

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Threatened Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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## I

Alfredo Portolisi pointed across the Piazza del Comune, past an ornate fountain where late-season tourists idled, to archways where a small group huddled in consultation.

“They requested the best tour guide I know,” related the squat Italian shopkeeper. “Which is why I sent Carlo...”

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea didn’t need to lead travelers around the ancient city of Assisi to pay for her next meal these days, not since Brit Leslie Steiner bequeathed her a substantial sum for services rendered. She’d sequestered herself in her apartment overlooking the Piazza San Rufino, wishing she’d never acquiesced to Johnny Rosemont’s plea that she appear in his biographical film on St. Francis.

The unwelcome attention that venture periodically caused proved most annoying.

Tucking auburn strands beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, and tucking her Pink Floyd t-shirt into her jeans, the woman grunted. “They didn’t ask for me by name?”

“No, Signorina,” Portolisi assured her.

Perhaps wealthy, or just willing to spend their time and money wisely, decided Mustang, gauging the unpretentious jackets and slacks worn by the four women and two men. She traversed the square and approached with her face well shielded from the mid-day sun.

Abruptly she halted, when an elderly, yet familiar, couple turned toward her.

Rolf and Greta Steckling, Austrian mystery writers, a number of whose novels Johnny Rosemont had brought to the silver screen.

Mustang instantly suspected another set-up.

Until the corpulent Greta enveloped the younger woman’s slender frame in a powerful embrace. “My dear Lady Elizabeth! So good to see you!” the former fashion designer babbled in German, which Mustang heard in English, thanks to the powers Jack Parsons had passed to her years before.

“What... are you doing here?” she countered, working free of the hug.

Rolf, more rotund than Mustang remembered, supplied, “We’re researching our latest novel, of course!”

“Here?”

“Why not?” his smiling wife beamed.

“I... um... no reason why you shouldn’t...”

Their tawny haired, very pregnant companion faced Mustang. “Don’t let them snow you, Lady Elizabeth. They came to see you.”

Mustang’s jaw gaped. She hadn’t seen Kathleen Fitzwalter since the victim of domestic abuse had visited Boleskine House. “If that’s true, who told them I was here?”

There could be only one answer: Johnny Rosemont. Mustang tried not to show her displeasure at his failure to keep her most precious secret.

“Are you still keeping these two organized?” prodded the tour guide, struggling to sound nonchalant.

Rolf chuckled. “She left us last year to marry an American serviceman.”

Who proceeded to reveal his identity, confounding Mustang further. “Lyndon Bixby White?”

In his youth, he’d come to Scotland, too, on a quest to learn about his father’s death. He still wore oversized wire-rimmed spectacles, his dark hair shimmering bronze in the sunlight, now accented with grey strands.

“Good to see you, Mustang,” he grinned.

She sank against the stone arch, her mind racing. “What’s this all about?”

“Like I said: we’re researching a novel,” commented the sandy-maned Rolf.

A third female, crowned with raven curls, clarified, “In Venice, to be exact.”

At least, Mustang didn’t recognize her.

“Lady Elizabeth, this is my cousin, Ludmilla Ouspenskaya,” Greta introduced them. “And her daughter, Ivana.”

The three clasped hands in succession.

“Ludmilla moved to Salzburg from St. Petersburg when Kathleen left us for Don. She’s a widow, and the living conditions in Austria are far better than in Russia.”

“How come you to have a Russian cousin, Greta?” queried Mustang.

“My mother’s sister, caught in East Germany when the country was divided after World War II, married a Russian architect, who eventually took her back to Moscow.”

Made sense. What didn’t make sense was why the six had descended upon Assisi.

Mustang would worry about that later. “What do you want to see?”

“Everything,” Ivana tittered, a painfully thin, blonde teenager.

“This is my daughter’s first trip outside Russia,” explained Ludmilla. “She’s been in school...”

“We’d better get started, then,” Mustang remarked. “Otherwise, we’ll never get done by sunset.”

As the group meandered through byways and lanes of the historic city, Mustang ignored Greta’s repeated attempts to engage her in conversation. Since the first time she’d met the Stecklings, at a casino in Monte Carlo, she’d considered them friends. When Kathleen Fitzwalter needed employment, she called upon them for assistance. A chance meeting in the Vienna airport eight years earlier, while she accompanied Johnny Rosemont on a promotional tour for one of his movies, had led to the authors’ increased success, in print and in film.

Thus, the dynamic of their relationship had been transformed into something less... comfortable.

Not the least bit comfortable encountering Don White again, either. After she’d manifested his deceased father at Boleskine over a chilly Christmas holiday, allowing the pair a degree of closure, the young man had vanished while she slept.

“I recall that expression,” he whispered in her ear as the others preceded them down the steep incline to the Church of San Damiano. “It’s the same one you favored me with the first time you saw me trespassing on your property.”

“You’ve got a good memory.”

“You’ve got a short one. You don’t think you can trust me - us?”

“You pop up without prior warning, when no one’s supposed to know my whereabouts... That usually means you need a favor.”

“Me? No. I’m eternally grateful to you, if you care to know. If you hadn’t done what you did for me, I wouldn’t have gone back to Rhode Island with my head on straight, done four years ROTC in college, and made the Air Force my career.”

“I’m happy for you...”

Don smirked. “I sense a ‘but’.”

“But, how’d you meet Kathleen?”

“I was stationed in Germany for three years, and made a point to travel while on leave. We met in a Salzburg tavern.”

“Will this be your first child?” Mustang wondered.

“Yes. We waited until...”

“That’s not what I meant.”

He slipped his muscular arm around her shoulders. “I know.”

“Where are you living now?”

“Rhode Island. We came back when Rolf and Greta phoned us about... coming here.”

“Why did they come?”

“Last month, a certain actor with whom I believe you’re associated closed negotiations for the rights to their latest series of novels. Greta asked him if he’d seen you since... the Francis pic.”

