

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Meddling Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Not one to window shop at the mall, or shadow her mother through grocery stores, only through coercion did Mustang Duryea accompany Maggie and Joe into Helena that May Saturday. She usually enjoyed time alone in the house when the couple made their weekly trip to the Montana capital to stock up on supplies; this time, they practically ordered she ride along.

They'd been pushing her for weeks - since her abrupt journey to Italy and back - to behave "normally", be more social, shed her perpetual t-shirt and jeans for more feminine attire, even attend school. She abhorred the implications of normalcy, shunned society's dictates, and outright feared walking the halls of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. She'd seen the havoc her power could cause, battled the anxiety of cleaning up the chaotic aftermath. Better she stay safely on the ranch, tending the horses, or wandering the wooded acreage.

The annual road construction season forced the Chevy Suburban to detour on its direct route to the feed store, traveling instead past the city's library. It had been a long, long time since Mustang had read any good books - she'd been slowly absorbing the contents of Jack Parsons' journals, hijacked against FBI orders from the rocket scientist's cottage at Boleskine House - but something a bit lighter would be a welcome change.

Or, even a movie.

"Would it be okay if I hang out at the library while you two make your rounds?" she asked.

Her father braked at the curb without a word. Mustang alighted from the rear seat and, no more had the door closed, the car moved back into traffic.

Tall ceilings inside the glass and block structure boasted angled skylights and solar panels, an effort to go green in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The teenager climbed a circular staircase to the mezzanine, where video collections were maintained on shelves running the building's entire length. She migrated toward the classics section.

Videotapes having gone the way of the dodo, she perused slender DVD cases, excited by special behind-the-scenes features now available for some of her favorites. Katharine Hepburn's *Holiday* with Cary Grant, Boris Karloff's version of *Frankenstein*, and *Some Like It Hot* were already selected when she was distracted by movement to the right.

The trouble with 15-foot ceilings is that 12-foot ladders are necessary to change burnt out light fixtures. Metal equipment which had been positioned near the mezzanine railing would dishearten anyone suffering from vertigo. The

bespectacled maintenance man who mounted the rungs, fluorescent bulbs slung across his back, must be immune to that affliction, Mustang thought, refocusing on a rack of new releases.

Six more movies had been added to her stack by the time the girl approached the check-out desk. She paused half-way to retrieving her wallet, when the ladder began to sway ominously.

Struggling to wrench a dead bulb from its ballast, the maintenance man had shifted his weight off-center. Mustang realized - as he did - if he let go of the light fixture, he would fall to the main level. She took one, two steps toward the railing, leaving the DVDs on the counter.

The blue-uniformed employee didn't expect the bulb to suddenly pop free and, his grip so tight, shatter in his hands. He twisted away from shards of flying glass, and pitched backward.

"Land on your feet, unharmed!" Mustang hissed, barely audible to the staff and patrons who had gathered to watch the spectacle.

Physical harm would have been the least of her concerns, if she'd stopped to think before uttering the desperate command. Dozens shrieked when the library's heavy glass doors slammed inward, nearly ripped off their hinges by a hurricane-strength microburst of wind. The air swirled around the base of the ladder, creating a funnel which sucked glossy volumes from the "New Arrivals" display. The shaft engulfed the maintenance man, as well, and suspended him between heaven and earth.

Those closest recoiled in trepidation. His feet eased toward the tile floor as the whirlwind dispersed; books trapped in its core crashed around him. Trembling fingers clutched the ladder's base, as if to assure himself it was real, and he was alive. He glanced up at the dangling remnants of the fluorescent bulb, then caught sight of the auburn-haired youngster among the throng huddling above.

"Oh, hell..." Mustang gasped, retreating quickly.

"You had a guardian angel watching over you today!" shouted one of the security guards, clapping the man on his shoulder.

The teen slumped against a cart jammed with recent returns. Only weeks earlier, she'd been called an angel... She wasn't divine; she was incredibly careless.

