

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Homesick Mustang*

**A Novella**

**by**

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# I

High on the slopes of Umbria's Mount Subasio, Elizabeth "Mustang" Duryea gazed over the Italian valley, still green despite an inch of snow at her feet. The horses she had climbed narrow trails to feed expressed their gratitude for the apples and treats, nuzzling her auburn head and whinnying in delight.

She relished these months when winter brought a chill to the air, and tourist activity practically ran dry in Assisi. She could spend her days with these wild, magnificent beasts, who had found a home far from man-made civilization. It relieved the homesickness which periodically gnawed at her soul - for the Montana ranch where she'd grown up watching newborn foals mature into valuable stock, or Boleskine House near Scotland's Loch Ness, where she'd kept six fine animals in her private stable.

She didn't miss riding so much as her closeness to the horses themselves. They were honest creatures, so unlike the human beings she led on tours through the hillside settlement which Francis of Assisi had made famous. The need for caution had arisen once actor Johnny Rosemont discovered her whereabouts and coaxed her into his biographical film on the saint. Once again, untimely visits from those seeking her unique powers - bequeathed to her by her late grandfather, Jack Parsons - disrupted her routine.

That affinity with the natural forces, allowing her to control life and death, cause earthquakes and thunderstorms, and travel via lightning bolts, brought all sorts to her doorstep. The physically twisted Leslie Steiner had sought peace from a five-century life span; Franciscan Br. Giovanni begged assistance with flushing out a fanatical murderer. What had ruined her tranquil existence in Assisi more than any other event over the past eight years, however, was the arrival of Rolf and Greta Steckling, pleasant Austrian authors of mystery novels, and a pair of Russian spies. The death toll when covert agents of many nations converged on the town, intent on her capture for their respective government's military supremacy, made Mustang choke as she inhaled fresh mountain air.

By noon, the sun had sufficiently warmed the terrain for Mustang to shed her parka briefly. She freed her wavy tresses from the blue knit cap, as well. Darkening clouds in the west, though, warned of a coming storm, so she started down the hill earlier than usual. She would be lighting the wood stove in her apartment overlooking the Piazza San Rufino in anticipation of a dreary December evening.

First, she detoured into Gran Caffé, her favorite bakery, which catered to the local off-season population of 25,000. A wax paper bag full of sweet confections, she veered along an alley and climbed the narrow stairs to her flat.

“Oh, hell,” escaped her lips when she glimpsed a furtive shadow above her on the third landing. “Show yourself, or wind up dead.”

It didn’t matter if the unwelcome visitor spoke English or not. Part of her power extended to languages: those to whom she spoke would hear her in their native tongue, and her brain would automatically translate anything they said.

Her jaw dropped when she recognized the straw-textured bronze mane, stern jaw and cleft chin. “Doc?” she murmured, completing her ascent.

Denis Sommers, British orthopedic surgeon for various sports teams, smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry if I frightened you.”

“Frightened isn’t the word,” admitted Mustang, who felt severe annoyance at that moment. “How did you find me, or need I ask?”

She led him across the threshold, the stark sitting room even gloomier than the corridor.

“Uncle Glenn...”

Her ears perked up at the mention of her neighbor in Scotland. “He knows I’ve been living here?”

“No, Mustang.” He accepted her signal toward the worn love seat. “He died last week.”

Sinking on a wooden chair near the dinette table, she felt a droplet trickle down her cheek. “What happened?”

“Old age happened. He was 82...”

“I never suspected. I thought he was in his fifties...”

“The horses kept him young, to be sure. And he never did retire from the construction company. In fact, he collapsed while supervising construction of a new wing at the Inverness hospital.”

Mustang swallowed hard. She remembered that institution, and attempts to confine her on the psych ward.

“You came all this way, just to tell me?”

“That... and other things.”

“What ‘other things’?”

“Haven’t you been the least bit curious about Boleskine House since you left?” Sommers prodded.

“As long as Glenn took the horses back to his place, not really.” Her composure recovered, she rose. “Would you like some hot cocoa?”

“Please.” Her guest shivered, being coatless in a tan dress shirt and khaki trousers.

Setting a sauce pan of milk on the electric burner, Mustang proceeded to toss wads of newsprint into the wood stove, along with twigs. Once the flames crackled to life, she added a couple larger logs.

The pair contemplated their mugs of steaming chocolate in silence for a time. Mustang finally pressed the issue. “It’s not easy to get here, Doc, unless you own a private plane and fly into Perugia airport. Why did you come?”

Sommers did not raise his blue eyes to meet her intense hazel orbs. “When Uncle Glenn’s solicitor rang me about his death... I canceled my engagements for a fortnight and drove north from Manchester. I knew that selling off his horses would take time, as would clearing out the house and listing it with an agent.”

“That sounds feasible. Yet, you’re here.”

“After the funeral, I arranged for one of the lads who works for Ben MacPherson at the granary to tend the stock. I devoted myself to going over Uncle Glenn’s papers, which he kept neatly organized in a locked chest. His will lay on top...”

The pause added to Mustang’s discomfort. “You’re not going to tell me he left me his horses?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

She waited, her breath shallow.

“Mention of your name in the will proper is limited to one sentence. There are... supplemental materials...”

“Doc, get on with it!” she hissed.

“He’d evidently known for some years that your name wasn’t really Lady Elizabeth Neville. Out of respect for your friendship, he never raised the matter with you, though he didn’t grasp the need for such secrecy until...”

“Until?”

The surgeon gulped visibly. “Until the American FBI offered him one million pounds to hand you over to them.”

“*What?*” erupted from Mustang’s throat, vibrating walls and windowpanes.

“Calm yourself, Mustang. You don’t want to...”

“Don’t I?” she raged. “Those idiots knew for years where I was living, and what I could do. Why would they dare...”

“It was... after the incident where you assisted the Chinese national and his children in escaping apprehension.”

“Han Feng.” Through grit teeth, “I should’ve killed all those jokers... like I did the last batch.”

Sommers glanced upward. “Eh?”

“Nothing, nothing. Go on.”

“The damage you inflicted on the region, and the chatter within the international intelligence community...”

“How’d Glenn know all this?”

“He kept a journal. If anything suspicious would’ve transpired, it was to be forwarded to the local constabulary.”

“Who would’ve done nothing, given the Brits wanted me as badly as the rest.”