“And he told her I lived here?”

He nodded, his wild hair wind-blown, as she remembered.

“Damn him,” Mustang muttered.

Rolf called, “Hurry, you two!”

They increased their pace down the slope.

All the while, Mustang deliberated melting the landing gear on the Monster, Johnny Rosemont’s aircraft, causing an accident which would permanently remove him from her life. Or, rather than bring death and destruction to innocent bystanders, give him a case of hives, so the itching would drive him over the edge.

“Are you okay?” Kathleen puzzled with a trace of Irish brogue, when they entered the tiny church where St. Francis had heard Christ’s voice speaking from the icon-like crucifix.

“Frankly, no,” responded Mustang. “What about you? When are you due?”

“December first. Being pregnant over the summer, though, I almost wished for the baby to be premature.”

“I can’t commiserate, because I’ve never...”

“You didn’t marry?”

Mustang managed a chuckle. “Could you see me having an argument with my husband, and bringing the roof down on our heads?”

“You put so much effort into controlling your... abilities, even when I first met you. Is it still difficult?”

“Not as bad as it was then. If I get angry, though, it’s very much within my capacity to do horrible things, even now.”

“What you did to Andre Desrosiers saved my life,” Kathleen praised. “And, what you did for Don gave us a common bond...”

“I’d love to have been a fly on the wall when *that* came up in the conversation!”

“When Don met Rolf and Greta, they told him how I was hired, and the four of us exchanged stories...”

“Oh, hell.”

Mustang could imagine not just the Stecklings writing her into their plots, as they’d warned her they would do, but spreading tales of her accidental mishaps at cocktail parties and formal dinners.

Two Franciscan friars in brown robes appeared from the cloister and advised the group the doors would soon be closing for the evening. That meant trudging back up the hill to Assisi, and Mustang was ready for a hearty dinner - alone.

“But, you must join us!” insisted Greta. “We’ve so much to talk about, so much catching up to do!”

The need to be polite irked Mustang; she’d longed to be a hermit at Boleskine, except people kept invading her privacy. She’d had six years of relative peace in Assisi, but the past year had reopened the can of worms she thought had been sealed shut.

She directed them to her least favorite restaurant. A seat between Ludmilla and Ivana placed her directly opposite Don, whose brown orbs flecked with grey never left her face through the antipasto, pasta, gelatto, and multiple bottles of chianti.

Mustang ignored him, but not the reminiscence of a passionate kiss on the hill above Boleskine House, near Parsons’ rotting altar.

“So, Ludmilla,” she distracted herself, “you came along to take notes for Greta and Rolf?”

The Russian smiled. “My friends call me Millie.”

“Millie,” complied Mustang.

“This is a working vacation, as Americans call it. A chance to be with my daughter, and a chance to get closer to the truth surrounding my husband’s death.”

Caught off guard, Mustang stammered, “I’m sorry...”

“Thank you.”

“How did he...”

“That is precisely what I do not know, Lady Elizabeth,” Millie said. “I only know the where and when.”

“Then, where?”

“Scotland.”

Mustang’s chest tightened. “When?”

“Nine years ago.”

Feigning calm, Mustang continued, “He had traveled there on business?”

“If you call being a spy ‘business’.”

The Assisi resident didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until she exhaled loudly. “A spy?”

“Gregor was recruited by the KGB before the Soviet Union dissolved. He remained in intelligence work, his proficiency in English and Mandarin Chinese a decided asset to the new government.”

Mustang reached for her wine glass, fingers trembling.

“When I married him, I understood he would travel extensively, and often need to pry information from both men and women, using... unconventional methods. I knew he placed himself in danger every day. I just never expected...”

Ivana reached behind Mustang to squeeze her mother’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Mama. Don’t cry.”

Millie drew a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her leather handbag, dabbing her eyes. “Excuse me, Lady Elizabeth. I still grieve his loss.”

“I sympathize with you, having lost many close friends in recent years.”

“If I could only discover what happened in his last moments, but there wasn’t even a mention in the Scottish media about the incident.”

“There wouldn’t be,” drawled Mustang. “Politicians are very good at covering up... unpleasant situations.”

“In our last phone call, from Edinburgh, he told me he’d bring me a souvenir from Loch Ness. After that, nothing.”

The tour guide choked on a bite of garlic bread. Don scrambled around the oval table, prepared to administer the Heimlich maneuver, when the blockage cleared on its own.

“Thanks, anyway, Don,” she growled.

He retreated with a differential bow.

Rolf filled a crystal goblet with water, urging her to drink. She appreciated the gesture, giving her time to calculate how - or if - to tell Ludmilla Ouspenskaya that her husband most likely died as a result of a conflagration between agents from many nations, converging on Boleskine House to whisk her into custody, subjecting her to life as the ultimate secret weapon.

She couldn’t predict the widow’s reaction. For that matter, Millie could also be a Russian spy, intent on completing her husband’s long-dormant mission.

Mustang hid her head in her hands, auburn tresses obscuring her face. “Oh, hell.”

## II

“Too much vino, Lady Elizabeth?” Rolf Steckling probed, dabbing his ample chin with a red linen napkin.

Too little, she mused, eying the half-full glass. Too little to dull the anguish already welling in her heart.

Damn Johnny Rosemont for flapping his yap so freely, when he *knew* she wanted to stay under the radar.

Greta slid away from the table, rising awkwardly. Don offered his arm to support her bulk.

“No, no, dear boy,” she chided. “See to your wife. She looks quite peaked.”

Indeed, Kathleen resembled a sea-sick sailor, desperately in need of the nearest railing. Don helped her to her terribly swollen feet.

“Will you be safe getting home?” he inquired of Mustang.

“Sure. This is my town; there are plenty of shortcuts.”