"Some excitement, huh?" gushed the circulation clerk at the desk when she retrieved her movies.

"Enough for one day."

At that moment, Mustang wanted nothing more than to meet up with her parents and drive back to the ranch.

She couldn't depart the library without traversing the main lobby, though, which is where two security guards and three additional maintenance men were inspecting the ladder and the malfunctioning light. The survivor of the fall sat on a bench usually reserved for senior citizens and children waiting for their rides, surrounded by chattering co-workers.

Mustang didn't know for certain if his "Thank you" was directed at her, for that very reason. Using his shirt-tail to clean his glasses, she couldn't gauge where his gaze fell. She approached the main doors, twisted metal frames jammed open. Crossing the threshold, she bent her head in shame. "If I could repair you myself, I would."

On the sidewalk outside, she glanced back. The doors had swung shut behind her, good as new.

She sprinted in the direction of the supermarket, dropping two DVDs in her rush.

Two hours later, she had sequestered herself in her bedroom, wearing a path in the shag carpet as she milled to and fro. "Damn you, Jack Parsons!" she moaned, a frequent curse these days. Since inheriting the occultist's unusual affinity with the natural elements - during a trip to Scotland orchestrated by her late maternal grandmother - she'd found her impulsive tongue a huge liability.

Scolding herself mentally for this lack of control, Mustang didn't hear the car on the gravel drive, or the knock at the front door. She stopped in her circuit of the room when Maggie tapped lightly.

"I'm not hungry, Mom," said the girl, thinking it a summons to the dinner table.

The woman countered, "There's someone here to see you, hon."

Having no friends had its advantages, in that her life was seldom disturbed by unexpected or unwelcome company. It left Mustang unable to guess who would come to see her.

She followed her mother into the living room. Hazel eyes peered through the screen door to the porch, glimpsing DVD cases tucked under an arm rippling with muscles. Reaching the Suburban in the shopping center parking lot, she'd discovered her loss; whoever found them must have traced her address from the library records.

His back to her, the short-sleeved blue shirt seemed vaguely familiar, as did the tight dungaree slacks with their square pockets. A full-bodied head of brown hair hid squarish, wire-rimmed glasses from view; until he glanced over his shoulder. The slightest hint of a smile played on his thin lips.

Her jaw dropped as the door clattered shut behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Bixby drove out special after work, girl, inconveniencing himself thanks to your carelessness,” chided Joe.

“I tried to catch you at the library,” the guest clearly lied, “but you left in such a hurry... as if you were running away from something.”

Mustang stammered, “I... was late meeting my parents.”

“If you say so. Knowing how expensive the fines are for missing items, I wanted to be sure you got these back.”

“We really appreciate it,” Maggie declared, puzzled by her daughter’s poor manners. “Won’t you stay for a drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m... late for an appointment.”

Bixby was mocking her, but why? Mustang wondered.

He extended his hand to Joe, who shook it warmly. Maggie did likewise. Turning full-face to her, Mustang stared through convex lenses balanced on an aquiline nose into twinkling brown eyes, accented by multiple, deep laugh lines etched in his tanned skin. He wasn’t a young man, but she couldn’t guess his true age.

She did read his library ID tag, clipped to the shirt pocket: Lyndon H. Bixby.

Maybe he *was* older than he looked, with a name like that.

He clasped her fingers and squeezed - hard. Watching John Ford’s *The Quiet Man*, Mustang had seen John Wayne and Victor MacLaglen engage in a contest of strength using just such a polite gesture...

She exerted a bit of her own pressure, strength doubled by a silent dictate. She noticed his minuscule cringe. “It was nice to see you again, Mr. Bixby,” she breathed evenly.

“Not ‘Mister’, just Bix,” he huffed, releasing the grip. “And I’ll tell you this much, it’ll be a long time before my boss gets me up that ladder, unless there’s an angel nearby.”

Neither Maggie nor Joe caught the inside joke.

Diverting her gaze from the visitor to his rusty, dented, 80s-era Camaro, Mustang quipped, “Looks like you need an angel when you drive, too.”

