

The Mustang Chronicles:

Medical Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Mustang Duryea loved to laugh.

She hadn't found much humor in her life lately, though.

The unpredictable Montana spring weather kept her indoors most days, when she wasn't hiding from the school bus and her parents.

Thanks to the unpredictable power bequeathed to her by occultist and scientist Jack Parsons, she often wanted to crawl in a hole and disappear outright.

She performed her morning and afternoon chores faithfully, nonetheless: riding to distant pastures and making certain the horses had enough hay and water, stoking the fire in the bunkhouse so the off-season crew would have a place to warm their bones after a day's work mending fences, and caring for her own horse, Heartbeat.

Brushing burrs from the pinto's coat one breezy evening, the teen noticed her father chatting with a tall, broad figure near a rented black Dodge Ram pickup. The visitor wore city clothes: light blue dress shirt with open collar, grey trousers and black leather loafers.

He and Joe Duryea ambled to the corral, where the unbroken colts had been gathered.

Mustang watched the man select two thoroughbreds, pass the ranch owner a check, then shake hands.

That meant the horses would be saddle broke and trained before being delivered, the girl knew. The ranch hands bouncing around on the horses' backs, at least, made her laugh.

The task her father assigned her at dinner that night did not.

"Roger Jaffe paid for riding lessons," Joe stated between bites of pork tenderloin. "You're going to be his teacher."

Her jaw dropped; she felt it. Protesting would only anger the man. "He's a bit old, isn't he?" she queried before biting her tongue.

"He's a single father, and his daughter wants a horse," the rancher snapped. "He wants to be able to ride with her, not that it's any of your business."

The explanation made sense, at any rate. "When will he start?"

"Tomorrow, 4:30."

Mustang ate her tapioca without another word, washed the dishes - while her parents watched the national news - then ducked into her bedroom, falling asleep with a 1950s film noir running in the video player.

As on most school days, she rose, showered, dressed, ate a hasty breakfast, grabbed her backpack, then walked into the woods so her parents would think she'd caught the bus to Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High.

Her intent that Thursday was to figure out the best means to instruct an adult male how to ride a horse.

He must be rich, she presumed, so he wouldn't necessarily need to saddle his own mount. He'd have stable hands to care for the animals: feeding, watering, grooming. She would start with explaining the bit, the bridle, stirrups, reins...

Roger Jaffe arrived in his pickup five minutes early. Mustang smothered her laughter at the sight of his "riding togs" - torn from an old British movie involving fox hunting. The red coat, flared tan trousers and polished black boots looked ridiculous on that massive frame, black mane rustled by the breeze, compared to her blue flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers, auburn tresses secured in a ponytail.

Beyond that, Jaffe towered above her. He couldn't have been more than 30, high forehead and cheekbones, sloped nose and full lips set above a square jaw. His scowl silenced her twitters and his voice frightened the horses.

"What's wrong, young lady?" he boomed.

"Nothing," Mustang gulped. "Nothing at all."

"Then, let us begin. I'm pressed for time."

His attitude irked her; she controlled her breathing, to prevent getting angry. "May I ask why you want to ride?"

"I plan to teach my six-year-old daughter, who likes horses and will receive one for her birthday next month."

What Mustang wanted to say, she repressed, signaling Jaffe to follow her.

Heartbeat and a larger thoroughbred - suited to Jaffe's size and weight - were tethered to the corral fence.

"Do you know anything about horses?" she prodded.

"No." The deep register tremored.

"Oh, hell..."

"Is there a problem?"

"If a horse senses your fear, you're in trouble."

Naturally, he denied the accusation.

None-too-gentle fingers grasped digits suited to a musician. "Don't be afraid. Stroke her mane and speak quietly."

Ten minutes elapsed before she felt him relax. Mustang demonstrated how to mount, placing her left foot in the stirrup and swinging into the saddle. Then, she dropped back onto the ground.

Taking the thoroughbred's reins, she held the horse steady as Jaffe fit what must've been a size 14 boot into the stirrup. She suspected his bulk might be a problem, though he was built like a professional football linebacker. On the third attempt, he found himself safely aloft, a slight smile transforming stony features.

She presented the leather, then leapt onto Heartbeat's back. "We're going to walk slowly a few times around the barn," she directed. "Hold the reins firmly, but don't jerk them. Watch me."

Tapping Heartbeat's flanks with her heels, Mustang moved forward. The thoroughbred, jolted by Jaffe's powerful legs, immediately took off at a gallop.

"Oh, hell..."

Mustang urged Heartbeat to full speed, afraid her student would end up with a broken neck when the horse refused to jump the fence directly ahead. Fortunately, the mare swung left, continuing parallel to the wood-slat barrier.

Jaffe did not lose his seat before Mustang overtook the runaway and halted it. He fumbled down from the saddle, however, and strode toward his vehicle.

"Mr. Jaffe, wait!" she shouted.

"No, no, no!"

She intercepted him, preventing him from grabbing the door handle. "Please. If you ever want to succeed, you must get right back up..."

"I can't trust my daughter on such an animal!" he stormed. "I'll get her a Golden Retriever puppy, instead."

"Mr. Jaffe, breathe. It was my mistake. You're not ready to solo yet. I'll lead you around the corral..."

He considered, then sighed. "Oh, all right."

Rather than a grown man, he behaved more like a spoiled child - the wealthy often did, Mustang had discovered. Ten minutes walking without incident, reins safely in her hands, he apologized.

"I used to ride motorcycles," he admitted. "It's harder to control one of these."

"Because they're living beings. Once you win their trust, though, it's a beautiful experience."

Jaffe returned on Saturday morning for a longer lesson, in a Northwestern University sweatshirt and jeans. Mustang directed the horses to an open pasture, where they could maneuver freely.

By that session's end, the student was handling a trot nicely. Dismounting, though, he noticed the soreness of his legs.

"You'll feel better by Monday, when we do it again," his teacher beamed.

As the horses plodded toward the corral, Jaffe confided he'd grown up in the East, moving from Boston to New York to Atlanta. "The most dangerous thing I rode in those days was the subway," he stated.