Millie and Ivana followed her to the exit as Rolf settled the bill. “We’re lodging at a hotel in the Piazza Santa Chiara,” announced the mother.

“Sounds... pleasant,” Mustang responded, as a courtesy.

“The beds are rock-hard,” complained Ivana. “The pillows make me sneeze.”

“This time of year, with St. Francis’ feast day coming up, there aren’t many high-end hotels with vacancies.”

Millie sighed, “We learned that when I started checking travel websites last week.”

“Last week?” echoed their tour guide. “You mean, Johnny Rosemont was in Austria...”

“Oh, no!” Greta interspersed. “We met with him during our Los Angeles layover in April. It was only natural we should discuss you, because you brought us together.”

Something for Mustang to regret.

The group moved along the dim Via San Francesco, a magnificent Umbrian sunset long since faded. Few other tourists passed them, unaccustomed to eating according to the Italian schedule.

Deep breaths of fresh mountain air soothed Kathleen’s queasiness and, ungallantly, Don foisted her off on Rolf, opting to accompany Mustang to the Piazza San Rufino, above which her apartment waited.

Pausing at a narrow intersection, they watched their companions vanish into the darkness. Then, the woman whirled on her escort.

“You’ll be getting an earful when you get to the hotel, and I don’t blame Kathleen one bit.”

“If she felt better, she’d be standing here, as well. We’ve much to discuss.”

Groaning, Mustang led him along the stone-paved lane. In fact, she didn’t speak again until he’d positioned himself on the battered love seat in the two-room flat, puffing from the three-flight climb.

“Spit it out, already.”

Lyndon Bixby White noticed the chess board on the small kitchen table, an unfinished game in progress. "Your... old friends... provide you with a challenge now and again?"

"Yes."

He licked his lips, cracked his knuckles, and avoided her gaze.

"Dammit, Don, get on with it!"

"All right, all right!" He straightened. "You suspect Millie."

"I... suppose."

"The only reason she came to work for Greta and Rolf is because they happened to mention you were living in Scotland when her husband was killed."

"That much, I deduced. What's the rest?"

"She thinks you might be able to shed light on the circumstances, based on casual remarks Rolf made one evening..."

"What kind of 'casual remarks'?"

"He mentioned your... skill at the craps table in Monte Carlo, and hinted at other mysterious behavior."

"Loosely translated, he told her about my power."

Don shrugged.

"From what she told me, all the records dealing with the incident at Boleskine nine years ago have been sealed... or destroyed."

"What incident?"

Twirling a wooden chair around, Mustang straddled it like a horse. "An agent named Han Feng - who I'd met in Beijing - was sent to... recruit me on behalf of the communists. Evidently, assorted other governments, Russia included, refused to let China get their hands on me, dispatching their own men to intercept Han and capture me first. The damage caused by my rage... ravaged a wide swath of Loch Ness' eastern shore. When the spies converged on Boleskine for the final confrontation, many dead bodies resulted."

"Wow," was the sole reaction Don could muster, peering at her over his wire-rimmed spectacles. "And I thought that earthquake when we kissed..."

Mustang snickered. "A drop in the bucket."

"Millie... won't be happy."

"Her husband took the risk."

"Like I risked coming to you..."

"You need to concentrate on your wife and child, Don."

"She's my wife, but it's not my child."

"Eh?" snorted his host.

“Kathleen and I have been friends since we met in Salzburg. I was being transferred stateside this March, and my buddies threw me a party. I invited her, because Rolf and Greta had been on a book tour for three months, and I figured she was bored. That night, I got drunk, and she was raped by one of my fellow officers. Too embarrassed to press charges, when she found out she was pregnant, I married her to keep things respectable.”

“Oh, hell.”

“She hoped she’d have a miscarriage, but everything is going as well as can be expected.”

“Except, you don’t love her, and she doesn’t love you.”

“Mustang, I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you.” He inched toward her. “And you haven’t changed a bit these many years.”

“You were young and foolish then, Don. Don’t be an old fool. Nothing’s changed for me; I can wreak havoc in a heartbeat, and those closest to me wind up dead.”

“Not Johnny Rosemont.”

Mustang swallowed self-consciously. “We’ve...”

“Made a movie together, been featured on the cover of tabloids - though you gave a false name...”

Sensing Don would not be deterred, she smiled sweetly. If he kissed her, *sans* earthquake, the thrill might dissipate and he would return to his previous obligations a wiser man.

“You’re right. I... make excuses to hide from men, to conceal my emotions. When my grandfather cursed me with this ‘gift’, my plans for a normal life evaporated. Marriage and family included.”

“There’s nothing normal about you, Mustang. That’s why I love you.”

He encircled her waist with powerful arms, and smothered her mouth with his. Her fingers entwined in his dark bronze mane; visions of their first kiss flooded her mind.

Don withdrew in order to lock his brown, grey-flecked eyes on hers. “Has every man you’ve met wanted you this way?”

“They wanted my power, and thought by taking my body...”

“My father didn’t want your power... he wanted *you*.” Slowly, his lips caressed her neck.

“Is that what he told you when I...”

“The night we went bar hopping.”

“He wanted me to cure him. He wanted to be normal, too.”

“Instead, you killed him.”

“I... couldn’t save him. I was too young...”

“You can save *me*.”

“How?”

“We can go away together.”

Mustang glared at him. “Your Air Force career...”

“I’m on six weeks’ leave. We could share paradise, before I report to my new duty station...”

Tempted to give him a lesson he wouldn’t soon forget, Mustang broke from Don’s grasp and crossed to open the door. “Get out,” she snarled.

“But...”

“If you don’t want me to do something dreadful, get out before I explode, and the building with me!”

Detecting a threatening fire in her hazel orbs, Don scrambled from the apartment, tripping twice on his way down the unlit staircase.

Ivana, wearing a fringed pink leather jacket against the evening chill, observed the scene from the threshold.

