reluctantly proceeding on the packed dirt trail.

He hadn’t traveled far when a blood-curdling, gut-wrenching shriek pierced the air.

### III

“Oh, hell.”

Paul Harrison and Mustang Duryea halted, surveying the area for the sound’s origin. The woman grasped it came from the murderer’s hostage, possibly being mercilessly tortured in some nearby cave, numerous on Mount Subasio. Harrison hadn’t the slightest clue.

“Where’d it come from?” the musician ventured.

Mustang pointed north.

He objected, “No, I think it was west.”

With a groan, she whispered, “Francis, this is your mountain.”

“Half a mile east, *Signorina*,” supplied the saint, invisible.

Harrison heard the voice, nonetheless. “Who was that?”

Hazel eyes averted, Mustang remained silent, then set off at a jog toward the east, with the man close behind, despite his advanced years.

Difficult to keep up the pace, with stones and exposed roots making the overgrown trail a hazard. Mustang’s chest heaving, she stopped after twenty minutes, wisps of smoke rising from a clump of gnarled bushes.

Branches pushed aside, a vertical split in the rock face served as entrance to a cave. Flickering light indicated the source of the smoke: a camp fire.

“Do you want to go in there?” Harrison panted, finally catching her.

“If someone’s hurt, we must do what we can.”

Her words rang hollow, even to her own ears. Another murder victim could lie within...

Squeezing through the narrow gap, she emerged in a sizable cavern. It took a valiant effort to suppress her cough - from the smoke, and from her gag reflex at the sight of so much blood.

Yet, no corpse supplied a source for the liquid.

Harrison's retching did not dissuade Mustang from venturing closer to the dying flames. Whoever built the fire had fled in haste, not bothering to douse the embers. Perhaps the volume of the victim's scream frightened the perpetrator, spurring abandonment of what might otherwise have been the perfect hideout.

The woman squatted beneath a pointed overhang, where fragments of a rope dangled.

"Someone was suspended off the ground," she surmised, noting how - once the thick hemp had been cut, the body had collapsed on the dirt, leaving scuff marks extending to the exit.

Those clues were the least gruesome. On a ledge about waist high, puddles of blood had not even begun to coagulate. A small double-bladed ax, metal dripping red, lay directly below.

What might have been mistaken for a blood-soaked towel tossed in a heap turned out to be the victim's severed left hand, which had bounced off the wall and settled in the corner.

"Oh, hell," Mustang choked.

A thick wooden stick lay apart from the fire, the tip still hot. Using deductive reasoning acquired from all the mystery novels she'd read as a teen, and classic movies she'd watched, she voiced her theory aloud.

"The assassin chose this site prior to killing the friars during their meeting. The hostage was brought here, hung up by his right hand, and his left hand cut off... why? It wasn't meant as a fatal blow. The wound was cauterized with the hot torch and the hostage dragged off to... where?"

Harrison had finally recovered his composure. "What do we do?"

The last thing Mustang needed was a weak-stomached companion. "Go back to the city and find the Carabinieri. Tell them what's here, and lead them back, if they don't know the way themselves."

"But... you..."

"Don't mention me to the police. I'm going to follow the trail. Either the hostage is being carried, or dragged, and it shouldn't be hard to track them from this point."

"What about the... hand?"

Mustang glanced around; a dust-coated red bandanna - possibly used to gag the hostage - had snagged on a piece of kindling. She snatched it, wrapping

the stiff appendage like a leftover sandwich. "Take it with you. They might be able to identify the hostage from the fingerprints."

Gingerly accepting the parcel, Harrison retreated into fresh air. Mustang remained long enough to completely extinguish the glowing coals, then focused her attention on marks leading to the culprit's next destination.

She felt like a cross between a detective and a tracker, studying bushes for broken twigs, and the dirt for random flecks of red. As she inched her way up Mount Subasio, she mused how much more pleasant it would've been to spend the day with the wild horses.

That led her thoughts to recollections of Montana, and her pinto, Heartbeat.

Such a gentle soul! But not destined to live past his first few hours, if Joe Duryea had his way. Owning a ranch meant distancing oneself from affection for any of the stock; they were a source of income, not pets he'd told his daughter years earlier.