The way he said it struck a chord, and Mustang burst out laughing.

He favored her with a glance, only turning three quarters of his face toward her, to keep an eye on the mare's progress. His smile expressed confusion more than humor.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed. "That was very funny."

"It was true."

"Sometimes the truth is funnier than the most well-written joke."

"You think so?"

"I'm no expert, but some of the old movies have some of the best comedy bits that weren't written as comedy. They simply reflect real life."

The pair launched into a discussion of classic films, for which they both had an appreciation.

Jaffe's demeanor visibly eased as they chatted, increasing his comfort in the saddle. He halted the horse near a water trough at the pasture's edge, taking a break to stretch his muscles. "How does someone your age know so much about the movies?" he puzzled, massaging his outer thighs,

"What free time I have, I pop in a video and enjoy the escape."

"You should be playing in the school band, on the cheerleading squad, or the basketball team at school," he countered.

"Not interested, thanks."

"You're fit, you're smart... why not?"

"Horses are more fun to be with than people."

He contemplated that notion. "You may be right, but it's not realistic. Interacting with others is the only way to get through life. Take it from me; I know."

"How so?"

"I own an advertising firm in Chicago. Branches in five countries. If my team didn't get out and feel the pulse of the common man, on a face-to-face basis, they'd never be able to develop slogans and campaigns to sell the products we're contracted to hawk."

"Even if those products are totally unnecessary and overly expensive?" Mustang smirked.

"You know that, so do I. Most of today's consumers believe what they hear and see - on television, billboards, social media."

“I don’t watch television, I rarely see any billboards, and I don’t waste time with social media.”

He squinted at the teen. “You want a job as my personal devil’s advocate?”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Be the voice of reason when... other voices overwhelm me.”

“Like the ones who convinced you to buy that riding outfit you wore Thursday?” she chuckled.

“Right. After so many years in the business, I sometimes find myself believing the hype myself.”

“In a way, I’d love to say yes. I have responsibilities here, though, and a situation...” Mustang imagined herself in Chicago, or some faraway city, destroying buildings or causing earthquakes. “A horse can be a voice of reason, in a way, and you’ll have two of the finest. Riding with your daughter...”

His shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry,” Mustang muttered. “Did I say something wrong?”

Jaffe averted his gaze, hoisting himself into the saddle once more. “My daughter is dying. Buying these horses is a way to make her last days happier.”

“Where is she now?”

“The Cleveland Clinic, undergoing experimental treatment. There’s less than a ten percent chance for a cure.”

Mustang reached and patted his arm. “Don’t give up hope. She might recover just like that!” Snapping her fingers, she steered Heartbeat toward the ranch house.

Jaffe lingered after his lesson, helping Mustang feed and groom the horses. “I might as well learn everything,” he quipped.

His cell phone rang; he dug it from his jean’s hip pocket. “Hello?”

Preoccupied, Mustang didn’t eavesdrop on the conversation. She detected Jaffe’s escalating excitement and paused with the stiff brush poised above Heartbeat’s mane.

“Oh, God! Oh, God!” Jaffe rumbled.

“Bad news?”

He stared at her, as if she were a total stranger and he didn’t recognize his surroundings. He blinked twice and exhaled loudly. “What? Oh, no! That was the lead surgeon on the medical team. He wanted to let me know, after she was at death’s door yesterday, their latest exam showed Suzanne is perfectly healthy. They’re calling it a miracle.”

Self-consciously, the teen clamped her hand over her mouth. She had spoken the dictate less than an hour previous... and nature had responded accordingly.

“I’m... glad for you both.”

Jaffe hadn’t a clue about the source of his daughter’s recovery, and totally forgot the horses. “I must get to Helena at once and fly to Cleveland...”

“Of course.” Mustang set the thoroughbred’s saddle on the stall door, planning to clean it next. “Will you still be wanting to buy the horses?”

“Definitely! Suzanne will have even more reason to ride, and I’ll be able to ride with her, thanks to you!”

His emotions transformed the somber mien into a countenance radiant with joy. He took Mustang’s hands and squeezed so hard, she thought he’d break the bones.

“You’d better get going,” she advised. “When do you think you’ll be back for the horses?”

“A week, two at most. I’ll bring Suzanne. She’ll love seeing the herds!”

Jaffe spun on his boot heel, which had become tangled in the thoroughbred’s loose bridle. Attempting to step forward, he tripped, stumbling over a wooden bench. The momentum knocked over the pitchfork propped against a square post and, when he hit the ground, the prongs ripped into his chest.

“Oh, hell...” Mustang shrieked.

II

Gingerly, Roger Jaffe was rolled onto his spine, anguish contorting his features. The pitchfork’s steel had wedged deep between his ribs; Mustang eased the implement from the wounds.

Blood spurted like fountains in five places.

In a practical sense, no hope existed to stop the flow or to keep him alive until an ambulance was summoned.

She had no choice, especially since the situation was her fault.

If she hadn’t inadvertently wished for Suzanne Jaffe’s cure, her father wouldn’t have been so reckless...

“Heal him,” she murmured. “Heal the wounds and any internal damage.”

Ten seconds later, Jaffe shot off the straw-laden stable floor, a coughing fit contracting every muscle. Once he could breathe normally, he stroked the sticky redness staining his sweatshirt.

“What...”

Mustang grit her teeth. "Oh, hell..."

"Suzanne!" The yowl rattled every board in the structure and set the horses on edge. A trembling hand seized her collar and green eyes bored into her hazel orbs.

She peeled his fingers apart, crafted a desperate response. "You're safe, and so is she."

Gradually, he climbed to his full, impressive height. "What on earth happened?"

"You fell. Bumped your head."

"This blood didn't come from my head," he grunted.

Exposing her scarred palms, fresh blood from handling the pitchfork still wet, she shrugged.

"You should get to the hospital at once!" Jaffe insisted.

"I'll be fine. You'd best be getting on to Helena, so you can catch your plane."