“How long have you been eavesdropping?” accused Mustang.

“Long enough.”

The flat’s tenant did not invite this guest to enter. “You’re not Millie’s biological daughter.”

“How...”

“I nearly flunked high school biology, but I remember dark hair is dominant in human beings.”

“Very astute. Ludmilla adopted me after my parents were killed in a raid on a dissident hideout.”

“Odd.”

Ivana countered, “Not really. The number of orphans in my country exceeds the facilities available for their care. Many single women...”

“This happened after her husband...”

“She has no husband. Never did.”

Mustang realized her uncertainty about Millie’s story was justified. She’d been lying.

“Pyotr and Ludmilla became lovers shortly before he left for Scotland. He postponed proposing marriage, believing he would return to be lauded by government officials for his outstanding accomplishment. Besides, the intelligence services did not approve of their agents... fraternizing off-duty.”

“So, she is...”

Ivana smirked, making her face appear much thinner.

Finally, Mustang waved her inside, closing the door. “Why tell me this?”

“She cajoled Rolf and Greta into coming here, when their research actually took them to Venice.”

“Is she really Greta’s cousin?”

“Yes. That much is true.”

“And the rest?”

“Ludmilla will act on one of two plans she devised: either kidnap you and transport you to Moscow, or avenge Pyotr’s murder.”

“I didn’t kill the man!”

“You know who did.”

“Honestly, no. I fought a Russian in hand-to-hand combat that day, but his worst injury was a collection of thorns in his backside.” Mustang considered. “You don’t talk like a teenager. How old are you, really?”

“I’m 27. Because of my... youthful features, I am often assigned to collect incriminating information from students in the upper classes at the trade schools.”

“Joined the family business, did you?”

“Why not? It’s one way I may be able to escape the poverty which persists in my country.”

“Now, who’s talking like a dissident?”

“It’s not traitorous to wish a good life for oneself. Who killed Pyotr?”

“At minimum, six dozen agents descended on my property that day. Any one of them could have killed Pyotr as he fled the killer rabbits.”

Ivana’s nose crinkled. “Killer rabbits?”

“Never mind. Point is: I last saw him alive, albeit bruised. I never knew his name.”

“That won’t satisfy Ludmilla.”

“I guessed as much.” Mustang flopped on the love seat. “What next?”

“Surrender to me, and I’ll protect you from her wrath.”

“Surrender, why? What do *you* intend to do with me?”

“If I succeed where Pyotr and Ludmilla fail, I will receive the reward they were promised, and more.”

“Reward?”

“A total equivalent to five million dollars.”

The ludicrous nature of the situation, a throw-back to the chaos of Boleskine... “It was just a matter of time,” murmured Mustang, rising.

“Don’t!” the baritone came from a shadowy, diminutive figure in the room’s far corner.

“What are my options, Francis? Start the cycle of running and hiding all over again?”

“You can erase her memory...”

“And Rolf’s, Greta’s and the rest? To constantly cover my tracks...” A clenched fist slammed into the wall. “I won’t do it!”

“Who... are you talking to?” Ivana demanded, scanning the flat.

Mustang’s muscles tensed. “None of your business. None of this is your business. You’d have been better off learning from Pyotr’s fate and staying far from me.”

“You cannot...”

“Oh, can’t I?” For the first time, using a sweeping motion of her arms - much as magicians did in movies - Mustang propelled Ivana Ouspenskaya through the air and out the open window overlooking the Piazza San Rufino. The Russian agent let out a petrified scream, cut short when she landed on the stones near the church entrance, neck broken.

Francis warned, “There’ll be an investigation.”

“So what? They can’t trace anything to me.”

“Unless Ludmilla reveals the true reason she came to Assisi.”

“She won’t, for fear of reprisals in Moscow. The Carabinieri will determine Ivana was wandering drunk in the middle of the night, and accidentally fell to her death.”

“You underestimate them.”

“You - knowing me so well - underestimate *me*.”

The Saint of Assisi raised his hands, conceding the argument. An instant later, he vanished.

Mustang would have to deal with the guilt on her own, and was content with that.

She sank on the wooden kitchen chair. Five million dollars, she mused. What man - or woman - would do for money... Pathetic, simply pathetic.

Laying her head on her arms, she slept, waking when a pounding shook the floor and walls.

Lyndon Bixby White, accompanied by Rolf and Greta Steckling, and Ludmilla Ouspenskaya, confronted her when she pulled the warped panel inward.

“What’s wrong?” yawned Mustang.

Rolf rumbled, “Ivana’s dead.”

The best attempt to look surprised failed. “I...”

“Right outside your building!” Millie shrieked. “You murderer!”

Greta whispered soothing platitudes to her cousin, in vain.

“What did you...” hinted Don.  
Mustang admitted, “Protect myself.”  
“Ivana would harm no one!” her mother wept.  
“Unless Russian intelligence instructed her to do so.”  
Four sets of eyes focused on Mustang.  
“Where’s Kathleen?” she queried.  
Don replied, “At the hotel. She needs a doctor badly. The baby...”  
“And you’re horsing around with this stupidity?” Insistent hands shoved him along the corridor. “Get her to Rome, or back to the States.”  
Reluctantly, the man shuffled toward the stairs.  
Mustang glowered at the rest. “Get out of here, all of you. Leave Assisi. I never want to see you again.”  
“But, Lady Elizabeth!” pleaded Rolf. “We are due an explanation.”  
“If anything, you owe *me* an explanation, for bringing spies to disrupt my life!”  
With that, she slammed the door in their faces, secured the deadbolt, and burst into tears.