“Reading what I did, I have to agree.”

“What’s this got to do with the will?”

“Uncle Glenn was scheduled to invite you over for dinner, the day after Mason Church shot and paralyzed you, in fact. Agent Ben Espinoza gave him a concoction to put in your whiskey...”

The ceramic mug shattered in Mustang’s hand. “That’s why the bastard was in Scotland! He didn’t come to tell me my mother had died...”

Sommers left his seat to tend the blood pouring from his host’s right palm. He commandeered a tea towel, applying pressure to the nasty gash. “You’re going to need a few stitches.”

“That can wait,” she spat. “What else had the FBI planned for me?”

“Once you drank the whiskey and passed out, they were going to load you on a plane and keep you drugged until they had you confined in some bunker below Washington, DC.”

“I would’ve destroyed the city,” Mustang grumbled. “I still might.”

“I thought you’d want to know...”

She patted Sommers’ shoulder with her left hand. “It doesn’t much matter now, Doc. Ben Espinoza’s dead.”

“You...”

“Through a fluke, he traced me here. He tried to blackmail me into surrendering and, when I called his bluff, he killed himself.”

“The Johnny Rosemont flick?”

She nodded.

“Despite the alias, I knew it was you. No woman I’ve ever known shines with such brilliance...”

“And, that’s how you knew...”

He straightened. “Let’s get you to hospital, then I’ll get out of your hair. I’m sorry to have disrupted your idyllic existence.”

Mustang discarded the make-shift bandage, beneath which the wound had healed without further scarring of her lightning-marred flesh. “You’re not the first, Doc.” She retrieved his cup and carried it to the sink. “You haven’t explained how I was mentioned in Glenn’s will.”

“He wanted you to have the million pounds.”

Her knees buckled; she clutched the worn counter. Occasional trips to casinos had kept her in comfort through those bygone days, but she’d never had a million pounds at one time. “They... paid him anyway?”

“They paid him in advance. It wasn’t his fault the plan didn’t... And they never called to reclaim the bribe.”

“Would Glenn have really...”

“No. He planned to confess all, and sneak you out of the country to a remote estate on the Channel Islands.”

“So, the result was nearly the same, even though the circumstances differed.”

Sommers reached into his hip pocket. “I brought the check...”

The recipient laughed heartily. “Where could I cash it? I long since ditched my ID...”

“I can have the solicitor transfer it directly into your bank account...”

“What bank account?” She opened a cabinet and showed him a dented coffee can stuffed with Euros. “This is my bank.”

“Something can be worked out,” Sommers promised.

Her smile eased the tension somewhat. “Don’t worry about it, Doc. I don’t need a million pounds. I’d just toss it out the window and let the kids go crazy in the piazza.”

“Then, what...”

“Have the solicitor donate it to an organization which rehabilitates injured race horses, or something similar.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She studied his furrowed brow and lean physique. “For now, you’re bound to be hungry. Let me treat you to a fine Italian dinner, and show you the city.”

“It’ll be my treat, Mustang...”

“Nonsense. I’m considered a native now. It’ll cost half of what they’d charge you.”

Reluctantly, Denis Sommers accompanied the woman down the stairs and outdoors, where an icy wind penetrated the cable knit sweater she had loaned him. He quickly lost his bearings as they wound through empty lanes and down steep

stone steps to a cozy trattoria, a blazing fire in the center of the dining room attracting many locals for an evening's enjoyment.

The pair didn't converse much over a meal of pasta in cream sauce. As multiple glasses of chianti relaxed Sommers, however, he rambled freely about topics he should not have voiced.

"Boleskine House has been left to deteriorate," he babbled. "Every summer I visited Uncle Glenn, I'd hike over and lament your absence. After another American family lived there briefly - he'd exposed some scheme or other, Uncle Glenn told me - it's been abandoned. Rocks have shattered most of the windows, and the furnishings have been stolen or smashed. The Gate Lodge has collapsed, a pile of rubble."

"I can't imagine the FBI letting it go to rack and ruin, when there are so many people in the witness protection program who need a safe place to live."

"Didn't you know? Boleskine wasn't owned by the Americans. At least, not since..."

"What? Was it part of the bargain if Glenn..."

"No, Mustang. A documentary producer named Peter O'Donnell..."

Abruptly, flames shot up the chimney, and those seated in close proximity abandoned their chairs.

"Don't, please," Sommers moaned, seizing the tour guide's fingers.

In a barely hushed contralto, she muttered, "Then, tell me - quickly - how Peter's involved in this."

"The FBI deeded the property to him, if he would..."

"You mean, while I was still living there?"

His silence confirmed the truth.

"How'd you come by this information?"

"Mr. O'Donnell called on Uncle Glenn nearly a decade ago, prior to filming one of his projects around the loch. He saw no harm in revealing that he meant to capture your... power on celluloid."

"But, the step-father of my dear cousin Rachel didn't bother to tell me that he'd sold his talents to the devil?"

"It was his belief that you could live out your life, undisturbed, if he held the deed, rather than any governmental agency."

"Well, he was wrong, wasn't he?"

## II

Dashing her utensils on the table, Mustang Duryea rose and marched from the restaurant into the drizzly night. Denis Sommers hastily paid the bill and pursued her, soon lost in the maze of dim alleys and stone structures.

Rounding the corner into the Piazza San Rufino, Mustang found Francis of Assisi materialized before her. "Your friend will freeze to death if you don't go back for him," the Italian saint warned.

"You go back for him." She slumped against the wall. "All he's brought me is more pain: news that everyone I've ever trusted betrayed me."

"Peter didn't betray you. He meant to protect you."

"He's not stupid enough to believe those government flunkies would abide by whatever agreement they made. Sure, they signed papers transferring Boleskine to him, but I can almost guarantee there was fine print somewhere which allowed them to continue harassing me!"

"It's over, though. It's been over for years."

"It's *not* over, and you know it! Just three months ago..."

A gentle, if emaciated arm, encompassed her shoulders. "Come. I'll take you where you can rest..."

"I'm going upstairs to my apartment, and lock the door..."

"They'll find you there."

Mustang stiffened. "*Who ll find me?*"

"Fret not. I cannot betray you."

She resisted the pressure to move. "Maybe not, but you don't always tell me what you know!"