The Dodge Ram kicked up gravel on the drive as Jaffe departed, his last glance in her direction mingling gratitude and uncertainty.

Glimpsing her image in the water bucket she'd filled for Heartbeat, Mustang cringed. More than her hands were soaked with Jaffe's blood. Her t-shirt and jeans were smeared with the thickening substance.

If her mother - or father - saw her in that condition, they would go ballistic.

"I thought I'd find you out here," Maggie Duryea's voice came from the stable doorway. "You missed lunch."

Mustang didn't turn. "I'll be in as soon as I finish with Heartbeat."

"Hurry, hon. Food's getting cold."

One of the rare times the girl saw an advantage in her parents' cluelessness about her power, she rinsed her hands in the bucket and dumped it down the drain, refilling it for the pinto. She avoided both the front and kitchen doors, prying loose the screen on her bedroom window and stealing inside, shedding the ruined garments and slipping into a fresh t-shirt and sweat pants.

Lunch being leftover meatloaf and stale french fries, Mustang wondered why she'd rushed. Once the pots had been scrubbed, she returned to her room, selecting James Cagney's *Public Enemy* from the video collection.

Mustang soaked the soiled outfit in the bathtub after her parents left for church Sunday morning. She tossed the soggy bundle in the washing machine, optimistic the stains would be eradicated without making a mess.

The roar of an angry engine reached her ears as she was hanging wet garments and towels on the clothes line behind the house. She peered around the

corner to see Jaffe's rental speeding up the drive, stopping behind a stand of evergreens near the bunk house.

"Oh, hell..."

A thunderstorm would have darkened the atmosphere no more than this man's overt rage as he jumped from the truck, clad in black from head to toe. "Don't try to run!" he warned, noticing her duck out of sight. With his long gait, he caught her by the wrist in short order. "What have you done?"

"I..."

He jerked her around so hard, she thought her neck might snap. The volume of his voice transcended a lion's roar as he rendered her immobile with twin vices clamped around her biceps. "I will crush you between my hands if you don't tell me what you've done!"

"Too much, too little. How do I know?" the girl protested. "Be more specific!"

Towering over her with that menacing glare, she felt like Jack facing the giant after climbing the beanstalk.

"I landed in Cleveland around midnight and drove straight to the hospital - which has metal detectors at the entrance to the Intensive Care Unit. But, *I didn't set them off!*"

"Good for you," Mustang gulped.

"Don't you get it? The pins in my leg *always set them off!*"

Meaning, to her frightened mind, the pins were no longer in his leg. She had not only healed the wounds caused by the pitchfork, but his other wounds and previous internal damage.

"Oh, hell..."

"What have you done?" he repeated.

"I'm... sorry. It... was an accident."

"Accident? How in the name of everything that's holy can you make such a claim? I endured three surgeries to restore the leg after my motorcycle lost an argument with a semi five years ago. Those pins made it possible for me to walk! Now, x-rays show no trace of them, the bones whole and strong."

"And you're complaining why?"

"The doctors say there's no logical explanation, for this or Suzanne's cure. As we speak, she's being subjected to examination by a plethora of specialists, curious about what the hell happened."

A Chevy Suburban approached the house: Joe and Maggie.

"If you can be patient for half an hour, I'll explain everything. I promise," Mustang pledged in an undertone. "I'll meet you on the patio at the bunk house."

Jaffe's left eyebrow arched, suspicious. "You don't want your parents to know?"

She nodded her auburn head.

"But, if you're capable of working miracles..."

"Please!"

"All right, but don't fail me!"

Long strides propelled the visitor through the trees. Maggie had passed from front door to kitchen while Joe tinkered with the vehicle's engine. Mustang carried the laundry basket indoors, ignoring her mother's startled smile.

"You've been busy," the woman greeted.

"The jeans I want to wear tomorrow were dirty, so I washed a load." Not exactly a lie.

"It's good to know you're taking responsibility for some of the chores."

The statement irked this girl, who did more chores around the house and property than any three individuals.

Closing her bedroom door, she raised the screen and crept out the window, crossing to the deserted bunk house as her father slammed the Chevy's hood.

Jaffe paced the stone patio against a background of oaks and walnuts not yet touched by spring. Hearing Mustang's footsteps, he stopped and sucked air. "Well?"

"Sit, please." She pointed to a set of worn folding chairs. "Relax."

"I can't relax. As soon as I get some answers, I'm back on the plane for Cleveland. Hopefully, I'll be able to tell the doctors something to alleviate their confusion..."

"Not likely."

"Why?"

"Because, what I did for you was truly an accident, as was your daughter's cure."

"Then, you admit to being responsible?"

"Oh, yeah. My mouth runneth over, and I cause chaos."

"That's not humanly feasible. Are you some sort of angel?"

Mustang flopped onto a chair, head buried in her hands. "Telling you will only place you in a more difficult position than you already find yourself."

"How?"

"How do you explain the inexplicable? Those doctors you're so worried about will think you stark, staring mad."

He knelt near her, raising her chin so their eyes met. "I don't care. I must know the truth."

She wiped wet cheeks with her shirt sleeve. "Truth is: I'm the victim of a cruel joke that left me able to control the natural elements."

He sank on his haunches, stunned. "Unbelievable!"

"Which is why you must swear to never reveal this to anyone. I've had enough trouble to last a lifetime because of it."

"Then, what do I tell the doctors?"

"Tell them you met an itinerant preacher who prayed for you both, and performed a bona fide miracle."

Straightening to his full height, he debated the notion. "It might pass muster."

Within ten minutes, Jaffe had departed, his bluster expended. A tentative date of two weeks hence had been set for picking up the thoroughbreds he'd purchased.

Mustang trudged to the house, sleeping most of the afternoon.

She discounted the niggling suspicion that Roger Jaffe would rain down hell upon her by some unorthodox means. Having the odd news crew, the FBI, the National Weather Service or the Montana Meteorological Service tracking anomalies she wreaked was bad enough, without a hoard of medical experts poking and prodding her *ad infinitum*.