Mustang had been twelve when Heartbeat's mother gave birth. She'd watched from the stable loft while the Canyon Creek veterinarian monitored the tricky situation. There'd been a stampede, set off by a lightning strike. The pregnant mare had been trampled, unable to keep pace with the others.

After hours of pain and discussion, Heartbeat emerged, not breathing. The girl recalled this solemn declaration, while the veterinarian concentrated on saving the mother - good breeding stock, according to the elder Duryea.

She'd scurried down the ladder and knelt beside the foal. Murmuring softly, she cleaned it and massaged its heart.

Finally, a beat.

Her father hadn't even praised her efforts.

He did, however, allow her to claim the animal as her own. That meant bottle feeding, since the mother wasn't producing milk, and nurturing him through those initial weeks of life.

She'd loved Heartbeat as much as any person - probably more. The day she came to the stable, and he was absent from his stall, she panicked.

Montana winters qualified as harsh, in the truest sense. For the colt to be out in the bitter cold could prove fatal. She'd bundled herself in heavy coat, gloves, hat and boots and set off to find him.

He'd been gone long enough that his hoof prints had been obliterated by overnight snows. She'd had to fight wind and fatigue to continue on, her nose almost frostbitten, her vision blurred.

Finally, she'd located the shivering creature huddled near a clump of evergreens, the only shelter available so far from the ranch buildings. Not yet halter trained, Mustang had to coax the skittish horse by holding a clump of his mane.

Both were near frozen by the time they reached the barn.

The tale had elicited no reaction from Mustang's father. "You must've left the latch open on the stall when you cleaned it yesterday," his only statement.

While her mother did fetch blankets to warm her, and prepared a cup of hot cocoa, the woman remained silent.

Thus had it always been. Joe applied his attitude toward the horses to his own daughter - a distant lack of affection - and Maggie sometimes seemed almost frightened of the girl. The two adults seldom spoke courteously to each other, as well.

So thick the tension in the house, it could've been cut with a knife.

Ducking under a low branch on the trail above Assisi, Mustang's reverie ceased. Her cheeks dripped with tears.

Not that the woman missed her home. She didn't miss her parents. She missed the horses, the loving, innocent animals who so mirrored her own being.

When this latest disaster ended, she would climb the mountain to the herd she had befriended, taking a large basket of apples and carrots as a treat.

Taking a few moments to rest, seated on the stump of a fallen oak, Mustang gazed at the sun-bathed valley. In the distance, Santa Maria degli Angeli, the church she'd almost destroyed so long ago.

"Francis, where is this madman?" she queried aloud.

The saint manifested in the jeans and Earth Day t-shirt she had given him during that original debacle. "As you, yourself, have said in the past, dealing with those who are mentally disturbed can be problematic."

"Are you saying you don't know?"

"No. Just warning you to take care, *Signorina*."

"If you interfere, would you face consequences on your plane of existence?"

He smirked. "No. You would face the consequences here."

With that enigmatic response, he vanished.

She rose and stretched. Chapped lips reminded her she'd drunk no water since lunch. The angle of the sun warned of approaching night. She'd best hurry.

Difficult, when muscles ached and the air grew thin at this altitude. She heard voices and, turning, glimpsed a collection of vehicles bearing the Carabinieri seal and red cross converging on the road some distance from the cave. The

officers' complained about having to hike with heavy forensic equipment on their backs.

She wished she possessed one of their flashlights.

Soon, though, she realized she didn't need one. A log hut lay ahead; within a kerosene lamp she had bought after spending the night, caught in similar circumstances and reluctant to descend to the city.

A modest supply of food and bottled water filled a cupboard. A sleeping bag offered some protection from the cold earth.

And, from the glow emanating under the crooked door, someone else had the same idea.

Mustang realized she couldn't assert ownership of the cabin. She hadn't built it; she'd simply found it on her exploration of the mountain. Whoever sat inside had most likely encountered the same difficulty - nightfall coming and no knowledge of the trails back to secure lodgings.

White plumes drifted from a chimney connected to the compact hearth. While the warmth would be welcome to her chilled bones, she hesitated about proceeding.

Unlikely some tourist had taken refuge in the structure, no larger than a prison cell. Most never ventured beyond the Rocca Maggiore or the Eremo delle Carceri. It could be teens from the city, using the hut as their rendezvous. In that case, she didn't want to interrupt them.

