

The Mustang Chronicles:

Betrayed Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Mustang noticed the unusual influx of tourists that February, many bundled in wool coats, knit hats and leather gloves. Assisi's high elevation compounded the winter chill, a primary reason the woman stayed in her tiny apartment most days, near a warm fire in the wood stove.

A recurring clamor in the Piazza San Rufino had attracted her attention over the past week. Inexperienced tour guides were bringing their groups to the wrong Romanesque site, seeking the Basilica of St. Francis at the far north of town.

Accustomed to providing multilingual services for newcomers, she could've descended narrow flights of stairs to straighten out these lost souls. She withdrew from the window, however, colliding with a periodic visitor.

"They're looking for you," Francis announced, adjusting the worn cord holding his tattered brown robe at the waist..

"How do you know?"

"Do you not hear them?"

"Something about miracles."

"And you haven't seen the papers?"

"Don't bother."

"Maybe you should." The saint's image merged with the morning sunlight. "Especially the New York edition."

If Mustang hated anything, it was surprises. Anger welling, she tugged on jeans and a cable-knit sweater, tramping down to the Gran Caffè, where newspapers from the world's major cities were available. Propped against the doorjamb, she flipped through the *New York Times*, nothing capturing her interest until she spread wide the movie section.

"After film's blockbuster opening, pilgrims flock to Italy seeking modern miracle worker," read one headline.

The details across four columns froze Mustang's blood. Her life had been exposed, on multiplex screens across the U.S. and around the globe.

Sinking onto the nearest plastic chair, she ignored the bakery clerk's offer of coffee. Palsied fingers brushed auburn tresses from her pale forehead.

"Bastard!" she muttered. Johnny Rosemont, who'd conned her into being part of his bio-pic of St. Francis two years previous, had betrayed her confidence after that effort flopped at the box office. He'd recouped his losses on this... this...

“It wasn’t your friend,” came Francis’ baritone to her ear. “This was a German production.”

“He could’ve farmed it out to investors,” she countered. “He knew what would happen to him once I discovered...”

“Perhaps you should view the footage before drawing any conclusions.”

“Where? There are no theatres in Assisi.”

“There are in Rome, or Venice...”

Mustang bristled. “I haven’t traveled... that way in nearly a decade.”

“You could take the train.”

Too slow, and with adrenaline coursing through her veins, she wanted immediate answers.

Tossing the crushed jumble in the trash, Mustang Duryea marched from the cozy shop to the middle of the Piazza Santa Chiara. A moment later, the lightning bolt scattered crowds, who searched the sky for storm clouds, though none were visible.

All too visible in the dark, packed auditorium near Rome’s pricy shopping district were Mustang’s face from age 3 to 32, the places she’d lived, schools she attended, and friends - or so-called friends - telling what feats she’d performed in their presence.

The ones she’d allowed to live.

Badly recreated were spontaneous rain showers, earthquakes, melting rifles and ludicrous “magickal” rituals. Even worse, the grainy cell phone video of her leading a tour group through Assisi.

She recognized every member of that party, including Johnny Rosemont.

“I knew it!” she hissed from the last row.

Then, and most damaging, shadowy images of herself, Rosemont and a third, translucent presence on the road to San Damiano in the valley below Assisi.

The camera, which Rosemont must’ve planted without her knowledge, had captured St. Francis.

Not five seconds passed before the digital projector burst into flames. Alarms sounded; the building was evacuated amidst screams and panic.

The peace Mustang had known after achieving full control of the power passed to her by Jack Parsons, her grandfather, would never be recaptured. She would not be safe anywhere on the planet.

This was worse than being dogged for more than a decade by the late FBI agent, Ben Espinoza.

Her wounded hands causing excruciating pain, she traveled by rail from Rome’s Termini to Foligno, then on to Santa Maria degli Angeli, walking the three

miles from the station up Mount Subasio to Assisi. If she packed only essentials, she might escape detection among the thousands of curiosity seekers...

The FedEx international envelope had been slipped under the apartment door in her absence. Addressed to "ECD", the sender's initials, "JVK" made her wish to shred the parcel. Even if a million dollar check was tucked inside, John Vladislav Kowalski - aka Johnny Rosemont - would never be forgiven.

Instead, three sheets fell onto the kitchen table. The first was an affidavit, filed in Los Angeles County Court and notarized, attesting Erich Seiffert of Bonn, Germany claimed sole responsibility for the documentary titled, "A New Age of Miracles."

The second listed Seiffert's professional credits, among them key grip on Rosemont's Francis of Assisi film crew.

A handwritten message adorned the third enclosure. "If you come, I will protect you. I honestly didn't know."

"Will you leave?" queried Francis, hovering over her shoulder.

"I must, to protect you."

"I need no protection."

"Remember Brother Luigi, the fanatic? You don't want to deal with people like that, and from what I've seen wandering the streets, there are many."

"I can fade away quietly at any time. You need not fear for me."

"For Assisi, in that case. You don't want your home town overrun with lunatics."

Francis leaned against the warped kitchenette counter. "Indeed. The sincere pilgrims are bad enough."

Scorched stones in the Piazza San Rufino provided the only proof Mustang had ever been in Assisi, and few detected them. Her arrival at Johnny Rosemont's weekend getaway - the Oceanside, California estate listed on the overnight package - occurred in broad daylight, fortunately shielded from public sight by numerous palm trees.

Conversing with studio executives via his computer, the lightning's close proximity severed Rosemont's connection, and knocked him off his chair. Mustang entered the Spanish-style bungalow through sliding glass doors, accompanied by the odor of burning flesh. She stared down at her host.

"I'd offer to help you up, but..." she displayed her charred skin.

The tanned, lean actor scrambled upright, brushing his backside. "Thanks, anyway."

"I'm trusting you on this, John."

"I won't fail you."

“You already have.”

Rosemont waved her to a gaudy, plaid sectional sofa. “How so?”

“Don’t you do background checks on your crew before starting production?”