Bixby stiffened. “That damage wasn’t caused by... a collision.”

The girl detected this change in temperament - brow furrowed, a hardening of his jaw-line, a squint to the eyes, biceps flexing involuntarily. She wished, in these moments, she possessed a touch of ESP, like her cousin Rachel’s step-father. Being better able to “read” the man would have eliminated her confusion.

“Have a pleasant evening,” he concluded, springing off the porch and sliding onto the torn vinyl driver’s seat. Rear tires kicked up a cloud of dust as he fish-tailed toward the road.

Their faces stunned masks, Mustang’s parents filed through the screen door. Joe held it open for his daughter, but she shook her head, settling on the concrete steps to contemplate this bizarre incident.

She did something rare after her parents retired to their bedroom, in fact, based on the nagging discomfort. The house dark and still, she sat down at the dusty computer desk in the corner furthest from the living room fireplace and activated the CPU tower.

Lit by the monitor’s eerie glow, Mustang connected to the internet and typed “Lyndon Bixby” into the search engine. Everyone had information posted on the world wide web, she’d learned during a freshman keyboarding class - even “Elizabeth Duryea”, though this individual was an elderly woman with 15 grandchildren living in Florida.

Pages and pages of results flashed on the screen within seconds. As she suspected, with the unique name, only one person matched her search. The photo matched, too, though it must’ve been taken at least ten years earlier.

Inexplicably a maintenance man now, Bixby had once taught economics and researched market trends at a prominent eastern university. His papers on various aspects of that field had been published by respected scholarly journals, and were included in these periodicals’ on-line archives. A campus newspaper brief dating back 15 years left much unanswered, reporting Bixby had burst into the previous day’s board of directors meeting and tendered his resignation, effective immediately.

Letters to the Editor from his students - printed over subsequent days - protested the move, praised his acumen and intriguing lectures. One noted how there had been no opportunity to thank the man or bid him farewell: his office and classroom had been emptied of personal belongings within six hours, and he - for all practical purposes - completely disappeared.

Until he surfaced as an employee of the Helena District Library, saved from a fall by a teenager who didn’t know when to mind her own business.

Questions swirled in her brain in an attempt to determine what had transpired to drive him from job and home to the middle of nowhere. Had he taken bribes to falsify data about the state of the economy? Did he have some deeply-buried secret about which he’d been threatened with blackmail? Was he witness to a mob murder, and participating in a federal protection program?

The latter was improbable, since he continued to use his real name. “He’s in hiding,” Mustang muttered to herself, “and he’s afraid I’m going to blow his cover by drawing attention to him.” She switched off the computer and crept to her room, shutting the door softly. The *Lawrence of Arabia* DVD Bixby had delivered popped into the player as she crawled beneath the bed sheets.

She’d already decided her parents would return the movies to the library without her on their next trip to town. If anything, the ranch’s isolation was her one guarantee of this power not causing additional problems for others.

When the rubber band snapped off the Sunday *Helena Chronicle* at the breakfast table, Mustang didn’t have to see the headlines to know her good intentions came too late. Her father’s expression betrayed the lead story’s contents.

“Did you hear about this while you were at the library yesterday, girl?” queried Joe.

She feigned innocence, not having related the tale of her Scotland adventure to the couple. “Hear about what?”

Her father shoved the bundle toward her. She bit back an exclamation at the oversized photo surrounded by columns of text. Somebody - on the mezzanine, given the picture’s angle - had used a cell phone camera to capture Bixby hanging in mid-air. The books whipped around in the mini-tornado gave the image similarities to a Harry Potter movie poster.

One line of type caught her eye: “The Montana division of the National Weather Service had no explanation for the freak wind. Conditions in the Helena area had been partly cloudy and calm throughout the day.”