She despised the thought it might be used as part of a drug operation. Assisi presented itself to the world as a wholesome, historic site; the truth would distress some people. The Carabinieri patrolled narrow streets in an attempt to prevent crime, but undesirable outsiders, and some locals, saw ways to make a profit off others with a taste for the unholy.

Cringing and shivering simultaneously, Mustang decided to set aside convention. Approaching a warped plywood panel, she held her breath and recognized the sound of metal scraping on brick.

A rancher's daughter, after all, she had sat in the barn on many occasions while the horses were being shod.

A chill ran up her spine, and goosebumps claimed the skin on her arms. Anyone who intended to harm the horses living free near the crest of the mountain would feel her wrath...

The woman inched open the uncooperative door. That allowed her a view of crackling flames, and three long irons being heated. The end of one had been bent to resemble a cattle brand, she presumed.

Again, anger blended with confusion. Who, and what...

She couldn't retreat and peer through a window; the cabin lacked such amenities. A shadow played upon the unpainted wall, and gloved fingers reached for the red-hot tools.

"I wouldn't," Mustang spoke on instinct.

The figure froze, then straightened. Turning, all Mustang could make out in the firelight was a vague lean form with a shock of white hair.

"What do you want?" came the snarled question.

"Shelter for the night."

"There's no room for you here."

Mustang sniffed. Not the smell of cooked meat, but something burnt...

She pushed the door open.

And nearly fainted.

Suspended by his elbows from a sturdy hook screwed into a rafter beam, an unconscious man missing his left hand swung as if blown by a breeze. A cat-o-nine-tails whip lay beneath him, fragments of skin clinging to the leather strips.

That accounted for the shredded and bloody white t-shirt dangling from dislocated shoulders.

The irons had already been employed to sear the soles of his feet, making use of them impossible for escape. The odor Mustang had detected: singed flesh.

She advanced on him; that quickly, sizzling metal arced like a sword, barely missing her face.

"Don't interfere," warned the assassin.

"You're going to kill him?"

"He's going to suffer for what he's done."

Mustang bristled. "Short of murder, what act could he have..."

"Murder, it is."

"A Franciscan?" The woman snorted. "They're a bunch of hypocrites, I grant you, but they wouldn't..."

"This man killed my son."

A mother's angst rang through the statement. Mustang squinted at her.

Past her, to the corner near the exit, where the AR-15 rifle had been propped, with boxes of extra ammunition.

That presented no danger to someone who could melt the weapon on a whim - and had done so many times.

Wisps of smoke from where the iron contacted her jeans jarred Mustang from her reverie. This person didn't know her, didn't know her capabilities. She would not permit her to torture this man, no matter what he'd done.

"Explain," she demanded.

The culprit tossed the rod back on the glowing coals and glared at her dangling victim. “Ten years ago, this... this... predator violated the trust of everyone who knew him, everyone who relied upon him for spiritual guidance and an example of holiness. My son... my precious child... confessed to this twisted bastard that he was confused about his own sexuality. Instead of offering compassion, or advising professional counseling, he took advantage of my son’s fragile state and committed abuse of the most heinous sort...”

Mustang heard the sobs, sensed the tears. She extended her hand, but the assassin recoiled.

“So, you’re making him suffer...”

“As my son suffered, wracked with guilt and shame, taking his own life the night before his high school graduation.”

Silence claimed the chamber, except for popping embers on the grate.

Mustang eventually asked, “Why kill all the others?”

“They were complicit in his crime,” she moaned. “When I reported what had taken place, they ignored me, intimidated me, almost cost me my career by claiming I was mentally ill. They would not remove this... piece of trash from ministry. They actually elected him to a position of authority, which is why he’s here.”

“But, the hand...”

“There’s a quote in Matthew’s Gospel: ‘If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.’”

“You cut off his left hand.”

“He’s left handed.”

In a way, it made sense, Mustang admitted to herself. Some overly zealous sorts took their respective scriptures literally...

Which meant, the irons heating in the fire would be used to burn out this Franciscan’s eyes.

Mustang swallowed hard. “What are you going to do with that branding iron?”

The anguished mother fetched it from its perch. “It’s the letter P. Burned into his cheek, it will show the world he’s a predator.”