### III

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea scolded herself silently, echoing the words Francis of Assisi spoke over an afternoon chess game. Her heart not in the strategy, she abandoned the kitchenette table, searching cupboards for something tasty.  
“Though you have plenty of money in your pocket, you seldom visit the grocer’s,” the saint noted.  
“I... never had to in Scotland. They brought out the same order every week or two.”  
“Peanut butter, jelly and bread.”  
The giggle slipped out. “Just because I like simple food doesn’t mean I didn’t eat healthy.”  
“Good to hear you laugh, even a little. This blunder could cost you all you’ve struggled to achieve...”  
“Don’t keep saying that!”  
A noise caught Mustang’s attention; she signaled Francis to listen.  
Slow footsteps ascended the staircase in the ancient structure. They approached the door, accompanied by labored breathing.

The feeble knock was answered promptly. “Kathleen!” exclaimed Mustang, pulling the pregnant female into the room. “You shouldn’t be exerting yourself!”

Tawny hair tousled, Kathleen sank on the nearest chair. “I had no choice...”

“You could have told Alfredo you wanted to see me, and he would’ve sent his son up to fetch me.”

“I... didn’t think of that. Not when I saw Don packing our bags.”

Mustang gulped. “Packing?”

“Rolf and Greta have rented a car for the drive back to Venice, and a flight home.”

“I’m... sorry.”

“It’s not for you to apologize. Don told me what happened and... about Ivana.”

“You understand why I must protect myself.”

“I’ve known for a long time.” Kathleen wrapped her arms around her bulging midsection. “Can I get a glass of water?”

“Sure.” Mustang hurried to the kitchen tap and filled a glass.

“What you may not know is how well your... activities over the years were reported outside of Great Britain.”

Delivering the drink, Mustang squinted. “Eh?”

Sipping the liquid, Kathleen relaxed. “Before he started writing novels, you know Rolf was a judge in Austria.”

Mustang nodded.

“He had a lot of connections with politicians, past and present. Used them to get ideas for plots, or learn the truth behind certain... scandals.”

“Not blackmail?”

“Rolf?” Kathleen guffawed. “He’s an honest, caring gentleman. But, he kept a computer journal on some unique intelligence projects he became aware of...”

The hostess blushed. “Weather anomalies?”

“Centered over Scotland.”

“Oh, hell.”

“And leaked to the media - sparking investigations of Britain’s weapons program.”

“By many different countries.”

Kathleen’s turn to nod.

This information clarified a lot of questions Mustang had pondered since the mass assembly of international agents at Boleskine nine years earlier.

A sudden, heart-wrenching groan distracted her. Kathleen had slipped off the wooden chair, curled on the floor, twitching.

Rather than bend to her, Mustang rushed to the open window and let loose a shrill whistle. She was easing Kathleen onto the love seat when a wiry, dark youngster bustled through the door.

“Carlo, fetch the doctor!” instructed Mustang.

“Si, Signorina.”

“No! No!” Kathleen protested feebly.

“Don’t be silly, woman. For the sake of the baby...”

“The baby’s dead.”

Mustang recoiled. “What?”

“I’ve... felt no movement in over a week. I think... I’m having a miscarriage.”

“All the more reason...”

Kathleen attempted to stand. “I... just want to go home.”

She collapsed, unconscious, into Mustang’s arms.

Stretched on the twin bed in the adjoining room, Kathleen’s features appeared tranquil when the grisled neighborhood physician arrived. Mustang related her symptoms, and the man took his patient’s pulse with gnarled fingers.

“She is gravely ill,” he concluded. “She must go to hospital immediately, or you will lose her, too.”

Mustang withdrew, ordering Carlo to find Lyndon Bixby White, Rolf and Greta Steckling at their hotel. The doctor was phoning for an ambulance on his mobile when she returned to the bedside.

Kathleen’s eyelids fluttered, and she managed a smile. “I... don’t mean to be such a nuisance.”

“Rest,” advised the older man, which Mustang translated for her guest.

“Save your strength, Kathleen. Don will be here soon.”

“I...”

“Hush!” Settling on the mattress beside her, she patted the swollen hand. “I know all about it. You and Don...”

“I never should have given in to him!” moaned Kathleen. “I’m too old to be having my first child, whoever the father is!”

“It’s not my place to say you’re right or wrong...”

“The whole reason I came on this trip was because I hoped... I hoped...”

The doctor intervened. “She must not get excited.”

Mustang tried to soothe her. “Kathleen, everything will be fine.”

“It would have been.” Tears streamed down the pregnant woman’s face.  
“If you had cured the baby.”  
Hazel eyes widened. “Cured... the baby?”  
“The last ultrasound showed... a deformity...”  
Don bolted in, paramedics on his heels. Mustang hadn’t heard the siren...  
“What happened?” panted the husband.  
The doctor replied, “Miscarriage.”  
Don’s reaction shocked Mustang. Two strides had him inches from her, a powerful hand gripping her t-shirt. “Did you do this because... because...”  
Grit teeth prevented the woman from saying what popped into her head, which would have brought the ceiling down on the group.  
“No, Donnie,” Kathleen muttered. “I knew... before we got to Venice...”  
He dropped to his knees. “Why didn’t you say anything?”  
“I... hoped...”  
Mustang left the crowded chamber, allowing the professionals and the doctor to get Kathleen safely to the ambulance idling in the piazza. She watched the vehicle navigate narrow streets from a vantage point three flights up, angry at herself.  
“This was not your doing,” declared Francis, visible now they were alone.  
“Her assessment of the matter was correct. Nearly 40 is too old...”  
“They don’t love each other.”  
“I know.”  
“They got married because of me.”  
Francis did not respond. Mustang faced him, waiting.  
“That they both had... dealings with you created a bond, but the marriage was by mutual content resulting from... a heinous crime.”  
She raged, “Why must I ruin everything I touch?”  
“Shhh...” he murmured. “You are overwrought, and when you are overwrought...”  
“I do horrible things.”  
“Indeed.”  
She strode toward the bedroom. “Don’t worry, Francis. I won’t destroy your precious city.” She wanted to slam the door, but the jamb’s deteriorated condition only made it bounce back open. Stripping off sheets, she chucked them in the closet and fell on the bare mattress, burying her head under the pillows.  
Waking two hours later, absolute silence startled her upright. Even during the Italians’ afternoon siesta, tourists would be out and about, their voices drifting from the piazza. This reminded her of youthful days in Montana when, as

precursor to a severe storm, the birds and wildlife hunkered down against wind and rain.