Jaffe being in advertising, he must be a master of "spin" - that tricky art which twists lies into near fact. No difficulty for him to make whatever story he told the specialists plausible, keeping her name out of it.

By nightfall, she discovered her trust had been misplaced.

Dinner always a tense affair around the Duryea table, Mustang heard multiple sets of tires on the gravel well before persistent fists beat on the door. She deliberately spilled gravy on her lap a split-second before the racket commenced, excusing herself to clean up in the bathroom.

The window slid aside; she was across the yard and into the woods before Joe acknowledged the black-suited Feds.

She still heard the heated exchange.

"We're here to question Elizabeth Duryea, commonly known as Mustang," declared one official.

"Not unless you explain the need for two dozen armed men to intrude on private property."

Typical, Mustang thought. Her father was more concerned about his land than about her.

"We have a duly authorized warrant."

Maggie joined the fray. "What's going on here?"

Then, the ultimate disappointment. Jaffe's singular basso profundo. "These men need to talk with Mustang, nothing more."

"Like hell," the teen spat from the shadow of an ancient oak.

She envisioned herself a caged lab rat, wires fastened to her head, arms, legs, torso.

Try as she might to control her emotions, she sensed her face reddening, her fingers flexing into fists. "I can't get angry," she reminded herself. "I do horrible things when I'm angry."

Then, she laughed aloud. She did horrible things, angry or not, so what did it matter?

Gas tanks on the government vehicles exploded in what might have seemed a series of perfectly timed detonations. Lit by the blaze, Mustang saw fear and horror consume young and old alike.

Except Roger Jaffe. He watched the flames for a moment, then caught sight of Mustang peeking around the tree trunk. Feigning nonchalance, he inched away from the group.

She took off at a dead run when she realized his ploy.

Even with his leg healed, his age, size and weight prevented him from closing the gap between them. He also didn't know the trails through the forest.

Stopping in the dark, he never suspected she stood inches above him on a low branch.

As badly as she wished to fry him to ash, she restrained herself.

"Consider yourself lucky," she whispered, "and get the hell out of here."

"Mustang, I'm sorry... Everything went terribly wrong. They were waiting for me at the Helena airport. They've been interrogating me for hours."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The National Institute of Health."

She hopped from her perch. "How'd they get involved in this?"

"Lord knows," Jaffe grumbled. "They already had a file on you..."

"The NIH? Hell, hell, hell!"

That particular document, and the briefcase containing it, disintegrated on the rear seat of an already decimated Ford Expedition.

Computers containing copies of the data melted into puddles of metal and plastic in six Washington DC offices.

Jaffe inched up behind her. "The cars... did you do that with dynamite or..."

Her turn to grab him by the shirt collar. She bent him, not too gently, so his rather elegant nose was touching hers. "Or." Exhaling slowly, she released him

and, like a spring, he bounced upright. “Whatever happens tonight is on your shoulders.”

With her right hand open, she slapped his left cheek, sending him flying into thorny underbrush.

That’s where the Feds discovered him minutes later, having implemented a wholesale search when Mustang wasn’t found in the house.

Handcuffs encased his wrists when he refused to tell the trio which direction the girl had fled.

“Both you and your daughter can look forward to a lengthy stay in federal custody unless you cooperate fully...” came the threat.

The news Suzanne Jaffe, an innocent child, would be victimized by these... fools riled Mustang further. She’d ascended a different tree, knowing the confrontation between Jaffe and the NIH agents would clear up a lot of her questions.

One by one, three flunkies dropped. The moon cast enough light for Mustang to detect the horror in Jaffe’s green eyes when he saw the corpses sprawled on the trail.

Shackles fell to the ground with a dull thud. She seized his massive paw and led him to the clearing at the top of a small hillock - still charred black where she’d previously summoned lightning.

Nearby rustling increased her urgency. “What street is the Cleveland Clinic on?” she hissed.

Flustered, Jaffe required a moment to regain his faculties. “Er... Euclid Avenue.”

Quietly, she instructed the natural forces to transport them to Euclid Avenue, outside the Cleveland Clinic.

Joe and Maggie Duryea saw the freak bolt descend beyond the trees, and 37 others scrambled from the property, their cell phones reporting the bizarre phenomena they’d witnessed.

Fire engines began to arrive on the scene, extinguishing flames which had reduced 15 taxpayer-funded vehicles to useless hulks.

It being Sunday night - two hours later, actually, than Montana time - the sparsely populated sidewalk outside the Cleveland Clinic provided an ideal landing spot for Mustang and her unwitting companion.

Both collapsed against the nearest wall, the disorientation and dizziness wearing off after a few minutes.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jaffe scolded, ogling his mutilated palms.

Mustang's hands had sustained far more damage. With a word, his flesh mended itself, but she left hers as a message about the need for self-control.

"Come on," she said, aiming for the hospital's main entrance. "We've got to rescue your daughter and find somewhere safe."

He clamped his hand on her shoulder, halting her. "I say again: are you out of your mind? Because of you, I've lost everything! My daughter will never know a normal life..."

She whipped toward him. "You can't pin this on me, Roger. If you'd kept your mouth shut..."

"You started it, with your silly wish for Suzanne's cure."

"Sure. And if I hadn't saved you after you fell on the pitchfork, she'd be an orphan."

"What will we do, if we survive this? I can't get at my money, because they'll freeze my accounts. The adverse publicity will destroy my agency, putting hundreds out of work..."

Mustang uttered a few choice expletives. "Give me time, Roger. Let's get Suzanne to safety, where I can think how to rectify everything."

He extended his hands. "Not with..."

"No. I wouldn't do that to a child."

Jaffe glanced at the black circular mark on the cement. "I wish you hadn't done it to me!"

Entering the hospital, no one paid any attention, with visitors crossing the lobby in both directions. Catching an elevator, they rode to the isolation floor where - oddly to Jaffe - staff members dozed in their chairs.

"You?" he muttered to Mustang.

Her head bobbed vertically.