"Merely because I am dead and privy to all knowledge doesn't mean I can reveal the future. History must be preserved..."

"My history has yet to be made!" she protested, yanking from his grasp. "And, if there's a threat against me..."

"It is no threat, I assure you. A slight nuisance, at best. Come. You can trust me."

"I can't trust anyone!" she shrieked, and hurried into the darkness.

Her vision blinded by tears, she stumbled along Assisi's streets, to the Piazza Santa Chiara. Familiar with every building around the square, she knew which were occupied at this time of year, and which were closed until spring. A guest house operated by Franciscan Sisters boasted locked shutters and gate, but the hasps fell away without Mustang uttering a word.

Within, she appropriated a candle from the tiny chapel and, by that feeble light, located clean sheets to spread over a twin bed on the second story. Her jangled nerves eventually succumbed to exhaustion, and she slept well into the next afternoon.

Hunger compelled her onto sparsely populated streets, a light dusting of snow adding winter flavor to the rustic scene. Only a few shops opened on the main thoroughfare, and she enjoyed her acquaintance with the proprietors. Thus, when one hailed her as she passed, en route to the bakery, she stepped into an establishment cluttered with plastic statues, rosaries and t-shirts.

“Buongiorno, Fabio!” she greeted.

“Did you hear, Signorina? A tourist was found dead on the steps of the basilica by the Carabinieri this morning!”

“Oh, hell,” groaned Mustang. “Has he been identified?”

“Not yet. He had no wallet, and was badly beaten. They think he was robbed and left to freeze.”

With any luck, then, it wasn’t Denis Sommers...

“Such criminal activity is rare in December,” continued the plump patriarch. “The thugs usually migrate south, where it’s warmer.”

“True, true. Ciao, Fabio.”

A lighthearted tone concealed her concern, nonetheless. Forgetting her errand, she trekked to the police station - a building she tried her best to avoid, for fear of prying questions. When the door creaked inward, a sergeant on duty at the lopsided metal desk assumed the wind had jarred it free. Mustang crept, unseen thanks to her power, along the corridor to what was used as a holding cell or temporary morgue, depending on the situation.

The deceased lay on a slab behind the bars, and Mustang gingerly lifted the grungy sheet hiding the corpse from view.

“No, it’s not me,” came Sommers’ British accent from behind her. “But I suspected you’d think it was.”

Without relinquishing her invisibility, she countered, “And you knew I’d come?”

“Not... in this form.” He reached for her, and missed. “Where were you all night?”

“Somewhere... safe. What about you?”

“I almost had frostbite by the time I stumbled into the night patrol. When the body was found, I went along to examine it.”

“Robbery?”

“I think he was drunk, stumbled on the basilica steps and cracked his skull. He probably lost his wallet somewhere along the way.” Sommers smoothed the sheet over the dead man’s form. “Would you please let yourself be seen?”

“What, and face interrogation from these boys about how I got in here?”

He bowed slightly, acquiescing to her rationale. “Then, meet me outside in ten minutes.”

“Why?”

“You mean, you don’t know?”

“Don’t start that again, Doc!”

“Peter O’Donnell is in Assisi. I thought you might’ve...”

He heard her collapse on the tile floor. “If... I did... I didn’t do it consciously...”

Her next thought, unspoken, was whether Thomas Burton was with him.

Sommers extended his hand to assist Mustang, but she eluded his grip.

Before he realized she had vacated the cell, the main door had “blown” open and slammed shut, causing the desk sergeant to utter a curse.

Instinct propelled her to the Piazza San Rufino, where a tripod proved the sole occupant, the camera fastened to it pointed toward the cathedral tower. She scowled at the equipment, capturing her home while intent on driving her into exile once more.

“Mustang?” came the Irish brogue from the shadows. “What on earth?”

She whirled toward the blond, overcoat-clad Peter O’Donnell. “You conniving...”

He threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Whoa! Hold on, there! I’ve done nothing...”

“You’ve come to betray me...”

Seeing the angry glint in her eyes, and knowing her capabilities, he remained at a distance, voice pleasant. “I didn’t know you were in Italy. I’m here to film historical sites related to St. Clare. I’m doing a documentary on the Poor Clare monasteries in Ireland...”

This declaration required a few moments for Mustang to digest. When O’Donnell noticed her breathing slowed, he inched forward and embraced her tenderly.

“Having a bad day, are we?” he soothed.

“Not now... if you’re telling the truth.”

He held her at arm’s length. “You can come with me to the Proto-monastery, if you like. I have pretty much unlimited access to the cloister...”

She sank on a nearby stoop. “Thomas isn’t with you?”

The lanky director bit his lower lip, preoccupying himself with disassembling his equipment. "You... don't get the papers?"

"No."

"He died after a horrific auto wreck, six weeks ago."

She cringed, wondering who else would perish before this latest travesty ended. Thomas Burton, curly mopped, virile Welsh actor, had been the first man to kiss her when she was 16 - shortly after her encounter with her grandfather, Jack Parsons. The house where they were staying, after her cousin's funeral in Idaho, practically collapsed around them.

O'Donnell continued, "He'd been sober since Rachel's wedding in Australia. He was in rehearsal for a revival of *King Lear*, when he abruptly fell off the wagon, drained an entire bottle of Jameson, and drove into a barrier on a Dublin roundabout. I reached the hospital just prior to his passing, and his last words were, 'Tell Mustang I love her.'"

Denis Sommers arrived in the piazza just as the woman let out a yowl of anguish before burying her face in her hands. He glanced from her to O'Donnell and back. "You... told her?"

The Irishman smirked in reply.

"At least, there've been no tremors..."

"Yet," quantified O'Donnell.

From behind him, a disembodied voice droned, "Signorina, I advise strongly against it." While the men heard the words, they did not comprehend the Italian dialect or detect their source.

"I'm tired of death!" she retorted. "Why shouldn't I restore those who've died prematurely..."

"You cannot deny them their eternal rest..." Francis proclaimed.

"You cannot deny *me*..."

"You will regret such impulsiveness, just as you have so often in the past."

"That was when I had no control over my powers. Now..."

Peter O'Donnell raised Mustang forcibly to her feet and shook her hard. "You can't even consider bringing Thomas back. He... he..."