She cautiously peered out the kitchen window. Not a soul to be seen in the square or connecting streets.

Something was very wrong, and Mustang didn't intend to wait around and find out what.

A skylight in the bathroom gave her access to the building's roof; she crept along loose clay tiles, dropping from the edge onto an adjacent, lower domicile. Service stairs allowed her to exit onto a winding lane, which she followed to a trail she'd forged, climbing Mount Subasio to the clearing where wild horses grazed.

Here, at least, she found a modicum of peace. Feeding the magnificent beasts, their exact origins unknown, apples and carrots donated by a sympathetic shopkeeper, no turmoil could touch her.

She gazed down on the Eremo delle Carceri, where Francis had occupied caves during periods of deep contemplation. Brushing stray auburn locks from her shoulders, she grasped her inability to dwell in those tiny caverns.

Outdoors, among nature - to which her powers attuned her in bizarre and dangerous ways - she could breathe easy.

A mare nuzzled her arm with its damp nose, anxious for its share of the treats. Mustang stroked its mane tenderly. "You're beautiful, y'know?" she drawled. "I wish I had a saddle, but I don't think you'd let me ride."

She remained on the mountain's summit until nearly sunset, hoping the trouble within Assisi's walls had settled itself. Within 24 hours, she'd sent a Russian spy to her death, dissuaded another from pursuing her further, and witnessed the aftermath of a late-term miscarriage. Don, Ludmilla, Rolf and Greta should have departed for Perugia, location of the nearest hospital, so she should be safe.

Her companion on the descent set her straight on that score. "If you think anyone would willingly forfeit a chance at five million dollars..."

"Francis, why are you always so pragmatic?"

"The question should be: why aren't you? You've avoided capture multiple times these many years, through sheer pluck and intuition. You should be able to predict..."

"I ache to be an optimist, but always end up the pessimist."

The t-shirt and jean clad saint skewed his worn countenance with a sideways grin. "Humanity is bound to wallow in its own dung. It was so in my day, and remains the same today."

"Thanks, Francis," Mustang grunted.

She detoured into her favorite trattoria for a plate of gnocci and a salad prior to returning to the flat, leaving an ample tip for the friendly staff, who greeted her by name.

The owner's surprisingly trim wife, as Mustang departed, drew her aside. "The Carabinieri have been inquiring after you."

"What, again?" chuckled the younger woman. Only weeks ago, uniformed officials had tried to apprehend her and Leslie Steiner in the Piazza Santa Chiara.

"What reason did they give this time?"

"Same as always: they wish to question you about recent events." The matron passed her a plain blue headscarf. "Best to hide that red hair of yours."

"Thanks."

Stars overhead sparkled brightly when she emerged into the cool Italian night. That unusual quiet, however, remained. The restaurant had been crowded, but the streets...

"Francis?" she spoke to the gentle breeze. "What's going on?"

No answer.

If the presence of Ludmilla and Ivana Ouspenskaya had brought agents from other countries to Assisi - a repeat of the Boleskine debacle - Mustang vowed to kill every one of them in their tracks, without mercy.

The city abruptly came alight with ethereal fire. From rooftops and recessed doorways, darkly attired figures darted from concealment, begging for the flames engulfing their clothes to be extinguished.

Smirking, Mustang angrily recalled a blouse she'd purchased many years ago in Las Vegas, the voluminous sleeves presenting an image of an avenging angel when she raised her arms. Despite its absence, the woman summoned natural forces to terrorize the two dozen foreigners milling in front of the Basilica of Saint Clare by augmenting her statement, "May you rot in hell!"

A shadowy grim reaper passed among the spies, who clutched at their throats before stumbling toward the stone wall and plunging over to their deaths.

When the Carabinieri found the pile of corpses, they'd *really* want to interrogate her.

Except, they wouldn't remember where she lived.

"This abuse of your power..." chided Francis on the dim stairs to the apartment.

"What about *their* abuse of power?" Mustang countered. "I've done nothing to warrant their attention, yet they come to kidnap - or murder - me. It's self-defense."

Before opening the door, the tenant heard snoring from within. She realized the bolt hadn't been secured when she escaped through the skylight that afternoon. Who would have the gall to break in and fall asleep?

Lyndon Bixby White.

Sprawled awkwardly on the love seat, his glasses dangling from one ear, he must've been waiting most of the evening, given his rumpled shirt and trousers. She poked his shoulder. "Don, wake up."

He rolled onto the floor, recovered his senses, and cast those grey-flecked brown eyes upon her. "Oh, hi."

"Hi, yourself. What are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you Kathleen survived emergency surgery. Rolf, Greta and I will pick her up from the Perugia hospital tomorrow afternoon, then be on our way."

"What about Ludmilla?"

Don bit his lip, adjusted his spectacles.

"What?"

"We don't know. She vanished from the hotel, without paying her share of the bill, leaving no note..."

Mustang hoisted him off the boards. "Don't worry about her. She'll cause no more trouble."

"How can you be sure?"

"Read tomorrow's newspaper. I'm too tired to explain." She filled a plastic tumbler at the kitchen sink, and chugged the contents, veering toward the bedroom. "Since you let yourself in, you can let yourself out."

Don grabbed her arm. "Mustang, wait."

"We don't need to replay last night's scene."

"I want to thank you."

Mustang pulled free. "Why?"

"If you hadn't been with Kathleen when she... she would've died."

"You *do* love her, then."

"Not the same way I love you, but, yes."