Suzanne Jaffe slept, as well. Unconsciousness would prevent her from asking inappropriate questions in an uncomfortably loud voice.

Jaffe scooped up the child, wrapping her in a flimsy blue blanket from the bed.

Leaving the way they entered unwise, they reached the ground floor and veered toward a parking garage.

"Do you have any cash?" Mustang asked.

"No. The NIH confiscated my wallet."

As they passed a bank's automated teller machine on the street, \$20 bills began spitting from the slot.

III

“Are you serious?” Jaffe shrieked. “That’s stealing!”

“They’ll be recompensed for their... generosity to souls in need.” Mustang retrieved \$400. “Hail a taxi.”

The money furnished cab fare to the lakefront, clothes to replace Suzanne’s hospital gown, and a quick dinner from a fast food restaurant - whose surveillance cameras temporarily went off-line.

“What now?” Jaffe asked, forcing calmness to reassure his daughter.

“Car or boat?”

“Eh?”

“Which method do you prefer?” Mustang persisted.

“You mean, steal...”

“Borrow.”

Jaffe reasoned, “A car would be traced too quickly.”

“Have you no faith in me?”

He lowered his eyes, mortified. “Sorry.”

“In a boat, we could reach Canada without needing passports...”

“You *are* crazy!”

She leaned on the hard plastic bench overlooking Lake Erie. “Let’s look at our predicament logically. Within the past hour, every federal officer has been placed on alert, with your photo and mine flashing on their phones.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course, I am. The ones with half a brain, and a penchant for science fiction, will make the connection between the lightning bolt that struck at the ranch and the strike outside the clinic - as outrageous as it seems - once the weather services report it on their websites.”

“True.”

“So, it’s Canada - for now - or I can reverse the past 48 hours, and Suzanne will die as the natural result of her illness.”

Jaffe hugged his daughter. “No. Now that I have a chance to keep her, I won’t let her go.”

“Why didn’t you think about that before you flapped your yap?”

“I’ve already apologized...”

“Yeah, yeah.” The teen scanned the piers, yachts docked securely. “Can you drive one of those things?”

“No different than driving a car.”

“Let’s go.”

The engine revved on the moderate sized craft and, after settling Suzanne in a comfortable chair below deck, Jaffe freed the ropes before mounting the bridge and sliding the shift knob into gear.

En route across rippling waters, Mustang flipped on the radio. News bulletins echoed old games of “post office”, the facts manipulated and stretched to create tales from an alien invasion to the apocalypse.

The girl chuckled, standing beside Jaffe as water sprayed her face.

“What’s so funny?”

“People. They fear what they don’t understand...”

“So, help them understand.”

“How?”

Jaffe held the wheel steady as the wind shifted. “The whole purpose of advertising is to explain products - or people - to the public. Look at how much money politicians spend on ads to spread their message.”

Mustang laughed anew. “Oh, right. Let the whole world know that a kid from Montana has the capability of destroying the world, raising the dead...”

She clamped her hand over her mouth.

The engine shifted into neutral. “What did you say?”

“It’s all part of what I deal with, every day.”

“Raising the *dead*?”

“Not on purpose! Most of what I do is because I speak on impulse, and nature obeys.”

“You mean, if you mentioned a hurricane right now, we could be swamped and sunk?”

She winced.

“Oh, my God!”

“This is why I don’t go to school much, or like being around people. Horses are more forgiving.”

His hands fastened around her arms, exerting a pressure borne of terror. “Mustang, listen to me. If, as you implied, you have power over life and death, I’m pleading for my life back. A quiet life, with my daughter, my business, my sanity.”

“Fair enough.”

Jaffe released her.

“If you don’t want me to bollocks up the works even more, give me an hour to formulate a plan where no one dies, and the world doesn’t end.”

“You’ve already killed three men.”

“They were idiots.”

“It’s still murder.”

“They can’t pin it on me. Their hearts exploded.”

He shuddered, quite a sight with his broad frame.

Going below, Mustang hunted up a sheet of paper and a pen from the desk secured to the starboard bulkhead. Then, she settled on a chair astern, using the moonlight to illuminate her scribbling.

The first column listed people involved in this catastrophe: Roger Jaffe, Suzanne, the Cleveland Clinic doctors, the NIH crew, federal and, likely, local law enforcement.

She deliberately left off Joe and Maggie - somehow, her parents would devise their own explanations for their daughter’s actions, so focused were they on personal issues.

The second column gave bullet points to what had been disclosed about her.

Jaffe, of course, knew the most, through her own lack of self-control.

Suzanne fathomed little, besides feeling better in the absence of the terminal disease.

The doctors... what did they know? After his initial flight back to Cleveland - and the discovery of the pins missing in his leg - Jaffe hadn’t been able to relay additional information to them, beyond suspecting a miracle.

The NIH had nabbed him in Helena.

“What did you tell the Feds, exactly?” she shouted to the bridge.

“Only that you’d been giving me riding lessons, and expressed a wish for Suzanne to be healed. Like I said, they already had a file...”

Probably because FBI agent Ben Espinoza shot off his mouth in the nation’s capital, Mustang surmised.

With that prior data destroyed, matters were simplified somewhat.

The hitch in the proceedings would be Jaffe himself. Even if she could resolve matters without implicating herself, he would retain the knowledge and - potentially - betray her in the future.

Yet, she couldn’t orphan Suzanne...

Speakers crackled as she mounted the ladder to where Jaffe had propped himself on a padded seat, clearly enjoying the ride.

“People are nuts,” he observed, switching off the radio. “Millions are in the grips of hysteria because a crazy story has gotten out of hand. Reminds me of what my grandfather told me about Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* broadcast back in 1938.”

“Sad, isn’t it? For me, it means doing everything I can to keep off the radar, the rest of my life. A century ago, my... condition would have gone

unnoticed, because news wasn't instantaneous, like it is today. Hell, when I was in Italy..."

"Italy?"

"Every news outlet on the planet sent their cameras..."

"What, just a few months ago?"

"Yeah."