She wrenched free and sauntered to the middle of the square. "You dare tell me what I can and cannot do?" Her arms spread as rain began to pour; she resembled a soggy avenging angel. "You've always wanted me to use my powers for the good of humanity, while humanity itself is destroying the world!"

O'Donnell seized Sommers' arm. "She's gone mad with grief. You're a doctor; do something!"

“I’ve witnessed her demolish walls, and recover from near-total paralysis. Mad with grief or not, I’m not interfering.”

“That’s a drop in the bucket, compared to the feats she wrought in my presence. Can’t you sedate her?”

Sommers snapped, “Bloody hell, man! It’s not like I’m packing a tranquilizer pistol in my belt or a syringe of sodium pentothal in my pocket!”

Desperate, O’Donnell shouted to empty air, “Francis!”

An emaciated figure in tattered brown robe appeared beside him. “She must stop herself. If she resurrects Signore Burton, she will irreparably rend the fabric of time and space, annihilating all creation.”

At that precise moment, unfortunately, a tour group of aging, multinational Sisters in lay clothes emerged from the Cathedral of San Rufino, chatting gaily until the rain caught their attention.

The force of Mustang’s will diverted by the disturbance, a subfreezing microburst of wind blasted the women, completely immobilizing them.

Dr. Sommers rushed toward the church, while Peter O’Donnell barely prevented Mustang from cracking her head on the stones when she crumpled in an exhausted faint. He hoisted her in his arms and scanned the piazza for a safe refuge.

“Where’s her apartment?” he shouted.

The surgeon ignored the question, his face contorted in disbelief as he retreated from the cathedral. “They’re dead of extreme hypothermia! She... she... freeze-dried them!”

Francis waved O’Donnell toward a low portal. “In here, quickly!”

Single bulbs on each landing provided little illumination as they mounted three flights to Mustang’s flat. The unconscious figure deposited in the bedroom, her soaked parka was hung in the shower, her sneakers placed near the wood stove to dry.

A quilt tucked around her chin as she shivered, Francis joined the visitor in the sitting room.

“What do we do now?” O’Donnell puzzled.

“She’ll recover in due course.”

“But, won’t the local constabulary demand an explanation for what happened... out there?”

“Since Mustang settled here, the Carabinieri have repeatedly tried to apprehend her, suspecting her of crimes. She has... foiled their attempts, to put it mildly - as she did in Scotland, if I recall. They will report to their superiors that

the Sisters fell victim to a weather anomaly, who will deem them foolish for visiting during winter.”

“In other words, Mustang won’t be held responsible for her actions?” snarled O’Donnell, searching the cabinets aimlessly.

Francis didn’t reply.

“Well...”

“He keeps his opinions about the men and women who belong to the modern Franciscan Order to himself, most days,” supplied Mustang, clinging to the doorpost.

O’Donnell barked, “Get back to bed at once!”

“No need for that. Whip me up some hot cocoa, will you?”

As she flopped on the love seat, Francis located ingredients for the sweet concoction, enabling the guest to heat the milk, add sugar and dark powder, and fill two green ceramic mugs.

Mustang sipped tentatively, then smiled her approval of the taste.

“So, young lady, you may not have ended civilization as we know it, but you murdered a dozen innocent souls...”

“Don’t use that parental tone with me, Peter,” she advised. “I’m not sixteen anymore.”

“You act like you are.”

“For your information, I’ve learned to keep my powers in check ninety-nine percent of the time...” Noticing Francis’ sour mien, she chuckled. “Okay, maybe eighty percent.”

O’Donnell clucked, “Which means, you’ve lost control...”

“If you call killing spies and tracking murderers losing control.”

“What was the body count?”

She tried calculating on her fingers, then halted. “A lot.”

“I’m surprised Interpol or the FBI haven’t come calling...”

“They have,” said Francis. “She dispatches all... interlopers without mercy.”

The Irish filmmaker dropped beside her on the cushions. “You see? *That’s* what you need to learn most. You need to empathize with those who seek you out, not kill them outright!”

Pulling her knees to her chin, Mustang grinned. “Do you remember the John Wayne movie *The Shootist*?”

“Vaguely.”

“In it, his character recites a code he lives by: ‘I won’t be wronged. I won’t be insulted. I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.’”

“You’re saying these people wronged you in some way, so the retribution was just?”

“Exactly.”

“Those nuns did nothing to you.”

Mustang exchanged glances with Francis. “They did nothing useful, either,” she finally stated. “While they are vowed to poverty, the thousands they spent coming here to see the ‘holy sites’ could have been used to feed and house one or two poor families for a year or more. The world is better off without such hypocrites.”

O’Donnell bolted upright, incensed. “So, you’re judge and jury now? God in human form?”

Denis Sommers slogged into the flat during the ensuing silent stand-off, toting Peter’s camera and tripod. “The deceased have been transported to the morgue,” he announced. “The Carabinieri are not happy.”

“Neither are you, I take it,” observed Mustang.

O’Donnell scoffed, “Join the club.”

“Arguing with her will get you nowhere,” Francis declared. “She is stubborn as a mule when she believes herself in the right.”

“And, even when she’s wrong sometimes,” sniffed Sommers.

“Ha, ha,” Mustang scoffed. “None of you are here at my invitation, and you’re free to leave if you don’t like my hospitality.”

Sommers knelt beside the love seat. “Mustang, I know it’s not your fault... The news I delivered yesterday, coupled with what Peter told you... It would more than overwhelm an ordinary person.”

“Are you implying...”

“That you’re extraordinary. While most people would break down sobbing, you... express your emotions differently...”

“And dangerously,” O’Donnell added.

Sommers glared at the other man before resuming his monologue. “I can’t deny you’ve helped many people - in unconventional ways - and some unscrupulous sorts have tried to take undue advantage of you...”

“And been roundly punished for their efforts.”

Mustang chortled at O’Donnell’s comments, patting Sommers’ wrinkled cheek sympathetically. “Doc, believe me, I understand your concern.” She rose, flexing her still-chilled toes. “All of your concerns. You may think me callous, and

I have to be to survive in this insane world - without going utterly nuts myself. You should be thankful I've maintained this much sanity, when it would be so easy to give in to the temptation to wipe civilization from the face of the planet."

O'Donnell and Sommers eyed Francis, seeking confirmation of her words. "Yes," he acknowledged. "Her command of the natural forces would make that very, very possible."