A bit medieval for Mustang’s taste, but the man would never be able to show himself in public - if he could walk, if he survived.

Her sole option: use her powers to end this debacle.

“Hello in the cabin!”

A quick glance into the dark outside showed dozens of flashlights bobbing between the trees.

Paul Harrison had brought the cavalry.

Mustang muttered, "Oh, hell!"

## IV

"Paul!" the woman cried a second before the door slammed.

Mustang Duryea grabbed her shoulders, compelling her attention. "You're Erica Harrison, aren't you?"

A stiff nod served as the reply.

"You've got about two minutes to get him down and let me heal him, before you go to jail for the rest of your life."

"It would be worth it..." Erica asserted.

"For you, sure. Would it be fair to Paul? He's a good man, a talented man. You going through arrest, trial and sentencing would destroy him."

The Army officer deliberated briefly. "All right."

With surprising dexterity, Erica hoisted her victim off the hook. She deposited him on the sleeping bag Mustang had unrolled on the ground.

The priest moaned, a sign he remained among the living. As Mustang knelt beside him, assessing all his injuries in order to formulate the proper, detailed command to nature, she told her companion, "Now, go outside and talk to your husband and the police. Tell them you were on retreat, went hiking, and found this cabin. The man had been left here, and you helped him."

"Why? Won't they... pin the other murders on me?"

"No. They want to pin them on me."

Erica resisted. "I can't let an innocent person..."

"They'll never catch me. I promise. Go on."

"If I can't treat these wounds, how can you..." protested the nurse.

"That's for me to know."

The sound of footsteps and arguments grew nearer. Erica slipped outdoors and confronted the approaching crowd.

Mustang could see through the crack how Paul embraced his wife. Their conversation was muffled by the discontented Italian of the Carabinieri squad.

Once the group calmed, Paul translated Erica's statements into Italian.

Mustang grinned at the realization she'd never need anyone to do that for her, thanks to her power.

She'd never need anyone.

The grin twisted into a frown.

With a sigh, she resumed her ministrations to this pedophile. He didn't deserve such kindness, she acknowledged. Anyone who made children suffer - a life of suffering, having to deal with such heinous memories - should be made to suffer himself.

Mustang understood Erica's logic. That her son committed suicide due to his anguish heaped a whole other crime on the Franciscan's shoulders.

That others who pledged to follow St. Francis - and failed miserably - protected such fools raised her ire. He should be dead...

His wiry frame suddenly engulfed by a seizure, he clutched at his chest, unable to breathe. Mustang observed his pending demise for a moment, before apologizing aloud. "Just heal him," she muttered. "Everything except his hand, his tongue, and his memory. He'll never talk again, never tell what happened to him. But his punishment will be obvious to all."

Trusting the forces of nature to fulfill her wish, she located a loose plank on the cabin's rear wall, ducking out just as the Carabinieri burst through the front door.

Mustang watched the scene from her perch on a sturdy tree branch some 50 yards up the mountain. Paul and Erica Harrison safely off to the side, officers and men rigged up a stretcher from supplies in the hut, and started the long process of carrying the Franciscan down to the road, where an ambulance would be waiting - given its progress from Assisi, lights flashing through the darkness.

A stern basso profundo could be heard interrogating the Harrisons about their knowledge of the priest's injuries and his presence in the shack. As instructed, Erica lied that she had sought shelter after getting lost on the slope. Paul confirmed he had stumbled across the first cave, then gone searching for his wife.

"What about this red-headed woman?" demanded the Carabinieri sergeant.

Paul responded, "I left her on the trail."

"Then, come morning, I will send a detail to find her."

Just what Mustang didn't need.

"Oh, hell."

"But, sir, she was with me when we heard the priest's scream," Paul interjected. "She could not be responsible..."

"Will you testify to that in court?" pressed the Carabinieri.

"I will swear out an affidavit. I'm leaving Italy next week."

The pause raised Mustang's heart rate.

"That will do."

Her relieved sigh frightened nearby birds, which flew skyward in the night.

Dismounting the tree, Mustang waited until the trio's shoes could no longer be heard on the trail. She had noticed smoke still rising from the cabin's chimney; the authorities had not bothered to secure the structure, or extinguish the fire on the grate.

She would do it herself.