“Sure. We had no way of knowing what the guy’s *next* project would be.”

Mustang plopped on overstuffed cushions. “I thought Hollywood was no more than a rumor-mill, always gossiping about upcoming big releases.”

“Seiffert flew under the Hollywood radar. Secured his financing in Europe, only coming to the States for the interviews.”

“Kids who graduated from Canyon Creek High with me, librarians in Helena...”

“You want a drink?”

“Double whiskey.”

“I don’t stock Jameson.”

“Whatever you’ve got.”

She emptied the tumbler in one gulp. Rosemont’s brown orbs widened.

“Hey, it’s been a rough day,” smirked Mustang.

He pointed right. “The kitchen’s there, if you’re hungry, and your bedroom is upstairs.”

“What about security?”

“Three shifts of armed guards, with dogs. Any unauthorized entry is promptly intercepted.”

“Good,” the guest yawned. “I need some sleep.”

Rosemont caught her wrist as she passed him. “You can stay here as long as you like.”

“Geez, John, more tattoos?” She ogled a design of horizontal lines peeking out from the t-shirt sleeve on his bicep, sandwiched between other inked images.

“It’s from the *I, Ching*. The Chinese Book of Changes. Hexagram 9.”

“Which is?”

“It’s about understanding that you only have the power to change yourself, and can’t force things without horrendous repercussions. Staying focused on your goals is best, while being tolerant, patient, detached and adaptable. That’s the way to reap a good harvest in the end.”

“Damn, I should get one of those.”

“I chose it because of you.”

Her pert nose crinkled.

“Watching you struggle for control of your... gift, I realized my struggles were quite similar.”

“I don’t think you ever caused someone’s death, or decimated a historic building.”

“No, but I did cause you an awful lot of trouble because of my selfishness.”

“You don’t have to make amends for the Francis fiasco, or for this.”

“It’s not amends, *per se*, it’s...”

She met his gaze, shaking off his grip. “Don’t get sentimental on me.”

“Just think what we could accomplish...”

“What? A string of summer hits to swell your bank account? Any of the bushes out your back door can drop dollars in lieu of leaves, at my command.”

“World peace?”

“Sure, I can destroy the weapons, but if their hearts don’t change, they’ll start from scratch.”

A puff of strained breath blew a lock of lank black hair off Rosemont’s perfect face. “You’re right.”

“You knew that before you opened your mouth. What do you really want?”

“Don’t *you* want someone to love you who isn’t after your power, who knows your deepest secrets?”

“Everybody is after my power now, and they know *all* my secrets.” A horrible flashback made Mustang shudder: a myriad of spies converging on Boleskine House in Scotland. Not just governments would pursue her after this debacle, but corporations, religious authorities, and no predicting who else.

Her only refuge might be a Himalayan mountain peak. Or, urging nature to take its revenge on humanity for devastating the resources.

Leaving her alone to wander the continents at will.

“You’ve the look of an avenging angel,” Rosemont observed.

“John, if the world ended tomorrow, and I had the means to save you, would you want to survive?”

Her mysterious contralto puzzled him. “I...”

“If it were just you and I, in a Garden of Eden, could you be happy?”

Rosemont didn’t have a chance to reply. Dogs began barking outside the house, and the crackle of radio transmissions indicated an intruder.

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang attempted to beat a hasty retreat; her host restrained her.

A hefty young Samoan butler brought in a padded manila envelope after boisterous tumult at the front door.

“You sure it’s not a bomb?” prodded Mustang.

“It’s the script I’ve been expecting.”

“A comedy, I hope?”

“No, another biographical deal.” Staples separated and agile fingers extracted a thick manuscript.

Hazel eyes glanced at the bold font on the cover: *Flames in the Desert*. Mustang inquired, “Who’s it about?”

“Jack Parsons.”

The papers were ripped from Rosemont so rapidly, he laughed. His guest was skimming pages and devouring the dialogue before he could retrieve the stack.

“Don’t worry, Mustang,” he soothed in his resonant bass, as she again grabbed for the screenplay. “It’ll never be produced.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I bought the rights from the author, with plans to stuff it in a drawer for the next 20 years.”

“Must’ve cost a pretty penny.”

“One million five.”

Mustang’s jaw dropped. “Why waste the money, John?”

“For you. Seiffert’s documentary didn’t connect you to Parsons. He left that to his partner, so they could collect more profits.”

Tears welled beneath drooping eyelids. She permitted Rosemont to embrace her as she wept on his shoulder.

“I told you I’d protect you, didn’t I?” he whispered through her reddish mop.

“I didn’t realize how well.” She eventually raised her head, and he kissed the moistness from her flushed cheeks. “What about other copies? Or computer files?”

“This is the last. One of the clauses in the contract required he turn over all notes, drafts and files.”

Unconvinced, Mustang asked, “What’s the guy’s name?”

“Quinn Ratchett.”

“A pseudonym?”

“The contract wouldn’t be legal if it was.”

For the briefest instant, Mustang concentrated, then flashed a contented smile.

“What did you do?” gulped Rosemont.

“Quinn Ratchett’s hard drive is now one lump of congealed metal.”

II

“Better safe than sorry, I suppose.” Rosemont grunted.

Mustang freed herself and crossed to the sliding doors. “I’m afraid you’ll be sorry you ever met me.”

“Go on upstairs and hit the sack. I’ll have Cam call you when dinner’s ready.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’m presenting at the annual West Coast Theatre Patrons’ Awards in Los Angeles tonight. I’m an easy touch for them, since I got my start in community theatre as a kid.”

“You’ll be home late?”

“Not ‘til tomorrow afternoon. Production meetings.” Rosemont slipped his arm around her waist from behind, and together they contemplated their reflection in the glass. “You going to miss me?”

“I’ve had these... powers almost 20 years, and have rarely known fear in that time. At this moment, I’m so scared, the force of it could blow the roof off the house.”

Her companion recoiled. “Please, don’t.”