A flash of lightning, followed immediately by a crack of thunder, made the occupants of the tiny flat shudder.

### III

"That wasn't my doing!" Mustang blurted, retrieving the mug she had dropped, drops of hot cocoa splattered on the floor boards.

A hearty laugh helped them release the nervous tension which had permeated the chamber. Peter O'Donnell was the first to adopt a freshly dour mien.

"What?" Mustang pressed, recognizing the furrowed brow and pursed lips.

"I'm uncertain whether what I do next will... escalate the situation once more."

"You, adept at ESP, aren't certain?"

He shrugged.

Mustang took his arm and lowered him onto the love seat. "I accept that Thomas is dead. I promise not to raise him from the grave. And, while you should be horse-whipped for not telling me you obtained the deed on Boleskine through... less than legal means, I will do my best to maintain my equilibrium, no matter what you tell me."

O'Donnell exhaled deliberately. "I didn't come here to see you, as I've said. Like Denis, I saw the film your Mr. Rosemont made..."

She interrupted, "He's not mine, but go on."

"I suspected you had been here, but had no clue you were a permanent resident. I thought - for fear of the authorities - you'd turned into quite the vagabond."

"That might've been the wiser course," she confessed. "By the way, how did you meet the good doctor here?"

Sommers volunteered, "Peter chanced to be inspecting conditions at Boleskine while I was visiting Uncle Glenn. Three summers ago, wasn't it?"

O'Donnell affirmed, "Correct."

"Why have you let Boleskine deteriorate?" asked Mustang.

“Thomas joked that he wanted it for a summer home, so I gave him the keys and free reign to outfit it as he pleased. With his hectic schedule on the stage, though, he never had an opportunity...”

Tears welled in the woman’s hazel eyes; she blinked them away.

The documentary producer removed a diamond-encrusted signet ring from his left pinky finger and placed it on her right palm, scarred by numerous lightning bolts. “He gave me this, in case our paths ever crossed again. It was his only possession not confiscated in payment of back taxes.”

Instantly suspicious, Mustang growled, “You just happened to bring it on this trip?”

O’Donnell held up his hand, indentations from the gold band well in evidence. “I’ve been wearing it since that day, in his honor. I never thought...”

“I... apologize, Peter. Another of my faults: trusting no one.” She discovered the ring fit loosely on her slender index finger, then turned to Sommers. “See, Doc, I can control myself.”

“I’m glad of that!” he praised. “Now, what say we get something to eat? I had no breakfast, and it’s well past tea time.”

Instinctively, the trio spun toward where Francis had been standing, seeking his approval. He had vanished.

“He does that,” explained Mustang. “Being his hometown, he comes and goes as he wishes - often at inopportune moments.”

“Inopportune, in that they force you to rethink impulsive actions?” snickered Sommers.

Lighthearted banter accompanied them as they descended narrow stairs single-file. O’Donnell escorted his companions to the upscale restaurant he had come to enjoy during his week in Assisi.

“I *am* astonished you eluded me for seven days,” he noted, pouring a local vintage into three glasses. “Those distinctive red curls...”

“I gave up disguising my hair after my first tourist season. I bought a wide-brimmed straw hat after my nose got so sunburnt, layers of skin peeled off. Not only was I shielded from the heat, but most of my head was hidden. I didn’t worry about being recognized until... years later.”

“If you’d moved around, you might have avoided the notoriety and... and...”

“Pain?”

O’Donnell winced. “Yes.”

“I think nature likes to remind me periodically the actions of one affect all, and no one is alone on the planet. I could’ve ignored Johnny Rosemont when he came hunting locations for his movie, pretended not to know him, but...”

“The British scandal sheets claimed you two engaged in a torrid love affair,” hinted Sommers.

She sneered, “What would you be doing reading the scandal sheets?”

“I didn’t *buy* them, mind. Members of the team would leave them in the locker room, and the odd photo would catch my attention.”

“Photo? Of who?”

“You, and Rosemont.”

“Oh, hell...”

“Even I have to deal with paparazzi, Mustang,” remarked O’Donnell. “Back when Thomas had an affair with the Scottish First Minister’s wife, they harassed him at the studio, where he was recording narration for my project on the River Shannon. The Garda could only bar those meddling bastards from the building. They had the run of public streets.”

“But, how? John and I rarely went out together...”

“You worked together every day. These photographers can take the most innocent pose - two people chatting between takes, or comforting each other after an arduous scene - and add a good dose of innuendo. Besides which, they hide in dark restaurant corners, snapping away while you playfully toast each other and feast on delicious pasta,” added Sommers.

Mustang quietly cursed, “May their cameras melt into gelatinous blobs!”

Two firm hands reached to cover her lips. “Don’t!” O’Donnell hissed.

Too late, as a supposed customer in the corner nearest the kitchen entrance squealed in horror and leapt from his seat when hot plastic and metal poured onto his lap.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang grimaced.

O’Donnell and Sommers stared at each other.

“He’s not here for me... I think,” offered the former.

The latter purported, “Well, he definitely has no interest in me. In the media world, I’m only rarely referred to as the surgeon who salvaged Spider Moffat’s football career.”

“Then, we’d best concentrate on our dinner and let the medics tend the injured party.”

As they retrieved their forks, all three burst out laughing.

Other patrons - and the restaurant’s staff - didn’t find the scene humorous. Customers seated closest to the writhing foreigner were moved, and their meals

provided *gratis* for the inconvenience. Medical personnel, who eventually managed to transport their gurney up a steep lane to the establishment, could do little for the man until the molten puddle cooled. They loaded him onto the wheeled bed and removed him, whining in Spanish, from the premises.

“Mustang, aren’t you going to remedy this problem?” suggested O’Donnell.

She snorted, “He’ll not be permanently crippled. Tomorrow, the burns and pain will have faded, but he *will* remember to keep his nose out of other people’s business.”

“Fair enough,” sighed Sommers.

Tiramisu for dessert capped off an otherwise uneventful repast. Strolling up the Via San Francesco, an early December sunset having left the hillside town in darkness, they parted ways for their respective lodgings.

“I’ll be leaving in the morning,” Sommers proclaimed. “I’ve got to finish closing up Uncle Glenn’s house, and get back to work.”

Mustang prodded, “How, exactly, *did* you get here?”