"I remember. CNN broadcast bulletins every fifteen minutes. Fox News featured some tripe about earthquakes and sightings of long-dead saints..."

His eyes widened at her guilty smile.

"You? That's what you meant about..."

She nodded.

"My God!"

"When all is said and done, Roger, you'll be the only human being alive who knows my secret. Divulging it will not just place me in a world of hurt, but you... and Suzanne."

"I would never do anything to harm..."

"That's good to hear. It's something you've got to remember. There may be ambitious federal agents" - like Ben Espinoza, damn him! she cringed - "or reporters who decide they want to follow up on what is, otherwise, a dead story, totally debunked by the available facts. They may hound you, or try to trick you into admitting something, anything, that will earn them praise, recognition, or cash. You must never utter a word about this, ever. If you do, Canada may end up being your permanent home, as an impoverished refugee."

"No, never."

In sight of lights on the Canadian shore, she instructed, "Okay, then, turn this heap around."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely."

Disregarding her statement, Jaffe shifted into neutral and lashed the wheel. He rose, gazing down on her, his expression somber.

Oh, here we go, Mustang lamented silently.

"Even though I'm in advertising, and words are my bread and board, this is going to be tough for me."

She waited, dreading for him to continue.

"In less than two days, I've experienced every emotion in the book. It's... taken a severe toll on my nerves. Part of me appreciates what you've done for Suzanne - and me - while the rest despises you for it. In the weird event your plan

doesn't pan out, I would rather kill you than see my little girl subjected to a life of torture."

Not what the teen expected. "Let me say this much: I respect your feelings. More than once - since this curse was inflicted on me - I've wished to be dead. Next, I can assure you the plan will work, because the natural forces will not be thwarted. Lastly, you couldn't kill me if you tried, more's the pity."

"It's that bad?" he murmured.

"Yes, that bad."

She was wrapped in an unyielding, sympathetic embrace, such as only a despondent father could impart to a dying child. Before resuming his duties at the wheel, he kissed her forehead - which barely reached his chin.

As they neared Cleveland two hours later, Mustang recommended Jaffe contact his pilot to fly the plane from Helena.

"The plane's already in a hangar at the airport," Jaffe responded. "When the NIH boys grabbed me, I told him to get here as quickly as possible, in case Suzanne needed emergency transportation."

"Smart man," Mustang praised. "When we dock, take a cab straight there and fly yourselves back to Chicago. Go directly home and talk to no one!"

"What about you?"

"I have a few... things to handle."

"Certainly, but how will you get back to Montana when all's said and done?"

She raised her hands.

"You can't..."

"Or, I can take a train."

"You have no money."

She snickered facetiously, and he flashed a sardonic grin.

"I could have the plane..."

"No. Once we part company, we must never meet again. My name must never come up in your conversation, your emails... nothing."

"What about the horses?"

"Write them off as a business loss and buy some from a breeder in Michigan. I hear there are some good ones near the lake."

"Are you positive?" Jaffe pressed.

"I don't want you to have to make an attempt on my life, and mentioning me to anyone could lead to that. Think of Suzanne. Always."

He snatched her hand; she flinched from the fresh wounds on her palm. He raised it to his lips, kissing it briefly.

She hopped off the yacht even before it was tied to the pier, hiking the distance to the Cleveland Clinic.

The yacht's owners never suspected their craft had been used by parties unknown, just as the Cleveland Clinic staff hadn't a clue the teenager who invaded their dominion at first light wasn't - alternately - an electronics repairman and a specialist from Johns Hopkins.

For Mustang, the ruse proved quite a lark. She enjoyed adventures, especially when her course of action was clear and she could not foul things up with a chance remark.

Since that horrendous incident with Jack Parsons in Scotland, when she thrust a knife in his chest after he'd blindfolded and deceived her about one of his occult rituals, she'd nearly destroyed a house as a result of her first passionate kiss, encountered Mephistopheles and his demons, a saint and his deluded followers, and a psychotic murderer.

More than one person suggested she belonged in a mental institution and, some days, she agreed - not that locked doors or straight jackets could hold her.

The ability to set a tree on fire, call down a microburst of wind or kill... her brain wanted to burst those nights where she lay on her bed, studying the ceiling.

The death of the three NIH agents didn't cause a twinge, however. Their motivation, their lack of morals, or comprehension... pathetic. People like that didn't deserve to live.

She had to convince herself she wasn't judge and jury, nor God. Jaffe had accused her of having power over life and death... to deny it would be to lie to herself. When enraged, she could easily decimate the populace - not merely of small towns, but large cities and entire countries.

Too much to handle at her age, essentially a high school dropout.

Mopping up the damage she caused, restoring order to the havoc she wreaked... how much energy was expended in the effort?

She could've been home, asleep, dreaming of not attending school the next morning.

Instead, she commandeered a tool belt from the janitor's closet on the first floor of the Cleveland Clinic and made a show of examining metal detectors near the Intensive Care Unit.

Then, she marched to the administrative offices, proclaiming, "Do you know, your security system is down?"

The brunette, business suit-clad executive assistant stiffened. "What?"

"Metal detector sensors are shot. Couldn't detect a six-inch diameter steel rod, much less a pistol or knife."

“Can you repair it?”

Mustang snorted, “Not me. The manufacturer holds the warranty.”

With that, she departed.

The wing, not the building. Her next performance involved plucking a doctor’s white lab coat from the surgical locker room and joining a conference on the third floor.

“The girl has been kidnaped. Her father was in Montana...” groaned the chief medical director at a long oval table.

“Sorry, gentlemen,” Mustang proclaimed upon entering. “I discharged her last night.”

“What!” the others chorused.

“Yes. Didn’t you know she’d been misdiagnosed?”

IV

The uproar around the table deafened Mustang. To alleviate the outrage, she passed copies of a forged report to the dozen professionals. They grew quiet as they read.

“My God, we’re fools!” gasped one.

Another contradicted him. “These tests need to be redone under sterile conditions.”