Her sad grin didn’t reassure him. “I *have* learned self-control. You helped me, remember?”

“It had something to do with this.” He kissed her lightly on the lips. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Presented a rolling suitcase by Cam, the butler, Rosemont departed. The Samoan eyed Mustang suspiciously.

“I’d think you’d be accustomed to John keeping his women here,” the visitor quipped.

Cam’s accented growl rattled the windows. “Mr. Rosemont never brings women here. This is where he comes to relax, meditate and think.”

“He’s still into meditation?”

“Three hours each day, at a minimum.”

“Good for him.”

“Meditation might benefit you,” stated the former athlete brusquely.

“John tried to teach me way back, but I wasn’t a very good student.”

“If you wish, I will teach you.”

Mustang squinted. “In my current frame of mind...”

“Mr. Rosemont didn’t believe he could calm his thoughts, at first.”

“You were his teacher?”

Cam nodded the dark head set on sturdy shoulders.

“I would be honored if you would do the same for me.”

“Come, we’ll fix dinner. After a good sleep, we’ll begin.”

Following him into the pristine kitchen, Mustang wasn’t certain she’d be able to sleep at all. A vegetarian meal satisfied her stomach, however, and intensified her drowsiness. She excused herself once a bowl of fresh berries was emptied, climbed stone stairs and fell onto the king size bed fully clothed.

She dreamt of standing atop a snow-capped mountain, witnessing all manner of natural disasters annihilate billions of people and animals. Unlike her vision when hospitalized in Scotland for a gunshot wound, she could not save the hoards crying her name.

They had hurt her too deeply, craving a share of her power for their own egotistical gains.

She woke with a jolt, having watched Johnny Rosemont’s lifeless body float past in a tsunami of debris...

A cool ocean breeze billowed sheer beige curtains drenched in sunlight. For a moment, Mustang didn’t recall the room with its bullfighting fresco painted on the plaster wall, and furniture culled directly from a 19th century hacienda.

She didn’t feel hung over, then she glimpsed the previous day’s Los Angeles paper on the night stand. “Search Continues for Mysterious Miracle Worker.”

Wondering if Cam, abruptly standing in the open doorway holding a breakfast tray, knew the truth, she stretched. Employers sometimes confided in servants, and Cam being Rosemont’s meditation instructor, they might actually be close friends.

“Too early in the day for your mind to be spinning at such speeds,” said the butler, arranging dishes on a table near the window. “You must pay attention to your breathing, and urge your thoughts to slow their pace.”

Mustang realized she’d been holding her breath, and exhaled loudly.

Cam demonstrated the proper technique; she imitated him as best she could.

“Once you are conscious of your breathing, focus on one concept - something peaceful, like a flowing stream or blooming flower. Do not let other thoughts drag you away from your tranquility.”

“Sounds tough,” sniffed his pupil.

“It gets easier with practice.”

He left her seated on the mattress, growing more and more frustrated as an hour passed. A spontaneous sand storm on the beach down the slope from Rosemont's bungalow sent sunbathers racing for cover.

And Johnny Rosemont racing home from Hollywood.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he raged, stomping into the living room as mission bells tolled noon.

Her contrite response, "Nothing intentional."

"Here I've promised to keep you safe, and you make news no sooner than you arrive!"

"Stop talking nonsense!"

"You're lucky this house is in my legal name, or the paps would be crawling out of the woodwork. As it is, that little show you put on is keeping meteorologists busy fielding questions from the news hounds."

"Sorry. I was trying to meditate."

"So was I, on the southbound train. Didn't work."

"I told you you'd regret ever meeting me."

He clutched her shoulders. "It's not that, Mustang. Our future depends on how quickly this miracle crap blows over. Reports of inexplicable occurrences will add fuel to the fire, and you'll be confined indoors until you're old and grey."

Mustang heard very little of Rosemont's tirade. She shrugged him off. "What's this 'our future' business?"

"You have to face facts: we've been inextricably linked, even before we met in Vegas. We're meant to weather this crisis together, or not at all."

"Your meditation bring you to that conclusion?" she scoffed.

"No, my gut. And I always trust my gut."

"Even with the Francis flick?"

"We're still making money on it. It's developed quite a cult following. The old mission up the road has seen a decided increase in church attendance, because of their connection to St. Francis. They can't keep enough copies of the DVD in their gift shop, sales are so brisk."

Conceding the point, Mustang queried, "So, what does this link we share entail?"

"Maybe that Garden of Eden scenario you mentioned yesterday. I don't know."

"I will say this much: of all the people who've disrupted my life since... you are the most balanced and least grasping. I wouldn't be against living under the same roof, with stipulations."

Rosemont opened his mouth to request a clarification, interrupted by his cell phone.

The argument which ensued, dealing with the menu to be supplied on location by a catering firm, sent Mustang into hysterics. She collapsed on the plaid sectional, spasms convulsing her torso.

“It’s not funny,” barked Rosemont, slamming the device on a filigreed oak desk.

The woman sobered gradually. “Your existence is filled with petty garbage. If I had to handle such situations, the West Coast would be in ruins.”

“Admittedly, I can’t get used to all the behind-the-scenes drama. I would’ve been smarter to limit myself to working in front of the camera.”

“For you, as for me, our choices carry dire consequences.”

“If you agree to stay with me, I may choose to get out of the business entirely.” He knelt beside her, cradling her hands in his. “We could commandeer the Monster and travel the world.”

“I’ve done that, and people are the same wherever I go. The architecture is different, that’s all.”

His head sagged, black locks obscuring his face. “You’ve lost your sense of adventure.”

“No way. My idea of adventure, though, would be one week of normalcy.”

“Whatever that is.”

“Amen, brother.”

Almost puppy-like brown eyes met hers. “Would you consider normal settling down with a loving husband who commutes to work each morning, brings home a regular paycheck and fathers your children?”

“I’d consider that boring.” Her wistful expression confirmed how she shone like a beacon. “I’d like a ranch, secluded, with horses, trustworthy hands and a reliable partner.”