“Manchester United’s owner loaned me his Gulfstream.”

“Lucky you.”

“Why, you want a ride back to Scotland?”

She displayed her lightning-ravaged hands. “Thank you, no. That’s one power I’m content not using.”

“Ta, then,” he concluded, bowing slightly.

“Safe travels, Doc.”

Sommers enveloped by the gloom, O’Donnell ventured, “I’ll pick up my equipment in the morning, if that’s all right.”

“Fine. I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

He paused mid-stride. “Where will you be?”

“I’m up and out early, most days.”

“Doing what, in this cold?”

“Keeping out of trouble.”

O’Donnell took a few steps, and hesitated. “You wouldn’t be willing... No, never mind.”

Mustang stood immediately behind him. “What, Peter?”

“Thomas was set to narrate this film...”

Suppressing a giggle, she queried, “Did he do all your films?”

“When his schedule permitted. He had that... distinctive voice which added dignity and stature to the work.”

“You want me to bring him back, for that?”

“No. I want you to take over those duties, in his memory.”

The woman recoiled. “You dare to...”

The Irishman snatched her coat sleeve. “No one would know it’s you, Mustang. Your face would never be shown, and your name wouldn’t need to be included in the credits...”

“Oh, Peter... Doc was right about you...”

“Right about what? That everything I’ve done was to protect you, both from yourself and... outsiders?”

“And you have the gall to want me to expose myself...”

“We can do the recording right here; you’ll have absolute privacy, I swear. I’m in a real bind, Mustang. The Sisters want this done by Christmas - three weeks. The footage is mostly shot and edited; I flew over to get some final images to accent the historical aspects.”

“All right, all right,” she breathed. “It’s not like this is going to be shown at any international festivals, or in theatres.”

O’Donnell neither confirmed nor denied her statement. “I could use your help, too, with the last few locations. If I swing by around 10:00, are you game?”

“Sure.”

Mustang didn’t flinch when O’Donnell bent to kiss her cheek. She waited until he was out of sight, before trekking up the alley to the Piazza San Rufino.

In her flat, congealed chocolate stained the floor near the love seat, where she had spilled it earlier. She shed her parka and extracted a lopsided plastic bucket from beneath the kitchen sink. She mixed hot water and dish soap, and found a relatively clean rag in the linen closet. She lowered herself to her knees and, when she next looked up, she might’ve been praying to St. Francis, who towered over her.

“I thought you’d come,” she muttered, sinking on her heels.

“You have questions.”

“And you know the answers, whether you tell me or not.”

“I’ve tried to explain...”

She managed to rise and settle on the worn cushions. “I know, I know. I’m sorry for being such a nag. But, for my own peace of mind, I have to know why Thomas fell off the wagon.”

“You believe... since his last thoughts were of you, that you were the cause...”

She nodded.

“I can assure you such was not the case. He’d been rehearsing his play, and could not remember his lines. He consulted a doctor, who ran some tests, which aided in a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease.”

Mustang gulped, “Oh, hell...”

“No more had he left the clinic, than he bought the liter of whiskey...”

“Suicide, then?”

“Indeed.”

“Which, by your standards, rates him an eternity in hell,” the woman postulated.

“It’s... not that simple. Those under mental duress are often judged unstable, the deed not a conscious or deliberate sin.”

“So, he’s enjoying what you call heaven?”

“Again, it’s not that simple.”

“Okay, okay.” Rising, Mustang stretched. “I’m for bed.”

Francis’ “Buona notte” reverberated around the sitting room as his weathered image dispersed.

A chill in the air reminded the tenant to wedge three logs in the wood stove, to last the night. She slept with the bedroom door open, allowing the warmth to circulate - when she dozed, that is.

Recurring images of elderly Sisters haunted her dreams, their limbs frozen and brittle, snapping off and dropping to the piazza’s cobbles as they tried to escape their fate. They screamed her name, and she jolted awake repeatedly, drenched in sweat each time.

The final screeches weren’t so much outcries of retribution, but inconsolable sobbing. Even when Mustang pinched herself awake, the noise persisted. She shuffled to the window, quilt hugged around her shoulders. A lone female, bundled in a camel-hair coat, paced before the cathedral steps, petitioning God for a spirit of understanding.

Mustang tugged on an orange flannel shirt from the closet and grey sweat pants. Auburn tresses unbrushed and sockless in her sneakers, she plucked the parka from its hook and raced down the stairs.

“May I help you?” she asked softly, approaching the distraught, middle-aged Asian figure.

Lips chapped by the cold, moisture clinging to her face, brown eyes scalded Mustang. “How can you help? They are dead, and I am responsible.”

The tour guide mumbled, “Oh, hell...”

“If I hadn’t stayed in Rome for meetings,” her companion lamented, “I would’ve been here. I could have prevented it...”

“Nothing could have prevented it,” countered Mustang, adding under her breath, “except me.”

“Were you here when they...”

“Yes.”

“How...”

“It’s difficult to...” The younger woman contemplated at some length before offering, “Have you ever seen the wind whip up a mini-tornado of autumn leaves?”

“Many years ago.”

“Such a wind occurred here yesterday, only far more forceful. It could not have been predicted, or avoided.”

Mustang had never sanctioned lying - and she wasn’t lying, in the technical sense. She just wasn’t telling the entire truth, in order to defuse an otherwise volatile confrontation.

“Has such a thing happened in Assisi before?” wondered the visitor.

“No, but elsewhere, I’ve heard tell...”

“Then, no one is to blame.” A degree of physical anxiety released, fists unclenched, breathing slowed. “I shall proceed with the funeral arrangements.”

“Are you a relative?”

“Their provincial.”

“I’m sorry?” Mustang responded, not comprehending the term.

“Their superior. We are members of the Franciscan Sisters of Mercy, located in Quebec, Canada.”

For all Mustang knew, since her brain automatically translated foreign languages into English, the woman could have been Chinese or Japanese, much less French-Canadian.

Gloved fingers extended, and Mustang clasped them. “Thank you for... clearing things up for me,” gushed the Sister. “God bless you.”

Fortunately, her high-heeled shoes were clicking across the piazza before Mustang realized her breach of protocol in not voicing a similar sentiment.

## IV

Trudging up to her apartment, Mustang brewed a pot of coffee to thaw her bones. The wood stove still generated a modicum of heat; she stretched her toes toward the black metal as she sipped pungent brew.