The orange juice glass was lowered onto the laminate; Mustang forced herself not to rush, rising from the chair and proceeding through the kitchen door. Hiking through the cool morning air in her red sweats/pajamas and untied sneakers, she wanted to scream, but maintained her outward composure. She’d been able to start a cattle stampede - and stop it - materialize Francis of Assisi from his eternal rest and make him vanish again, heal wounds, set trees afire and extinguish them with cloudless rains...

This time, she’d placed a man in very real danger, and had no way to prevent the potential tragedy.

Unless she located him and stayed by his side around the clock.

Which would be troublesome in itself, given the likelihood his address and phone number wouldn’t be listed in the latest edition of the local directory.

An unnecessary concern, she realized, emerging near the north pasture’s barbed-wire fence to confront a seething Bixby perched on his Camaro’s hood.

“Oh, hell...”

## II

“Your life just became hell.”

This ominous statement petrified Mustang, as did Lyndon Bixby’s appearance. Twigs and leaves were tangled in his uncombed hair. Sweat streamed from his temples; veins throbbed visibly in his neck. Bent glasses lay beside him on the hood. His black t-shirt and snug jeans were tattered and stained with perspiration, mud and - could it be? - blood.

“How’d... you get up here?” the teen prodded.

“Last night, on my way home, I spent a couple hours exploring an abandoned service road west of here. I’d been hoping to find a secluded spot to... think, and when I saw today’s paper...”

“You’d need a 4-by-4 monster truck to navigate that terrain...”

“This old beasty gets me where I need to go.” He patted the Camaro’s cratered quarter panel.

She sucked air loudly. “Look, I’m really sorry...”

“Be sorry all you want; it doesn’t alter your fate.” The sclera of his eyes shown red in the sunlight, as if burning with an animal’s untamed rage.

Mustang withdrew toward the trees.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home.”

He lunged, and they tumbled to the ground. Mustang landed hard on her spine, Bixby pinning her shoulders to the dirt - a cougar immobilizing his prey. She slipped her right hand up to his chest, retracting it upon feeling his heart pounding at a rate over 200 beats per second.

“You’re... having a heart attack,” she guessed.

“No such luck.” Curious, he sank on his haunches. “What’s a kid like you know about such things?”

The teen scrambled to her feet, panting. “After one of the ranch hands took a nasty fall from his horse, my dad made us take a first aid course and CPR training.”

“Sensible.”

“If it’s not a heart attack, what is it?”

Bixby snarled, “The last person who poked around in my life hasn’t been allowed out of his padded cell in four years.”

“A mental institution?”

She'd have to be content with that hint of a smirk.

"My parents... will be getting worried," she bluffed.

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me what you saw."

"Just you, sitting on the car."

"Nothing before?"

"No."

He debated her reply. "All right, then. Get lost."

She pushed aside a low branch on the path, and paused.

"What?" Bixby puffed.

"About yesterday..."

"What about yesterday?"

"I... never mind."

He bristled. "That was none of my doing."

"I know." Mustang resumed her trek. "How well I know."

How the man covered fifty feet in a split second, she couldn't fathom. He seized her arm, yanking her to face him. "What the hell do you mean by that? You the one who shot that picture?"

"I don't even own a cell phone."

"Tell me the truth!" Bone-crushing pressure increased on her humerus.

She echoed his words. "The last person who poked around in my life nearly drowned in Loch Ness."

He removed his hand from her sleeve, and she left him there, his mouth agape.

Her own pulse throbbing, the girl was glad Bixby did not suspect her interference in his fall at the library. Best they steer clear of each other, the mutual secrets they harbored posing a distinct threat to any future interaction.

But could she escape him, in the long run? He'd found her at home, and ruined what should have been a tranquil jaunt in the woods by trespassing on private property. The first was a deliberate act; the second could be seen as coincidence...

Yet, his reaction to her approach indicated he'd been expecting her.

Mustang's hazy memory of a remark Jack Parsons made about her grandmother broke free from the hidden recesses of her brain: "She knew where I was at all times, just as I knew where she was." The girl had read about psychic bonds between people who shared a great love, or a horrendous tragedy. She shuddered at the notion of such a connection with Lyndon Bixby, allowing him to intrude on her life whenever he chose.