“Done.”

She scrutinized Rosemont’s features quizzically. “Huh?”

“With my share of the gross from the World War II film, I bought a place in British Columbia for a summer home. Ten thousand acres, and it’s yours if you say the word.”

This bid for normalcy vanished in a hail of gunfire. No dogs warned of trespassers, meaning the source originated beyond the property’s perimeter.

Rosemont pulled Mustang onto the floor as projectiles shred the upholstery. Immediately, she righted herself, shouting, “Stop!”

Shrieks echoed across the swimming pool, and security guards were heard converging on three suspects entangled in tree branches above the 8-foot adobe fence. High powered rifles lay on the ground, barely identifiable.

“Who...” stammered Rosemont, raising himself into an undamaged recliner.

“Not paparazzi, for sure,” Mustang chuckled.

“The humor eludes me.”

She wrapped her arms around him, his chin at waist level. “Laughing about it prevents me from crying my eyes out. It’s happened so many times.”

The assailants were escorted into the house, German Shepherds snarling at their heels. Rosemont straightened. “Who are you?”

Mustang didn’t need an answer. “Skip the interrogation, John,” she advised. “Their IDs - if they possess any - are forged. They’re trained not to divulge classified information, especially when tortured.”

“What should be done with them?” challenged the homeowner. “If we contact the police, we’ll be the ones who get interrogated.”

“Frisk them for any concealed weapons and turn them loose.”

“Won’t they try again?” a squat guard protested.

“Not with their trigger fingers broken.” Mustang’s sneer coincided with anguished howls from the trio of suddenly debilitated assassins.

Herded from the dwelling, they staggered along the deserted coastline - closed to the public post-sand storm - fainting within 100 yards of each other.

“Are they dead?” Rosemont speculated from the second floor balcony overlooking the ocean.

“No, unfortunately. When they regain consciousness, however, they won’t remember why they were here.”

“Neat trick.”

“Short term amnesia.”

“Have you any idea who sent them?”

Mustang snorted. “Honestly? I don’t think they were after me. Too soon for any foreign interest to track me, and Homeland Security doesn’t give a damn, based on their reaction to Ben Espinoza’s reports.”

“What beef would they have with me?”

“Maybe they think that monster of a DC-10 you fly is equipped for spy missions.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Any of your films laced with anti-communist themes or derogatory remarks about Mohammed?”

“I steer clear of propaganda.”

“What about Cam?”

“We met in high school - thirty years ago. There’s no less political sort on the planet.”

“Any of the neighbors... controversial?”

“Oceanside’s mayor lives two houses north, and California’s governor pops in for periodic vacations. They’re cousins, or something.”

“Those thugs probably targeted the wrong house,” Mustang sighed. “To be sure, how soon can you be ready for that trip to Canada?”

The actor’s jaw gaped. “You mean...”

“I’m accepting your offer.”

He grabbed her and twirled her around the living room, knocking a lamp off the end table and tripping over the fire irons. She didn’t resist when he drew her close and kissed her. No tremors jarred the floor, the walls didn’t crack, no glass shattered.

“We can fly up tomorrow,” he murmured as his lips moved along her slender neck and shoulders. “I’ll have to be in Los Angeles late next week, though.”

Mustang stiffened. “You won’t be quitting the business?”

“I’m already committed to this project. Pre-production and shooting will take six months or so. It’s not due for release until next summer, so there’ll be a gap before I’ll have to do the promotional tour.”

His cell phone emitted a shrill ring tone, startling them both. “Crap,” swore Rosemont.

“What it is?”

“Remember that skinny script girl on the Francis movie?”

“Not really.”

“A kid, no more than 25. Blonde, glasses. She’s basically been stalking me ever since we wrapped in Assisi. I’ve changed my number multiple times, filed a restraining order, and still...”

“Ignore her.”

“I’ve tried. She always manages to be at the studio when I have meetings, or on location...”

“Have her fired.”

“I’d rather she get badly needed psychological treatment.”

“Push the courts to commit her.”

“According to my lawyer, nothing can be done until she’s caught violating the restraining order, or threatens me with bodily harm.”

“That’s crazy.”

Rosemont shut off the phone and tucked it in the desk drawer.

His guest hinted, "You want me to..."

He spun toward her. "To what? Give her short term amnesia?"

"Maybe divert her attention."

"I wouldn't inflict her on anyone else. The repeated calls through the night, seeing her two rows away on the train..."

"Fine. We'll leave at the crack of dawn, and she won't be able to find us in British Columbia."

"True." Rosemont resumed his embrace, smothering Mustang with playful kisses. "We'll live like normal people."

"Do normal people like the feel of sand between their toes?"

"I'd say yes to that."

"Good."

III

Mustang yanked Johnny Rosemont through the Spanish bungalow to the beach-side door. A golden sun descended over the Pacific; the red-head kicked her sneakers toward the surf, then peeled off her tube socks. The damp, packed surface cooled the soles of her feet, and caused her entire being to beam.

Rosemont knocked off his loafers and cuffed his trousers, revealing muscular, tattooed calves.

"Why do that to yourself?" Mustang asked.

"It's my way of commemorating special events - or people - in my life."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Not much."

"What do your directors think about filming their leading man with... so much extra color?"

"I usually convince the costumer to give me long sleeves. If my skin does show, the special effects team use their computers to erase the tats."

"Adds to the budget, eh?"

"Cheaper going with long sleeves."

As the sky transitioned from pink to orange and red, Mustang took off jogging. The actor gave her a head start, then sprinted to catch - and pass - her.

She increased her speed but, despite being younger, couldn't catch Rosemont until he stumbled on a half-built sand castle.

He tripped her as she leapt over his prostrate form, and together they tumbled into the waves. While they laughed, wrestled and ended kissing, stars became visible overhead.

“Damn, we’d better get back,” the drenched Rosemont groaned, hoisting himself off the sand.

Mustang caressed his arm tenderly. “Never in my life...”