Peter O'Donnell arrived as bells from Assisi's many churches chimed 10:00. He accepted Mustang's offer of a mug, secretly hoping the sun breaking through mid-morning clouds would raise the temperature for their day's excursion.

"What's the first stop?" queried his volunteer assistant.

"The Proto-monastery. I want to capture the nuns at prayer, and eating a meal."

"How long did it take you to get permission to invade their privacy?"

"The Archbishop of Dublin wrote the necessary letters, since he initiated the project. I had to wait three years for a reply, though, which is why there's such a rush to get the final product pulled together."

"Otherwise, you would've come over last summer?"

"No, I actually prefer filming without the tourist crowds. Makes it easier to get a shot in one take, rather than fussing with stray people cutting across the background, losing the light because of delays with traffic, and such."

"Makes sense." Mustang picked up the tripod. "You ready?"

O'Donnell set his cup in the sink and balanced the camera on his shoulder. "Let's go."

As they walked to the Basilica Santa Chiara, they could see breath steaming from their mouths. Shops remained shuttered, and only two other brave souls wandered the lanes.

A brown-robe and black-veiled extern Sister granted them access to the cloistered domain of the Poor Clares, a community of women who withdrew from "the world", dedicating their lives to prayer and labor. Rare were the occasions when lay people trod up the spiral stone staircase, along arched corridors, and O'Donnell felt the need to talk in hushed tones.

"Have you ever been inside before?"

Mustang chuckled, "No, but I invaded the friars' Sacro Convento, on the other end of town."

Filing along a sunlit corridor, the filmmaker stumbled at this declaration. "How on earth..."

"Long story. Almost brought the walls down on them, too."

"Why have you such a... jaded view of priests and nuns?"

"It's not my view, it's Francis'. What he started over 800 years ago has been warped beyond recognition, and it galls him no end."

"Really? I've found the Sisters very tranquil and pleasant, their history quite... admirable."

"Did the ones you interviewed tell you about million dollar projects to build new convents, or mausoleums, rather than caring for the truly poor?"

O'Donnell's blue eyes widened. "No..."

"If you knew the truth, you'd be making a totally different documentary, I guarantee."

"Could be." Their guide ushered them into the magnificent, candle filled chapel, where the pair set up video and audio equipment. A steady procession of 40 identically-clad nuns assembled in wooden choir stalls angled toward the altar, intoning prayers in Italian.

Gradual rotation of the camera captured the historic beauty of the chamber, and the backs of veiled heads - individual Sisters anonymous by design. A boom microphone picked up their chant in stereo, and Mustang had to admit the combination would make for enjoyable viewing.

When the glow of flickering candles increased tenfold, then a hundredfold, as if the sun itself had invaded the premises, the monastery's residents dropped to their knees, whispering "Miracle, miracle!"

The producer glanced at Mustang, adjusting his zoom lens. "Is this you?"

"No..."

"Liar."

She thrust a finger toward the altar. "If you don't believe me, look!"

Above the gold tabernacle hovered Francis of Assisi, illuminated by numerous brilliant flames.

"What the hell..." grumbled O'Donnell.

"They're always praying for a sign, a revelation," reasoned Mustang. "Proof their petitions have reached God's ears. Maybe Francis wants to..."

The murmurs grew to a refrain of "Francesco, San Francesco."

Not a kindly affirmation of their good works, this apparition. Assisi's great saint stretched out his arms, and lightning shot from the wounds of the Stigmata in his hands, shattering every window and melting marble statues' faces.

Shrieks echoed on all sides, and the nuns doubled over to protect themselves from flying shards of glass. As the shower of splinters subsided, an eerie silence enveloped the sanctuary.

When the abbess - superior of the house - straightened, their surroundings had been restored to normal.

"A hallucination?" whimpered some.

Others opined, "A prediction of Christ's coming!"

Whatever had occurred, it had been digitally recorded for posterity.

Only Peter O'Donnell had the good sense not to tell the nuns as much. He claimed to have switched off his camera prior to the apparition and, rather than

move on to the next filming location, the pair retraced their steps to Mustang's flat, where they hooked up a small monitor to watch the footage in its entirety.

"What was Francis up to?" the Irishman puzzled.

"I'll tell you," replied the Assisi native from behind the love seat. "Day after day, their lips babble the same hollow words, the same selfish petitions for relief of aches and pain, or peace in warring countries - on *their* terms. They're oblivious to real expressions of prayer, which are wordless, nonspecific, and rooted in love. I've so longed to awaken them from their stupor..."

"And, you chose today, with the camera running?" Mustang mocked.

"Yes. The world needs to see, for this particular monastery isn't the only one where such abuses of spirituality take place."

O'Donnell protested, "I... can't make it part of my documentary..."

"Then, release the clip to the news agencies, and let them broadcast it."

"All that'll achieve is more fanatical tourists, Francis, jamming the streets in hopes of another miracle," said Mustang.

"She's right, you know," O'Donnell concurred.

With a chuckle, the woman quipped, "Besides, it reminds me of a stunt I pulled years ago, which also backfired."

Francis' dark orbs widened. "If you've been a bad influence on me, Mustang..."

"You've been a good influence on me, so we're even."

"Regardless of who's influenced whom, we're in one hell of a predicament," O'Donnell interspersed.

"We could spend the afternoon arguing the philosophical merits of your assertion, but I'd much rather grab a bite to eat at the bakery, and finish the task at hand." Mustang snatched her parka and waved cheerily to Francis. "You should probably make yourself scarce."

Inclining his shaggy brown head, with a wise smile, the saint dissipated.

O'Donnell buttoned his overcoat before slinging the equipment bag strap over his left shoulder. "My rental's in the car park behind San Rufino. We can drive to San Damiano."

Tripod tucked under her arm, Mustang grinned. "Thank you for not making me walk down - and up - that steep hill again!"

"You should be used to it by now."

"That one, you never get used to."

The slow descent of Mount Subasio, and winding roads through the valley, took almost the same amount of time as if they'd hiked to the small church where

St. Francis had heard the voice of Christ from the crucifix, and St. Clare had later lived with her first Sisters.

Mustang squirmed on the front seat of the Fiat. "It's been a long time since I've ridden in a car."

"Denis told me about your escape from hospital," O'Donnell remarked. "Along with other things."