"The two of you can make a good life together." Her contralto grew wistful. "The kind of life I'll never enjoy."

"May I kiss you good-bye?"

"No, Don. Just leave, and forget about me."

"That, I'll never do." He swept her hand to his lips in a gallant gesture, then made his exit.

The sensation of his kiss lingered on her skin as she instructed nature to erase all memory of her existence from his mind, Kathleen's, Rolf's and Greta's.

## IV

Mustang's sleep was plagued by weird dreams of international agents chasing her throughout Europe. Roused by the song of myriad birds, she welcomed alertness and the new day. Another crisis over, she mused, opening the sparsely stocked refrigerator.

Satisfying herself with dry cereal in a chipped bowl, she planned to hit the bakery for a real breakfast as soon as she showered and dressed. En route to the bedroom, she glimpsed a man's wallet under the coffee table.

"Oh, hell."

When Don fell off the love seat the previous night, it must have slipped from his pocket.

Rifling the contents, she could not deny the need to restore military ID, drivers license, credit cards and cash to their rightful owner.

Her whistle carried on the morning breeze, and brought a bleary-eyed, pudgy pre-teen to her door.

"Ah, Little Fredo. Where's your brother today?"

"Papa sent him to Foligno to visit Grandma."

"Any special reason?"

The boy averted his gaze.

"Fredo? What's wrong?"

"Have you not seen today's newspapers?"

"Not yet."

"The front page tells of the dead found in the valley."

"Dead?" Mustang tried not to smile.

"At least twenty."

"Who found them?"

"An olive farmer, returning late from Rome."

The tour guide had no doubt the spies would be discovered, but not so quickly. "Why send Carlo away because of that?"

"Since he heard, he'd been nagging Papa to see. Like the woman who died at San Rufino - he sneaked out to look at her before the ambulance came."

"Ah. Well, then. Maybe it's for the best."

"When he read the story, Papa swore. He said it will ruin the tourist trade."

“What will?”

“Religious cults coming here to kill themselves.”

The laugh erupted, unbidden. “Cults?”

“Si, Signorina. That is what the paper reported.”

The Carabinieri would definitely not be searching for suspects, in that case. Or was it a deliberate ploy to misguide the public?

Mustang would consult Alfredo Portolisi about his views later. She changed the subject with his young son. “Did you see the people who asked your father about a tour guide the other day?”

“Si, Signorina.”

She presented the brown leather wallet. “This belongs to the younger man of that group. Do you know their hotel?”

“Si.”

“Please, take it to him as fast as you can. They leave Assisi today.” A ten Euro note accompanied the transfer.

“Grazie, Signorina.”

Fredo scurried down the stairs, the energy of youth his in abundance. Mustang resumed her routine, scrubbing the previous day’s dust from her arms and legs, washing and brushing her long auburn hair. A sweatshirt and jeans, with her pony tail tucked under a wide-brimmed straw hat, would protect her against the sun and chilly winds.

Assisi bustled, once again a normal city, departing travelers loading their luggage into tour buses, or enjoying a leisurely meal in the open air. Mustang overheard some discussing the latest news; she located the elder Portolisi restocking his shelves, the shop door not yet unlocked.

“Buongiorno, Alfredo!” she greeted.

“Buongiorno, Signorina. My Fredo is helping you?”

“Si. A small errand, is all.”

“You pay my boys too much for such errands.”

“I appreciate their good work.”

“It will be a sad day in our city.”

Mustang pretended innocense. “How so, Alfredo?”

“More than twenty people, under age 50, garbed in black, with no identification, no papers or money. A ritual suicide of the worst kind.”

“Who believes it is a ritual suicide?”

“The coroner. They were all in excellent physical condition. He found no signs they were assaulted, nor injured in any way, until they leapt from the wall.”

The medical examiner must've labored into the wee hours to reach his conclusion, Mustang surmised. An erroneous assumption, but valid for her purposes - and, probably, those of the governments who sent, then disavowed knowledge of, the agents.

"The authorities are busy tracking down the cult's leader," announced Portolisi.

"They don't believe that person jumped first, as an example to the rest?"

"No."

"You are right, my friend," Mustang sighed. "This kind of publicity Assisi doesn't need. Ciao."

Portolisi resumed his chore as she slipped through the service entrance; Little Fredo jogged toward her, beaming.

"You found him?"

"Si, Signorina." He displayed another ten Euro bill.

"Don't spend it all on sweets," advised Mustang.

"I'm saving it for a new video game!"

She chuckled as he vanished into the building. Never having siblings, nor children of her own, she did not understand the attraction for sitting in front of a television, or computer screen, chasing imaginary villains or hunting fictional treasure.

Real life far exceeded such nonsense.

Case in point: Ludmilla Ouspenskaya, raven locks secured in a tight bun, wearing a black turtleneck and spandex slacks, wielding a glinting sharp cleaver, when Mustang rounded the corner into the Piazza San Rufino, powdered sugar coating her lips from a tasty pastry.

"Oh, hell."

Obviously, the Russian hadn't been among the crowd decimated last night. Nor had she been included in Mustang's command to nature that the Stecklings, Kathleen and Lyndon Bixby White forget her.

"If you expect me to feel intimidated by your weapon..." she sniffed.

Ludmilla rumbled, "This is for self-defense only. I read what you did to the others, and saw Ivana's twisted remains."

"Ivana was twisted long before I met her. You are more responsible for her death than I."

"She wished to emulate her father and mother, true patriots! I could not discourage her from that goal."

"Because you, too, are a patriot, eh?"

"I have the citations to prove it!"

Hazel orbs rolled skyward, as Mustang sank on the nearest doorway's stone steps. "What patriot sells others into bondage for five million bucks?"

Ludmilla's stunned expression pleased the younger woman. Her tentative, "Five... million?" forced Mustang to conceal a grin.