“Hush, love. Or, is that word anathema?”

“Only because everything and everyone I’ve loved has been taken from me, through my own fault. I don’t want to... jinx this. If anything happened to you...”

“We’ll be safe in Canada.”

She allowed him to lift her to her feet. “May the day come when I’m safe from myself.”

Slowly, they retraced their steps through the high tide.

Cam prepared a sumptuous dinner, with chocolate mousse for dessert.

They spent the evening watching two of Rosemont’s early, campy science fiction farces. Mustang hadn’t laughed so hard in years.

“They use Play-Doh to model those monsters?” she guffawed as the credits rolled.

Her host shrugged. “What can I say? The director had a really low budget. Speaking of budgets, are you going to let me buy you some clothes, since you left Assisi in such a hurry?”

“Not if I can convert the Euros I stuffed in my jeans to dollars.”

“Despite the favorable conversion rate, a few Euros won’t buy much in California.”

“A couple thousand might.”

“A couple thousand?” Rosemont echoed.

“I managed to save a tidy nestegg, thanks to a generous film crew...”

He threw up his hands in defeat. “Nothing more irritating than an independent woman.”

“This independent woman is going to bed,” she declared, rising from the recliner.

“I’ve got to pack, myself.”

They mounted the stairs, arms linked. “Will Cam be coming with us?” Mustang wondered.

“No, he stays here and meditates when I’m not around.”

“And the security guards?”

“They’ll come along, for a few weeks, at least. Until we’re positive no one has followed us.”

Mustang's lips brushed his cheek before crossing the guest room threshold. Without a change of clothes, she crawled beneath the sheets in her underwear. Recurring dreams of a psychotic blonde stalker disturbed her slumber; she grasped they were more than just fears rising from her subconscious. The little script girl posed a greater danger to the normalcy she and Johnny Rosemont craved than any team of foreign agents.

Mustang borrowed Rosemont's Guns 'n Roses t-shirt after her morning shower, and a pair of green sweatpants. They breakfasted on bacon, eggs and orange juice before Cam drove them to the airport in a nondescript SUV. Slumped on the front passenger seat, the woman tried to suppress a sensation of impending doom while they sped north on I-5.

"This is more civilization than I've seen in ages," she remarked. "So many people, and the cars!"

"Isolating yourself has put you out of touch with progress," said Rosemont from the back.

"You call this progress? Look at the haze of pollution!"

Cam interjected, "From an economic standpoint, increasing goods available to the public *is* progress. It keeps companies in business, and millions employed."

Impressed by the Samoan's stoic wisdom, Mustang again scanned the countryside. Wildflowers and succulents dotted the fields, with a backdrop of mountains. Beautiful it might be, but she wouldn't want to live there.

From Rosemont's description, the Canadian ranch would be as close to her parents' home in Montana as she could possibly hope. She'd been happy with the six horses she owned at Boleskine, letting dozens - hundreds - roam free would redouble her joy.

During the Assisi years, she hadn't ridden once, only carrying treats to the wild horses living high on Mount Subasio. The thought of retraining herself to the saddle raised a cackle in her throat; she'd look mighty idiotic walking bowlegged.

Detouring into an Orange County shopping complex, Mustang exchanged her Euros - with Rosemont's assistance, since she no longer possessed a valid ID - and purchased a selection of jeans, shirts, shoes and underclothes. Cam toted her bags and his boss' suitcase onto the Monster in its private hangar at LAX, as the flight crew prepared for takeoff.

"This brings back a lot of memories," noted Mustang, flopping onto a seat in the unconventional cabin.

"Pleasant memories?"

"Mixed. Last time, I hadn't mastered my powers, and felt like a freak on display. But I enjoyed the company."

Rosemont acknowledged the compliment, buckling himself at the computer desk. The aircraft lurched into motion, and Mustang relished waves of relief washing over her like the whitecaps she could see thousands of feet below as they soared through the clouds.

Three hours put them on the ground in Vancouver. Distracting the customs agents proved simple, then the luggage was transferred into the caretaker's Econoline van. They sped past snow covered buildings along rutted highways to the foothills.

A track off the main road extended more than a mile through trees bare of leaves. The ranch house - a 4,200 square foot log and stone domicile - awed the newcomer.

"How many bedrooms?" she gasped.

"I've never counted."

Nick, the caretaker - a tribal elder - replied, "Eight, and ten bathrooms."

"Suitable for getting lost when prowling around for a midnight snack," snickered Mustang. "Are there servants?"

"I don't like people milling around, as a rule," Rosemont explained. "If I don't feel like eating, I don't want to be guilted into it because someone has cooked a meal. Any mess I make, I'm capable of cleaning on my own."

"What about Cam?"

"He's more friend than butler. He putters in the beach house to pay rent on the place."

Instructed to pick whichever suite she preferred, Mustang wandered the mansion throughout the afternoon. On the second floor, a corner room opened onto a balcony with an ideal view of vast grazing land. She imagined horses feeding there come spring, and dumped her load on the carpet.

She'd been running too long, she mused - from Montana to Scotland to Italy. Constantly looking over her shoulder. No more. She determined this would be her last refuge, and she would die rather than flee.

"Mustang!" Rosemont shouted up the rustic staircase accented by split-log railings. "I found you a winter coat!"

"We going out to make snow angels?"

"I thought we'd play 'king of the hill'."

"Which hill?"

"The one behind the barn."

Mustang scanned the landscape. "That's half way to the border!"

"You not up for a hike?"

"Not without sturdy boots, gloves and a warm hat!"

“All here.”

Leaving the unpacking for later, the woman didn't pause to assess her tousled appearance in the mirror before bounding down to the foyer, with its collection of moose heads and bear trophies.

Turned out the “hike” was a ride on a snowmobile to the property's far reaches, Mustang bundled in a parka reminiscent of her teenage years, holding tight to Rosemont in his insulated ski suit and goggles.