As she discovered upon reentering the decrepit hut, more needed done than just smothering embers on the hearth. Light from the kerosene lantern illuminated irons resting among the coals, the cat-o-nine-tails, the AR-15 and ammunition, blood splattered on the walls and dirt floor, even an open surgical kit on the lopsided table with scalpels, forceps and other instruments a nurse or doctor would use...

For what?

In addition to burning out his eyes and branding him a pedophile, had Erica Harrison intended to commit other acts of vengeance?

The castration instrument - she'd seen it used on horses at her parents' ranch many times - propped in the far corner seemed to indicate such plans.

In a flash, with just a muttered instruction, all of it disintegrated.

Having left no evidence of Erica's crimes, Mustang closed the cabin's door so even a powerful wind could not blow it open.

She yawned, and her stomach grumbled. This long, long day wasn't yet over. She had to descend Mount Subasio in order to find herself a bed.

That lengthy trek gave her an opportunity to review her actions. She could not resolve why she had permitted Erica to escape justice for murdering 142 men and torturing the last. Even if her husband's career as composer and symphony conductor wound up jeopardized, his reputation tarnished, the truth should have been disclosed.

Sunrise brought with it unusual activity through the heart of Assisi. A long caravan of hearses and other oversized vehicles passed from the Piazza del Comune along the winding road leading toward Santa Maria degli Angeli.

The bodies of the deceased Franciscans had been released by the coroner, Mustang surmised, and would be taken to Rome, flown back to their respective countries for burial.

What a horrendous waste of money.

"I agree," stated Francis as the woman ascended toward San Rufino.

"Why don't they just dig a huge grave and drop them all in together?"

"Sentiment, I supposed, *Signorina*. Funerals are, after all, for the living, not the dead."

“What about all the mumbo-jumbo and prayers spoken by the priest over the caskets?”

“The soul has already reached its final reward long before that happens so, again, it is a way to comfort the living.”

Mustang paused at the door leading to narrow stairs of her lodgings. “What was their eternal reward?”

“Nothing so simple as heaven or hell,” Francis replied. “They will be tortured by unending regret for their failure to properly deal with the sins of their brothers.”

“It’s own kind of hell.”

“Indeed, *Signorina*.”

“Then, not having the murderer prosecuted is...”

“She, too, will be pricked by her conscience for the rest of her life.”

“And the survivor?”

“He is recovering in the Ospedale di Assisi.”

“I want to see him.”

Francis hesitated as she unlocked the apartment door. “Why?”

“To confirm I’m doing the right thing.”

Crossing the threshold, Mustang could not mistake that the Carabinieri had searched the flat - probably searching for the AR-15, the sole link with the murders. Before she went anywhere, she needed to clean up their mess, shower and rest a bit.

Mid-afternoon found her hiking to the hospital on the city’s outskirts. Not many tourists wandered the lanes or populated the shops - unusual.

Then, gazing down at the valley, she saw crowds overflowing the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli. Some manner of memorial service was being held, and the tourists had become rubber-neckers, hoping for a glimpse of the dead.

For the living, precisely, Mustang sniffed. All too soon, the corpses would be dust.

Dust contained in expensive coffins, shipped via airlines to destinations near and far. She shuddered at the amount of time, paperwork and expense - for what?

An armed, uniformed guard at the hospital’s main entrance puzzled Mustang. He maneuvered his rifle into a salute as she approached.

“May I help you?” Not a friendly offer.

“I’m here to visit one of the patients.”

“No visitors allowed until Monday.”

Hazel eyes squinted. “Why?”

“An ongoing investigation involves one of the patients, who may still be in danger.”

“Thank you.”

Mustang retreated along the street, considering options. She could let the whole matter slide and go about her business...

Curiosity won the day. The guard distracted with another potential visitor, she muttered a command unlocking the employee entrance and located the surgical dressing room. There, she commandeered a set of green scrubs and pulled them over her jeans and t-shirt.

Another challenge arose when Mustang realized the difficulty of finding a patient whose name she did not know. Attempting not to betray her ignorance of the facility, she strolled each of the five floors, finding two Carabinieri positioned near a door on the uppermost level.

Given the abandoned state of the nurses station, Mustang wondered if the floor had been cleared as an additional security measure. She hovered near the desk, pretending to read charts hanging in a metal file, watching the room with one eye.