The debate resumed, with the physicians interrupting each other, throwing insults and cursing in frustration.

Mustang withdrew, pulling the door closed.

As a parting shot, she found Roger Jaffe’s leg x-ray, exhibiting an absence of metal, and retouched it to show the pins.

Thanks to nature, she allowed the knowledge to flow through her to complete these tasks. After she left the hospital, queries about her presence, her identity and qualifications never surfaced.

She didn’t dare travel by lightning to Montana. Another ATM could be manipulated, but she didn’t feel right about a second theft. The first instance garnered needed money for Suzanne. Mustang could not allow a child to suffer for her stupidity.

Boarding a train would not be difficult, nor would hiding from the conductor until he checked the passenger’s tickets. The same held for a bus...

Idly wandering the streets of this unfamiliar city, she watched humanity rush to and fro. Never could she have lived in such a bustling metropolis; her heart remained in the wilderness with the horses.

She chanced upon the railroad tracks and followed them to the station. The next westbound train would not arrive until almost midnight, according to the schedule. A digital clock over the ticket counter showed 3:30 p.m. She sank on a bench and dozed.

The hand on her shoulder might have been in her dream, but it roused her. Stroking the fingers, she knew their origin.

“Roger, I told you...”

“Our plane had mechanical problems, so we couldn’t leave. I’ve already received a call about the misdiagnosis. That was your doing, correct?”

“Yes.”

“The NIH agents are out of the picture. Let me take you home and offer a proper farewell.”

“No. It wouldn’t be safe.”

Suzanne came around her father’s hip, clad in a frilly blue plaid dress, and smiled sweetly at the teen. “Please...”

Mustang chuckled and hugged the six-year-old. “All right.” She rose and stretched her sore legs.

“Are you hungry?” Jaffe asked, having changed his lightning-scorched black outfit for a white dress shirt and tan slacks.

“Starved.”

Leaving the railroad station, they slid onto the rear seat of a limousine Jaffe had rented at the airport. He instructed the driver to find a good Italian restaurant.

“Suzanne loves spaghetti,” he explained.

Mustang grinned. “So do I.”

Not yet the dinner hour, the hostess of the tiny bistro seated them at a corner table and presented the menus.

“Do you have any money?” Mustang wondered.

“I always keep an extra credit card on the plane.”

“Good thinking.”

She ordered beef ravioli; Jaffe opted for chicken alfredo, adding a child’s portion of spaghetti to the tab. He launched into a series of humorous stories about misfires at his advertising agency - really rotten slogans for some popular products.

Mustang laughed so hard, she felt tears streaming down her cheeks. Even as they ate, Jaffe continued the anecdotes, with Suzanne giggling about the ones she grasped at her young age.

Her back to the street window, the teen didn’t see three Ford Expeditions and a black quarantine panel van brake at the curb, but she detected the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun. A chuckle died in her throat. “Really?”

“I had no choice,” Jaffe confessed, squeezing her hand as it clutched the fork with white knuckles. “They blocked us on the runway and threatened to place Suzanne with Child Protective Services...”

Through clenched teeth, she stated, “Take Suzanne to the restroom. Act natural. Don’t come out until I fetch you.”

Commenting on the child’s tomato sauce-stained cheeks, Jaffe playfully scooped her in his arms and vanished down a narrow corridor. Taking one last bite of the delicious pasta, Mustang dabbed her lips with a linen napkin and faced the mob on the threshold.

“Hello, gentlemen,” she hailed pleasantly. “Looking for me?”

An obese figure, creases in his black trousers sharp enough to cut bread, announced, “Elizabeth Duryea, you’re under arrest...”

“And the charges?”

“Those are best discussed in private.”

A flick of his finger set others into action, herding other customers and employees through the kitchen doors.

“That’s right, get them out of the way so no one will see what happens.”

A junior official extracted handcuffs from a loop on his belt. Two others pulled their service revolvers.

“Are you kidding?” She spread her arms. “Do I look like I’m hiding a weapon?”

“You *are* a weapon,” the agent growled.

She took a step toward him. “You’ve been talking to Ben Espinoza,” she snickered conspiratorially. “Haven’t you heard? He’s certifiable.”

Without the slightest dramatic gesture employed by movie and television wizards or witches, Mustang set the entire squad twitching with the severest case of spontaneous poison ivy historically recorded. Pistols dropped on the floor; the men could not control their involuntary reactions to the discomfort.

She passed through their midst and knocked at the unisex restroom. Jaffe peered through a crack.

“Let’s get out of here,” Mustang advised.

Suzanne’s head averted from what resembled a drug-induced dance competition, Jaffe puzzled, “What did you do to them?”

“As I can heal, I can also afflict.”

Through the back door, they met the limousine in the next block and sped along side streets to the airport. Eventual efforts to pursue them were thwarted by the Expeditions’ tires being irreparably flattened.

Outside an open hangar, police guarding Jaffe's sleek Lear jet found themselves distracted by a feisty skunk as the trio boarded and prepared for take off.

"If the situation wasn't so... ludicrous, I'd be laughing my head off," Jaffe admitted as he buckled Suzanne into a leather seat. "Of the many ways you could've handled that, why..."

Mustang raised a finger to her mouth. They spoke no more until they were airborne over Lake Huron and Suzanne curled up, asleep.

"Why didn't I kill them? It would've been awful if a restaurant serving such good food had to close its doors after such a tragedy."

"Very considerate," Jaffe acknowledged in that basso profundo.

"I'll be even more considerate. When we land in Helena, refuel the tanks and take off immediately. Disappear for a few weeks - to Canada, Mexico, or one of your agency's other bases of operations. Let this fracas fade."

"How can it, when they know where you live..."

"I've dealt with these sorts before - the fear, hypocrisy, stupidity. Those traits, however, I cannot cure."

She continued, "The file having been destroyed, their superiors will recall them to Washington first thing tomorrow. They'll have no choice but to comply and take on the next assignment. Unless there's a hot-shot rogue among them, their embarrassment will preclude any mention of the... restaurant incident, so as not to jeopardize their careers."