“Talk about isolated,” she yelled against the biting north wind when they stopped to survey a river coursing through the valley. “This is incredible!”

“I've never been out here,” admitted the actor. “The few visits I've made, I stuck close to the house.”

“If it were me, I would've been riding hours on end, exploring every bush.”

“Remind me, when we get back, to show you the stable.”

“Nice?”

“Heated, indoor track, massive tack room...”

“I never suspected you were that into horses.”

“I wasn't, until I saw your layout at Boleskine. I had this built, hoping...”

Mustang thumped his back. “I told you not to get sentimental.”

“Can I help it if, once in a lifetime, you meet someone who gets under your skin, and you can't ever forget?”

“More than once in a lifetime, maybe.”

“For instance?” pressed Rosemont.

“I told you: Jim Neville, the cop; Thomas Burton, the Shakespearian actor; Lyndon Bixby, who battled his own demons.”

“They were years ago.”

“I'll never completely rid my memory of their faces, or...”

“Or, what?” Rosemont shifted on the snowmobile seat.

“Jim and Bix *died* because of me.” She flexed her feet inside heavy boots.

“Can we head in? My toes are frozen.”

The vehicle sped over rough terrain, and the pair recovered their “land legs” en route from the barn to the house.

Warmed by a blaze in the living room's carved granite fireplace, they sipped hot chocolate and munched potato chips. Mustang discovered the adjoining chamber had been outfitted as a screening room, perfect for viewing wide screen classics she'd missed so much.

The collection on built-in shelves made her drool in anticipation.

Rosemont observed her reaction from the doorway, a pleased smile lighting his tanned countenance, augmenting slight wrinkles around his eyes and mouth.

“Did you do this for me?” ventured Mustang.

“Half and half. I like old movies, too. And, they’ll keep you out of trouble when I fly out tomorrow.”

“Can’t you do a computer call, or something?”

“There’s no signal here in the wilderness. Haven’t you noticed? My cell hasn’t rung once.”

“Is there a land line?”

“An ancient crank model in the kitchen. I don’t think it’s connected anymore.”

Distant barking penetrated the walls. From the security control room, a report of caribou confirmed the false alarm.

“How ‘bout dinner?” suggested the host.

“I’m ravenous.”

“Then roast beef and potatoes, heaped on two plates.”

Meandering to the renovated kitchen, Mustang stated, “Just don’t ever try to feed me venison.”

“There may be some in the freezer. Nick is an avid hunter, and may have shared some of his take.”

“He kill the bears hanging in the hall?”

“Him, or his sons.”

They cooked, ate and washed the dishes. “You know what I really like about this place?” said Mustang as they gravitated back to the cozy fire, coffee mugs in hand.

“This glorious example of native workmanship?”

“Yes, and the quiet. No arguments to cause heartburn or spoil a tasty meal.”

“You, too?”

“Not an evening passed without my mom and dad bickering at the table. Sitting in absolute silence would’ve been better for my digestion.”

“At our house, my mom and older brother constantly got into it.”

“Cole slaw?”

Rosemont hugged her. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Remembering that corny joke.”

Escorting her to her room as the grandfather clock in the foyer chimed midnight, Mustang was grateful for his gentlemanly solicitude. He kissed her affectionately and waited until the door latched, making no unwelcome overtures.

He could've pressed his advantage, like so many others. Whether mutual respect or saintly patience, the reason didn't matter. Mustang promised herself, if the normalcy continued, she would reciprocate Johnny Rosemont's feelings.

He'd departed before she awoke Friday morning. So long, she'd risen at dawn to tend her horses. She'd broken the habit in Assisi. With the melting snow, she'd again have responsibility for her stock and, frankly, she couldn't wait.

Being alone in the huge house drove her to the brink in less than a week. Video after video didn't hold her attention. Strolls through the stable served no purpose. She broke with tradition and rode the snowmobile - precariously, having never driven a car - to a remote village, phoning Rosemont from a booth in the diner.

"Are you okay?" he demanded in a tense bass.

"Would you object if I got a puppy to keep me company?"

"You miss me that much?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad."

She chuckled at his sarcasm. "Any sign of your stalker?"

"None, but my publicity guy put out word we'd be shooting on location indefinitely. She's most likely trolling the bars in New Orleans, searching for me."

"Is that where you're headed?"

"We need to catch the Mardi Gras parades. Cheaper than recreating them, off-season."

"Send me a postcard, at least."

"Maybe a voodoo doll," he joked.

"No, thanks."

"Love you."

He spoke the words so naturally, their impact didn't hit her until she passed the fork in the road to the ranch. She hit the snowmobile's brakes and stared at the sea of white surrounding her.

White, except for a figure clad in black, trudging along the badly plowed road.

Nowhere close to any houses.

"Oh, hell..."

Mustang didn't dare veer toward the lone traveler. Best to warn the guards and lock the deadbolts, priming the shotgun hung near one of the moose heads.

She skipped lunch and dinner, pacing the corridors and using antique binoculars wedged in a kitchen cupboard to scour the landscape for movement.

Of course, she guessed any violence would be planned for darkness, as when psychotic teacher Wilfrid Bailey sought his revenge for her interference with his murderous rampage so long ago.

Confident she could deter any attack while awake, Mustang delayed sleep with pot after pot of strong coffee. She dreaded being assaulted in bed, one of her rare defenseless moments.

Every noise set her nerves atingle. Ceiling beams creaked, her bent-wood rocking chair squeaked. Dying embers on the living room grate popped like firecrackers. She made the circuit of the dwelling, closing all the draperies, to avoid any scenes drawn from Rosemont's old science fiction movies of a hideous face peering through the window.

Exhaustion took its toll, and she dozed in the screening room through the wee hours. The script girl, wielding a butcher knife, invaded her dreams yet again; Mustang's hazel eyes shot open, fully expecting the young woman to commence slicing her to pieces.

The guards changed shift at six AM, with the off duty supervisor reporting all secure. Mustang couldn't shake the feeling of an uninvited presence, spending restless nights worrying - in vain.