"You mean, you didn't know Ivana had been offered an... incentive to bring me to Moscow alive?"

"I... no..."

"Those who've been scraped off the rocks below the city in the past few hours most likely had similar arrangements, to risk so much in the quest."

Ludmilla's tongue had gone numb.

"But you did it for love of Mother Russia," scoffed Mustang, rising. "Get lost, already."

The cleaver whipped close to her chest. "You shall not dissuade me!"

Mustang's jaw clenched. "If I say the word, you will end up impaled on some church steeple, or devoured by wild dogs. For what it's worth, I could easily arrange for you to be prosecuted in an Italian courtroom - a joke, compared to American jurisprudence - charged with being the leader of the religious cult which has sullied Assisi's reputation as a beautiful and inspiring tourist attraction."

"You wouldn't!"

"Consider this: *you* wouldn't be able to defend yourself, or confess your real purpose in visiting the city, and you'd be locked away for the rest of your life, never able to speak the truth!"

"I am willing to die for my country!" proclaimed Ludmilla, a hint of fear peppering her defiance.

Mustang moved past her. "Fine."

The cleaver clattered on the stones when Ludmilla collapsed, sobbing, where the tour guide had just been sitting.

These types of scenes - human beings showing their true stripes - had soured Mustang on her own species. She, at least, accepted the consequences of her actions. Others, given their druthers, would flee the punishment.

Mustang crossed the piazza.

She heard rapid footsteps in the nick of time, dodging the cleaver strike by inches. Ludmilla had tried a ruse, thinking Mustang would forgive her and submit to her demands. The gambit backfired, and she followed through on her original instructions.

The primary witness: a Carabinieri sergeant on his way to report for duty.

Mustang didn't even have to file a complaint - not that she would have done so. She would have been content reducing Ludmilla to a pile of black dust on

the same spot her adopted daughter had died. She observed the spy being handcuffed and dragged from the piazza, screaming invectives and begging for mercy.

The seemingly offhanded prediction Mustang had voiced would come true. No agent would ever reveal their true mission; the tale would never be corroborated.

Resisting violently, Ludmilla made quite a commotion. The lanky sergeant finally lifted her onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, where she suddenly slumped, motionless.

Shades of Ben Espinoza's death by biting down on a poison capsule wedged behind his teeth came to Mustang's mind. The few tourists nearby stood, aghast, as another corpse was transported to the coroner's office.

"I've been here six times," lamented a Sister in brown dress and black veil to her casually dressed companion. "St. Francis would be appalled at how his city has become a haven for murderers and thieves."

Mustang snickered behind her hand.

"I find no humor in that statement," said Francis, when she recounted the incident to him in her flat.

"It's humorous how people make assumptions without facts. Though, if the motives of the dead were exposed, the shops and hotels would close their doors for lack of business."

"If you were to leave, the murders would cease."

She glanced up from a bowl of tomato soup. "Are you saying..."

"Where you live, trouble follows."

"You don't have to watch. You can go back to the ethereal plane and bask in the peace of eternity." Slurping another spoonful, she added, "Besides, over the centuries, others have done far worse."

"Si, I know it."

"Then, why blame me?"

"Because I do not sanction the deaths of innocents."

"They were *not* innocent!" raged Mustang. "Had they an opportunity, they would've killed me, or subjected me to torture and slavery, just to gain an advantage over their rivals!"

Francis did not respond.

"If you're going to blame anyone, blame Johnny Rosemont!" she persisted. "If he hadn't told Rolf and Greta..."

"If you hadn't encouraged him."

"Encouraged?"

“You love him, and he loves you.”

“And I’ll never see him again!”

“Nor your other friends.”

“I... have no friends.” Setting the dishes on the kitchenette counter, she grasped the edge with white knuckles. “I had to make them forget me. I... only create chaos.”

“You have created more chaos by your actions.”

“How?”

“The Stecklings wrote you into their novels as the main protagonist. When they revisit those plots, they will experience a void regarding their inspiration. Being mystery writers, they will be compelled to solve that mystery.”

“Oh, hell.”

“They have not left for Perugia. Go, bid them farewell, and reverse what you have done.”

Staring out the window, Mustang refused. “Let them think it was some movie, or some chance meeting...”

“Signorina...”

“No, Francis! Practically everyone who’s known me since I... this... is dead. I’ve clouded the memories of others, for their own protection, and mine. So few remain, I thought myself safe, but maybe they should all...”

The saint growled, “I forbid it!”

Mustang spun. “You...”

“I’ve detailed the results of this power in one instance. In the others, it leaves your victims believing themselves insane, or inflicted with some form of amnesia. It is a form of torture...”

“Torture? The torture is in remembering the hell I put them through!”

“That is your personal torture, not theirs.”

Feeling as if her heart would burst, Mustang sank on the wooden chair. “Why didn’t you tell me this long ago?”

“You were making excellent progress in self-control, and these past years no problems arose...”

“Until Johnny Rosemont showed up.”

“You could have hidden your identity from him, refused to give the tour when you recognized him.”

Moist eyes met his stern brown orbs. “Are you implying I *wanted* to be in that movie?”

“You craved his love, a love honest and pure, for you as you are, not selfishly pursuing a share of your power.”

Her head drooped.

Emaciated fingers lifted her chin. “Let them have their memories. The spies have failed, their superiors will write off the loss of personnel and move on to the next secret weapon.”

“Can you be certain?”

“Nothing is certain in this life,” he stated. “But, this latest disaster will pass from the headlines, and you will once more find peace.”

Mustering a weak smile, Mustang reversed her instructions to nature.

Out at mid-day for a bite of lunch, she saw Don, Rolf and Greta loading their car for the drive to Perugia, where Kathleen recuperated from her miscarriage. Reluctantly, she waved, and endured their enthusiastic embraces in parting.

She hoped Francis was right about finding peace, as she ascended Mount Subasio to visit the horses.