No one came, and no one went. After an hour, two fresh officers emerged from the stairwell - changing the guards.

Mustang rose fifteen minutes later, casually carrying a chart toward the room.

“What is it?” barked the short, burly figure.

“Time for the patient’s medication.”

His comrade opened the door; it closed automatically.

Alone in a dim chamber, cheap plastic shades obscured most of the evening light.

Behind a curtain suspended from hooks on a ceiling track, the shadow of a figure connected to intravenous tubes and heart monitors, head slightly raised on the adjustable bed, presented no threat.

The drawn countenance she had briefly seen in the cabin on Mount Subasio now lay in repose, obviously sedated. Bandages covered the left wrist, where the hand had been severed. No other injuries remained; plastic bags held blood and fluids, the respective ports allowing them to flow into his arms.

No time for formalities. Mustang roughly shook his shoulder, instructing nature to wake him from the drug-induced slumber.

Grey eyes fluttered open; he glanced around, a confused expression creating wrinkles on forehead and cheeks.

“Right now, you can’t speak,” Mustang informed him. “But you can nod your head. Did you molest that boy six years ago?”

Lips pursed noncommittally.

“Look, buddy. Your robes won’t protect you. I want the truth, or you’ll die this instant.”

The affirmative gesture could have been evidence of a nervous tick.

“Was he the only one?” Mustang pressed.

The priest shook his head side to side.

“And your superiors did nothing?”

A nod.

“Then, they deserved to die, and so do you.” Mustang faced the window, deliberating.

“*Signorina*, no!”

Whether the patient’s horrified mien originated with the prospect of death, or the vision of St. Francis in his tattered, patched robe, the woman did not bother to determine.

“Your followers do not follow you, Francis,” she objected. “If they won’t be expelled from your Order, they should be eliminated.”

“Let this one serve as an example to the others,” the Little Poor Man pleaded. “He can bring about change...”

“Tell me how, please? With most of the leadership dead, those comfort-loving, irresponsible over-aged adolescents will simply elect others who continue to allow them to do as they please, without consequences.”

“What would you have me do?”

“You? Nothing. But, every one of them who harmed a child, spoke or behaved inappropriately, or broke their vows would bear a mark proclaiming their shame, so the masses would know not to place one ounce of trust in them.”

From his bed, the patient thrashed and mouthed words his silenced tongue could not articulate.

“See how you are traumatizing this man?” Francis protested.

Mustang snarled, “Traumatizing, hell. He’s guilty; he knows it, and he fears for his life.”

“Do you want another death on your conscience?”

“I’ll spend my eternity regretting my actions, starting with flying to Scotland to meet Jack Parsons. What’s one more?”

“At least, let him speak his peace before you...”

“What, and plead for forgiveness, make excuses, or persist in his lies?”

Francis neared the bed. “You’re not God!”

“There is no god!”

Her rage manifested as a microburst of wind, which blew open the window, blinds crashing to the floor. The patient tried to scream, a soundless exhalation.

The heart monitor went wild, electronic signals showing a cardiac arrest in progress. Shrill alarms pierced the air; Carabinieri rushed through the door...

By the time emergency personnel arrived, the Franciscan on the bed could not be revived.

Mustang and Francis descended the last steps of the fire escape as a squad of police piled from a van at the hospital’s entrance.

Local, national and international news media reported the death of the sole witness to what became known as the “Franciscan Massacre”. Mustang discounted the stories, knowing the Carabinieri - like the FBI and Interpol - would continue to dog her steps whenever an unexplained crime occurred.

A chance copy of the *New York Times* left at a sidewalk café caught the woman’s eye one Saturday morning: a review of Paul Harrison’s concerto, which had premiered at Carnegie Hall, simultaneous to the tragic death of his wife, Army Colonel Erica Harrison, in a freak skiing accident near the base in Germany.

Justice, albeit delayed, had been served.

As autumn approached and the number of tourists dwindled, Mustang enjoyed games of chess with St. Francis in the evening.

“It doesn’t matter how that happened,” the wise man stated as they basked in the pastel hues of a glorious sunset. “You still need to improve your self control.”

“I know, I know.”

With a sigh, she moved the white queen to checkmate him.