IV

Nick's rusty Econoline van rumbled up the unpaved drive that dreary Thursday, depositing black suit and fedora-garbed Johnny Rosemont on the porch. Her usually fresh features worn and pale, auburn tresses uncombed, purple sweats baggy, Mustang greeted him with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, ignoring the dozen red roses he presented and his cursory peck on her cheek..

He held her at arm's length. "What's happened to you?"

"Paranoia, I suppose."

His furrowed brow beneath the black mane aroused a tightness in her chest.

"You've had news?" she postulated.

"She evidently recognized the New Orleans story as bogus. The TSA at LAX notified the police she boarded a flight to Vancouver late last week. I skipped out on shooting as soon as I could."

"How long can you stay?"

"Three, four days."

"Anyone hanging around out there will be a popsicle by then."

He blew on his gloveless fingers. "I feel like one now."

Nick pushed past Rosemont, toting bags of groceries, and followed by a rotund woman with a box of cooking pots and utensils.

“What’s all this?” puzzled Mustang.

“Ilona is Nick’s wife. When she heard I was coming home, she insisted on preparing a festive dinner.”

“Why festive?”

“Today’s my fiftieth birthday.”

Mustang’s left eyebrow arched. “I wish I’d known.”

“I’ve never really celebrated birthdays, for obvious reasons. The production company offices are inundated with mail bags full of cards and gifts which never get opened, even by the assistants.”

“I’m sure your fans would be glad to know their efforts go unheeded,” came the sarcastic comment.

“Back when it was just a trio of guys flying around in the Monster eking out a few bucks with low budget thrillers, fan mail wasn’t a problem. We didn’t get any. One mega-hit, though, and the piles began to mount. It’s impossible to answer every one, or read them. There’s a staff of 30 college grads who do nothing all day but open envelopes and sign photos with the auto-pen.”

“More disappointment for the fans.”

Rosemont led Mustang into the screening room. “The reason they’re called ‘fans’ is because it’s short for ‘fanatic’. Also, they exist in a fantasy world. Publicizing that most letters end up in the trash would only ruin their unrealistic dreams.”

He positioned her in the leather armchair and loaded a DVD in the projector.

“This is no time for old movies,” she argued, squirming to her feet.

Firm hands lowered her onto the cushions. “This one’s new.”

Reluctantly, she watched as a long view of lush vistas closed in on a herd of magnificent horses. They ran as one, led by a regal black stallion.

“Footage for a Disney flick?” she hinted.

“No. These are yours.”

Swallowing hard, Mustang’s hazel orbs shifted between the wall and Rosemont two, three times. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, love. I contacted a few friends between shots, and they found me these. I bought the lot this morning. They’ll be shipped up next month.”

She leapt into his arms, feeling a thousand times better than she had mere seconds earlier. Their kiss lasted until Ilona shouted that dinner would be ready in ten minutes.

“How come it’s your birthday, and I get the present?” queried Mustang.

“Because the best present I could get is you.”

Both smiled through the exquisite meal of pork roast, red rice, green bean casserole and triple chocolate cake. Rosemont blew out a cluster of candles, which created quite a torch when lit. He nearly singed his lank black mane in the process.

They helped Ilona clean the kitchen afterward, ignoring her objections. Once her husband’s van had been loaded with the oversized box, Mustang and Rosemont found themselves alone.

In the living room, they nestled on a bear skin rug near leaping flames. For the first time in days, Mustang felt safe. Soon, both slept.

To be roused after dark by an ominous thump. No other commotion could be heard, but their hearts were beating so rapidly, they could no longer relax.

From a dim corner, Rosemont drew an acoustic Gibson guitar. Nimble fingers ran a quick scale up and down the six strings, and he adjusted the tuning. Strumming a few chords, he hummed the melody and improvised a few riffs.

“Something else you’re good at, eh?” Mustang jibed.

“Back when me and my friends were getting started in the business, we earned enough to pay the rent on our apartment doing weekend gigs as a punk rock band.”

“Don’t tell me you had a mohawk?”

“No, that was Bob. If you look close, you can see the scars where my piercings eventually closed up.”

“Piercings, and tattoos?”

“Them, I decided to keep.”

He launched into some tunes from the 70s.

“Why didn’t you become a musician full time?”

“Musicians, like actors, are a dime a dozen in California. The chances of getting noticed are slim, often none.”

“You got noticed.”

“We got ourselves noticed, screening the early movies on college campuses. They developed an underground following and, with the internet, word got around.”

“Which is when the big boys came calling?”

Rosemont shrugged. He abruptly stopped playing, set aside the instrument and flexed his digits. “I need more practice.”

“Sounded good to me.”

“By the way, I had a good laugh when I flew back to Los Angeles last week,” the actor stated.

“I could use one, myself.”

“The three assassins whose hands you fractured? The cops caught up with them, and you were correct about them targeting the wrong house. The governor had been visiting his cousin down the street, and they were mob hitmen, contracted to whack him so he wouldn’t sign some legislation or other.”

“What about updates on the ‘miracle’ front?”

“Your landlord in Assisi, finding you gone, has opened your flat as a tourist attraction. Charges five Euros per person. The lines stretch through the Piazza San Rufino almost down to the Basilica of St. Francis.”

“Silly old man.”

“Silly, but rich.”

Mustang proposed, “True wealth lies in being able to trust someone with your life.”

“I heartily agree, but we also have enough cash so you won’t have to cheat the casinos any more.”

She shoved him away playfully, and he tackled her, rolling on the floor. Finally out of breath, their eyes met.

“How ‘bout we get to bed?” suggested Rosemont.

“I don’t want to sleep alone.”

“Sleep with me, then.”

Mustang hadn’t shared a bed with a man since... Somberly, she let Rosemont guide her to the master suite.

“Thank you for not having some hunting trophy mounted above the headboard.”