"What about torching their fleet on your front drive?"

"A natural gas line cracked. At least, that's what the local authorities will say."

"The truth being..."

"The heat from the explosions melted the line."

Jaffe reclined in the seat. "So, you've covered your bases..."

"Except for home plate." She shifted on the cushion, meeting his green eyes. "You're vulnerable, Roger, because Suzanne is - rightfully - your pride and joy. You will do anything to protect her, including betray a friend."

"You're right, of course."

"If you weren't, basically, a good man, and if you hadn't made me laugh harder than I ever have in my life, you'd be dead already. By the time we land, I'll figure out a way to ensure you never betray me again."

"Mustang, I..."

"No apologies, no excuses. Go, read a magazine or work on the computer in that fancy office. Let me think in peace."

Jaffe complied, his face a dejected mask.

One reason she ached for solitude: her stomach had begun to rebel at the slight turbulence. The train would have been much slower, but highly preferable.

She gazed out the window at tall cumulus clouds, above which they soared. No lights were visible from the ground, or she might have realized they had passed Chicago.

Contemplating Suzanne, she spoke aloud. "You're so lucky. You have a father who really loves you and puts you first in his life."

She squirmed, still not comfortable. "Look at me. Where are my parents? Home on the ranch, without the foggiest idea of my plight. They had a chance to stop the NIH from searching for me, but they didn't spend the energy to protect me.

"It's happened before, too. The horses and the acreage are more important to my dad. Let somebody damage one of his fences, and he'll be on them in a second. Point a gun at me, and he gives them leave to shoot."

She rambled on, noting how her mother was so absorbed by housework - and her image in the community as a good wife - she neglected to see her daughter's suffering.

"If only I had someone to hold me when I cry, or comfort me when I'm frightened - and I'm always frightened, these days..." she concluded.

Jaffe knelt beside her and encompassed her in a gentle embrace. "I had no idea your life was such a travesty," he soothed. "Besides the... power, I mean. My parents were distant, too, which is why I swore Suzanne would have every ounce of love I could give her, especially after her mother died."

When Mustang raised her head from his solid chest, his shirt bore the marks of her tears. He stroked her auburn tresses and grinned in an attempt to lift her spirits.

"You liking classic movies, have you ever listened to any of the old radio shows?" he queried.

"No."

"One of the few good things about the internet: access to the recordings." He adjusted his position and cleared his voice. "What evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows..." His deep, almost maniacal laugh, brightened her downtrodden expression.

For a moment, only. The cabin door opened; the pilot signaled to Jaffe. After consulting with the cockpit crew, he rejoined Mustang, disheartened.

“We’ve got trouble,” he announced, stroking his unshaven chin. “The Helena airport - and others that have been contacted - refuse us permission to land.”

“Why?”

“The Federal Aviation Administration has issued orders that we return to Cleveland.”

Mustang bristled. “Not happening.”

“What do we do?”

“Contact them again, giving a different tail number.”

“That’s illegal!”

“What the government is trying to do is illegal.”

“When we land, they’ll know...” Jaffe insisted.

“How? The tail number painted on this heap will match what we tell them.”

The owner scrutinized that young, determined face and succumbed. He informed the pilot of the plan.

“Have you made any decision about my fate?” Jaffe then asked, sitting opposite Mustang.

“Like I suggested: set up shop at one of your foreign offices for awhile. Suzanne would enjoy the experience...”

“She already has. Until her illness, we lived in Belgium. She’s quite the little linguist.”

“Good for her. Take her somewhere new, so she can continue learning and experiencing life. And never stop loving her.”

“You know I won’t.” The tall man grasped both her hands, leaning forward. “Having heard your... reflections earlier, I better understand your predicament. If ever I am placed in a situation where your safety is in my hands, I will do what I can to defend you.”

“The best thing you can do is forget me. Mention my name to no one, not even trusted friends, and definitely not casual acquaintances or clients. Perhaps, by the time I learn to control my impulsiveness and restrain these powers, I’ll be able to live peacefully on the ranch with the horses, with visitors banned.”

“A sensible and admirable goal.”

The pilot appeared, flashing a thumbs up on their landing.

Suzanne woke as the Lear descended, groggy and thirsty. Jaffe brought her a glass of chocolate milk, and she sipped the liquid through a rainbow-colored straw as the lights of Helena came into view.

Brakes squealing, the plane taxied to a hangar, where a service crew converged with a fuel truck and other equipment. The door opened, flipping

outward to convert into stairs. Mustang waited until the coverall-clad team had checked in with the pilot before kissing Suzanne, hugging Jaffe and making her escape.

From Helena to Canyon Creek too far to walk, the girl stuck out her thumb as she trod the highway shoulder, exhausted. Pairs of headlights in the early morning gloom were few and far between, and she calculated she'd already walked five miles before a delivery truck pulled over, the driver waving at her.

"Where you headed?"

"Just outside Canyon Creek," she replied.

"It'll take awhile, but I'll get you there."

"Thanks."

Rather than engage in idle chatter, Mustang's head rested on the high-backed seat and she slept. Full daylight greeted her when the bearded delivery driver poked her arm. "This good for you?"

She blinked and scanned her surroundings. About a mile from the ranch, she could make it home without any problems.

"Yes. Thanks so much."

The passenger door slammed and the vehicle pulled back onto the asphalt.

Mustang trudged home, not surprised to find a few of the charred government vehicles remaining on the drive. Others had been towed away by the lone wrecker in town.

She was somewhat surprised to find her parents at the breakfast table, glaring at her.

"Where have you been, girl?" Joe snapped.

Maggie added, "The school called, checking if you'd been sick."

"I... got lost." Partially true. "I just want to go to bed."

"You've got chores, girl."

Her groan rattled the windows. "Right, Dad."

In that instant, she wished Roger Jaffe had been her father. She would dream of his tender embrace - and the laughter - for weeks, finding a bit of comfort in the knowledge that, wherever he settled with Suzanne, part of him also cared about her well being.