Rather than stare at her parents reading the newspaper or watching television that Sunday, Mustang detoured to the barn, saddling her pinto, Heartbeat, and riding in the opposite direction from where she'd encountered the bedraggled maintenance man.

She tried her best to put Bixby out of her mind. Her ears listened for the calls of different birds; her eyes sought the tracks of wild animals crossing the trails. It was late afternoon before she groomed, watered and fed the horse in its stall, sneaking back into the house through her unlocked bedroom window - though she knew Joe and Maggie ignored her random comings and goings.

Spencer Tracy's version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was nearly finished when the black Chevy Impala parked at a curve in the drive. Mustang peeked through her curtains at the youthful blond woman and tawny haired man in business attire who knocked at the front door.

"This is getting ridiculous," the girl murmured. "In two days, we've had more visitors than in a normal year!"

Her solitude interrupted again, the pair presented FBI credentials, and requested permission from her father to speak with Mustang alone. "We're investigating the incident at the library, and understand your daughter was a witness."

"Go ahead," muttered Joe dismissively.

Opting for the outdoors, they strolled along the drive and past the ranch hand's bunk house - deserted with the crew mostly off-duty, gone to town.

"If you've interviewed others who were at the library, their story is the same as mine," Mustang commented.

"Not quite," retorted the man, who'd identified himself as Sam Johnson. "Lyndon Horatio Bixby didn't drive 30 miles out of his way to call on any of the other witnesses yesterday afternoon."

The teen couldn't suppress her giggle. "Horatio?"

"Look, Miss Duryea," snapped Ginny Richards. "Lyndon Bixby is a wanted criminal, and we've been assigned to apprehend him, now that his whereabouts are known."

"What did he do?"

Johnson supplied, "He's the prime suspect in a murder committed 15 years ago."

"Who'd he kill?"

"His wife, a covert DEA operative."

"Wow."

“Wow, indeed. Our department has been busting their butts more than a decade to locate him, since he vanished from Providence one day after the murder. This is our first credible lead in eighteen months.”

Something clicked inside Mustang’s head, a sense of something wrong with the story these government flunkies had concocted. For one, despite his attack on her that very morning, Bixby didn’t strike her as the type who would kill. And, if his wife had been a drug enforcement agent, he would have been held for questioning immediately after the crime was committed, instead of having almost 24 hours to resign his post and clean out his office.

“Couldn’t you trace his car?”

“That old beater of a Camaro?” Richards countered.

“Right.”

“Stolen plates. Every time an APB would be issued with a particular tag number, he’d grab a fresh set off a car in a mall parking lot or something.”

If that was true, Bixby was a smart criminal, at least. Still..

“You two haven’t been long out of the academy, am I right?” she speculated.

Richards answered, “Graduated two years ago.”

“Then, you would’ve been dragged along on Ben Espinoza’s yearly field training adventure.”

“Sure,” chuckled Johnson. “Living conditions were terrible in those Appalachian backwoods.”

Since FBI instructor Espinoza had made a point of informing Mustang - during their brush at the Boleskine Gate Lodge - he annually conducted his off-site training on Jack Parsons’ Scottish property, she knew these two were lying.

“Get out,” she instructed. “And if you know what’s good for you, don’t show yourselves within a hundred miles of here again.”

“Are you threatening U. S. government officials?” growled Johnson.

“No, I’m promising idiotic impostors you will forever regret if you don’t get your asses off this land within the next 30 seconds.”

“We’re not impostors,” confided Richards. “We’re just not FBI. We’re DEA, and Bixby *is* wanted on federal murder charges. You can check the posters at any post office, or on the internet.”

“I checked the web. His name didn’t bring up any postings about criminal activities.”

“Keep pushing, young lady,” Johnson barked, “and we’ll arrest you as an accessory.”

“Keep talking, Mister, and you’ll find yourself dangling from the highest branches of that big oak over there. Now, get out.”