“I had them removed. Creeped me out.” Rosemont stripped off his dress shirt, revealing the myriad tattoos and well-defined musculature. He wore only boxers under the native-made quilt.

Self-conscious, Mustang removed her sweats, leaving t-shirt and underwear. Her nerves remained on edge, especially when Rosemont slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“My God, you’re shaking like a leaf! Are you that frightened?”

“Of you, of myself.”

He turned her chin toward him on the pillow. “Given that I know what you’re capable of when you’re angry, I would never cross that line. So, close those gorgeous eyes and, in the morning, the security team will find that girl or die trying.”

She rested her cheek on his chest and he listened to her respiration slow. His brown orbs remained open, however; he disguised his own fear well.

A wolf howled, or was it a dog yelping in agony? Rosemont jerked upright; his stirring roused Mustang.

Propped on her elbow, she complied with his signal for silence. Crunching footsteps on the snow below their window preceded a gruff voice snarling, "Come in, Brody! Stop horsing around and answer me, dammit!"

The one-sided conversation continued as Rosemont crept from the king-sized bed. He motioned Mustang to accompany him; she paused long enough to pull a silk robe from the scrollwork chest.

Barefoot, the pair tip-toed across the carpet. The hinges, fortunately, did not creak when Rosemont opened the door. The corridor appeared empty; they inched toward Mustang's room.

Boots on the stairs brought them to a halt. Two security guards sprinted into view, huffing and puffing when they stopped.

"Mr. Rosemont, Brody and his dog have been killed," panted the balding supervisor.

"How?"

The junior guard replied, "Knife. Big. Throats slit from behind."

"The dog, too?" Mustang queried.

The men nodded in tandem.

"Did you find footprints, a trail of blood, anything?" pressed the homeowner.

The supervisor croaked, "Leading to the house."

"Oh, hell..."

"Search every nook and cranny," Rosemont instructed. "Don't quit until she's in cuffs."

The guards touched their forelocks in salute before retracing the route to the ground floor. Rosemont and Mustang resumed their trek.

Stunned, they stood on the bedroom threshold for some moments, contemplating the scene. Draperies and paintings had been mercilessly slashed, as had sheets and quilts. Mustang's clothes had been yanked from the closet and summarily shred, strewn throughout in rags.

"Let's get back to your room and lock the door," Mustang urged.

Rosemont almost yelled, "I'll not be terrorized in my own home!"

His gait increased in length and speed in the direction of the stairs. Mustang couldn't keep pace - luckily.

Dressed in black turtleneck, spandex pants and boots, a knit cap concealing her blonde mop, the intruder pounced from a shadowy wall recess onto Rosemont, piggy-back style. A butcher knife arced in her right hand.

Mustang could do nothing, grasping how attempts to manipulate those not sane - as with Wilfrid Bailey during her high school years - might cause more harm than good.

Rosemont flipped the girl agilely onto the landing. She grunted, but kept hold of her weapon and maneuvered into an attack posture. Her intended victim dodged two strikes, then seized her wrist, twisting to force a release of the hilt. The assailant kicked his shin with her boot, knocking him off balance. Before he could recover, she thrust the blade into his torso.

Blood flowing unchecked, Rosemont slid off the metal into a heap. Mustang bolted into action, using her martial arts training to drive the skinny script girl away from the dying man.

“Why?” was the only question her lips could speak.

Through grit teeth, the assailant pledged, “If I can’t have him, no one will!”

The knife slashed empty air, Mustang managing to sidestep dripping steel. She toppled over Rosemont’s feet, though, sprawling on the carpet; the girl lunged at her.

They struggled, with Mustang unnerved by her tiny-framed attacker’s strength. The woman summoned nature to augment her own energy, sending the girl sailing into the split log bannister, disorienting her.

Mustang scrambled to Rosemont, his condition grave. Clearly, an artery had been pierced.

“Call an ambulance!” she bellowed down, hoping the guards heard.

“Better, a medical helicopter!”

She felt the knife rip flesh near her spine. Once, she’d told Rosemont, “Creep up on me from behind, and I’m completely vulnerable.”

A thought more ironic occurred to her: she had inherited Jack Parsons’ powers after stabbing him with a knife on the altar at Boleskine. The one way she could rid herself of what she’d often deemed a curse was by being stabbed, herself.

The stalker towered over her victim, chortling in triumph. Mustang would not die unavenged, however. As she pitched forward, the girl became tangled between her feet and spun sideways down the stairs.

This chaos brought guards into the foyer. They shouted up that the stranger’s neck was broken.

Mustang sagged onto her back. Her vision blurred; she compelled herself to look upon Rosemont’s perfect visage, screwed now in a tormented grimace.

“Mustang, I’m sorry,” he gurgled. “I...”

“Hush, John. Help is on the way.”

“They’ll never make it.”

Images materialized along the corridor. Mustang's hoarse contralto hailed them.

"Francis! Sam. Gandhiji. General!"

She took each hand in turn as they knelt beside her.

"The chess board is ready," announced the Italian saint, his tattered brown robe pulsating with ethereal light..

Mark Twain - Samuel Clemens - signature white suit pristine and matching his bushy mustache and hair, added, "We've been waiting for you."

"I haven't done the job I was meant to do..." protested Mustang.

Mahatma Gandhi, not the least bit cold despite a lack of clothing, shook his bald head. "No one person can achieve world peace. You have known this many years."

"Retribution for their blindness and greed will be swift," Rommel proclaimed, his German uniform just as she remembered seeing it the first time in the African desert.

Johnny Rosemont saw the four historic figures and believed himself hallucinating. "Mustang, stay with me!"

"We'll be together always, John," she assured him. "I'll teach you to play chess."

Her lids closed the final time.

Rosemont lurched toward her, burying his face in her hair, sobbing. His own injuries soon took their toll.

The silence held barely an instant before sirens blared in the distance.

The earth tremored violently on six continents. Lightning flashed; hurricanes and typhoons formed in the oceans. Volcanoes erupted in Europe and along the Pacific rim.