"For instance?"

The driver cleared his throat tentatively. "Last time I checked on Boleskine, he was visiting his uncle. We had... a long chat about you."

"Peter..." warned Mustang's aggravated contralto.

"Sorry." O'Donnell downshifted. "If Dr. Sommers had his druthers, you'd be locked away in an institution right now, under permanent sedation."

"Why?"

"He thinks you're quite insane. He doesn't believe in your power..."

"What he's seen, and still..."

"You've got to understand, Mustang, he comes from a conservative, almost puritanical background. Anything... out of the ordinary... is often attributed to... evil spirits..."

"So, what you're saying is that he'd like to recreate the Salem witch hunts..."

"Not exactly, but you're close."

"Instead of burning me at the stake, he'd drug me up and strap me to a bed..."

"And study you..."

The woman exhaled loudly. "Like the others wanted to do."

"Yes."

"Well... damn him! Isn't there anyone I can trust on this planet?"

"You can trust me..."

She swiveled on the molded cushion. "Even though you took Boleskine in payment for trying to catch me on camera using my powers?"

O'Donnell navigated a tricky hair-pin curve. "I... I..."

"Never mind." Mustang glared out the window at the bleak Umbrian countryside. "As I've known since that fateful day when Jack Parsons died, I'm totally alone in this."

"I've always tried to help you..."

"How would turning me over to the Feds help me?"

"You needed to learn control..."

“I’ve learned it,” she snapped, “which is why you’re not plunging over the cliff as we speak.”

The documentary producer trembled visibly. “I’m sorry, Mustang. Truly.”

“Does Rachel know what you did?”

“No. She’s busy raising her family in Australia, enjoying life to the full.”

“That’s a relief, anyhow.”

The silver compact braked at an intersection. O’Donnell eyed his passenger, desperately. “What do you intend to do about Francis’... apparition in the chapel?”

“Why should I do anything?”

“As you said, it will bring more people to Assisi, which will... will...”

“Put them in harm’s way, meaning in case I get angry and do something stupid?”

He shrugged.

Through grit teeth, she mumbled, “The file, and the nuns’ memories, have already been erased.”

“Eh?”

“You heard me.”

“The... whole file?”

“No, just that minute or two.”

Steering onto the adjacent street, O’Donnell sighed. “Thank you.”

“When we’re done here, I never want to see you again, Peter. You can get yourself another narrator.”

“That... would be for the best.”

They unloaded the equipment in San Damiano’s empty parking lot, and stood for a moment contemplating the historic structure.

“Mustang,” O’Donnell said.

“What?”

“May I ask you one question before... I don’t have another chance?”

“What?” she grunted.

“You’ve... materialized Francis, Mark Twain, Mahatma Gandhi, and General Rommel. Other than wanting to bring back Thomas yesterday, why haven’t you... done it to others?”

“The only person I manifested on purpose was Lyndon Bixby, so his son could meet him and settle unresolved issues. The rest were accidents. As Francis told you, had I not been distracted by those Sisters, the results would have been...”

“Catastrophic?”

“To put it mildly.”

“Only, you didn’t realize it in the throes of your... impulse?”

“Thankfully, only a dozen people died.”

O’Donnell bristled. “I don’t see how you can say...”

“Let’s drop it, okay? What footage do you need?”

“The chapel, where Clare slept, and the exterior.”

She passed him the tripod. “Go for it.”

An hour later, Peter O’Donnell joined Mustang in the cloister garden, his task complete. “How’d you get in here?” he wondered.

“The friars who operate the place know me quite well. They also don’t lock the doors as they should.”

A rose bush, which should’ve been dormant in the midst of winter’s chill, bloomed with gorgeous red flowers before her.

“Do you really think you should?” hinted O’Donnell.

“I need a bit of beauty after... the past couple days.”

She bent to relish the delightful scent, and stroked the blossoms gently. Upon their departure, every plant in the garden sprang to life, though her companion did not notice.

The silence between them on the drive up the hill was palpable with tension. O’Donnell stopped the Fiat at the Porta Nuova near the Basilica Santa Chiara, and Mustang alighted. As she strode away, he rolled down his window. “What will you do?”

“Grab some dinner, go home, and watch old movies until spring.”

“I mean...”

She whirled on him, and he detected rage lighting her hazel orbs. “I will never again trust any human being who appears out of my past, pretending to have found me by chance, when what they really want is the same thing they’ve always wanted: to use my power for their own benefit!” She eased her escalating temper. “When you next talk to Rachel, tell her I love her, and I hope she’s eternally happy.”

On that note, Mustang marched into the town. She followed through on her plan, except for spending her mornings high on the mountain, with the wild horses. As she fed them treats of apples and carrots, stroking their manes and talking sweetly in their ears, she had no regrets about her treatment of Denis Sommers, Peter O’Donnell, and so many others. Those who had died deserved to die, for one reason or another. The greed and avarice which filled human hearts, causing them to ignore the welfare of those in need, to pretend at kindness, or holiness, or solicitude, could not be rooted out by external influences.

Francis' attempt in the Proto-monastery chapel proved that. Those women would not alter their style of prayer, merely because he showed them their intentions were roundly rejected. They would, instead, pray for additional signs, miracles, visions.

Individuals had to be shaken aware of their faults, and make an honest effort to reform, to change their attitude, their actions. When they refused, and approached her with their less-than-honorable motives, she could do naught but put them in their rightful place, give them their just reward: death.

Perched on a stone overlooking the Rocca Maggiore, Assisi, and the valley stretching below, Mustang caressed the signet ring on her index finger. Even Thomas, tragically, had craved her power. She pondered whether Jack Parsons had found himself in the same dilemma, so many years ago. Or, had he been able to keep to himself, discounted by neighbors as Boleskine's cantankerous groundskeeper, thus maintaining both his anonymity and his equilibrium?

In this modern world, she found that solution impossible. The media, the internet, spread news instantaneously, and her every mistake was publicized by casual witnesses, bringing the masses to her doorstep, no matter where she chose to live. She ached for Montana, for the horses... for Boleskine, for the horses... who loved unconditionally.

The worst part of the whole situation: her own death could not be counted on to relieve the turmoil. She wasn't even positive if she *could* die.

"Centuries of agony?" she snorted. "To hell with that!"