Whether it was the set of her slender shoulders or the gleam in her hazel eyes, the pair casually retreated to their vehicle and departed. Mustang didn’t move from the drive until the car had disappeared around a distant curve to the west.

She resented how an innocent attempt to prevent a man’s injury had immersed her in the chase for an alleged murderer - who might well deserve prosecution. She couldn’t shake her impression he, himself, had been chasing something near the north pasture that morning, or was being chased by... what? There’d been reports of bears, wolves, and wild cats throughout the remote area...

Her skull aching, she trudged to the house, where Joe glared at her between stories on the evening news.

“That friend of yours comes around again, I’m calling the police,” he warned.

“He’s not my friend, so I don’t really care what you do.”

The knot in her stomach meant she did care, nonetheless, and the first chance she had, she’d break her resolution and track him down. She spent a depressing evening in her room, not even tittering at Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in drag.

The ranch hands were busy about their chores at 6:30 AM Monday. Mustang bounced out the kitchen door in gold Greenpeace t-shirt and black jeans, backpack slung over one shoulder.

Anyone aware of her truancy record might have sensed the auburn-haired girl’s destination was not the bus stop. No one noticed her sling the backpack on a tree branch and proceed past the end of the drive, crossing the road and sticking out the traditional hitchhiker’s thumb.

Her efforts netted nothing for an hour. A delivery van driver took pity on her, because it had started to rain, and she wore no jacket. By the time Mustang shuffled through the main entrance of Helena’s library, she was wet, tired and frustrated.

Her frustration soon redoubled. Directed to the maintenance office, a stout, balding gentleman greeted her cordially.

“What can I do for you, little lady?”

“I’m looking for Mr. Bixby.”

“Well, you won’t find him here.”

“How come?”

“He left a voice mail on my phone Saturday, telling me he was quitting.”

“What!” Mustang sank on the molded plastic chair near a locked chemical cabinet.

“I’d anticipated it,” the supervisor admitted. “He’s a drifter, that one. Been here only nine weeks, and he didn’t have the hands to be good at routine maintenance. He’s a scholar, if I’m any judge, only taking this job to earn a stake before accepting a better position.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“Personnel has those records.”

Climbing to the third floor administrative suite, she obtained no assistance, due to “privacy laws”. Rage smoldering at the receptionist’s saccharine-sweet phony courtesy, Mustang was sorely tempted to create a paperwork cyclone from stacks of unfinished filing. She stomped from the chamber and slammed a trembling fist into the stairwell wall.

Pain shot up her arm, and exasperation swelled. “I mustn’t get angry,” she breathed. “I do horrible things when I get angry.”

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged in the lobby, at a loss regarding her quest. Two security guards were chatting near the doors, and she wondered if Bixby had been friendly with any of the other employees. An informal inquiry might snare her the required address.

“Excuse me, sir,” she ventured, approaching the taller guard. “Do you know Mr. Bixby?”

“You mean Bix, the maintenance guy?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t say as I knew him well, but we went drinking a couple times after work.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

He grew suspicious. “Why?”

“Saturday... after the...”

“Ladder malfunction?”

“Yes. I lost a couple DVDs, and he brought them to my house, but he left his jacket there. I wanted to return it to him, and I just found out he doesn’t work here anymore.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you. We met at the bar, so I never went to his place.”

She forced the “Thanks, anyway,” through taut lips.

The urge to keep moving propelling her feet, she zig-zagged through the bookshelves, not bothering to look at any of the titles emblazoned on cloth-bound spines. It took all her self-control to keep them from bursting into flames.

Until she passed a road atlas, lying open and abandoned at a reading desk.

“Where would he go?” she mused, flipping to the Montana map. If he wasn’t safe in a small city like Helena, would he be better able to conceal himself in a metropolis like Minneapolis or Chicago?

There’s no way to tell, she reasoned internally. I’d have to orchestrate a way to find his car, and if the Feds can’t...

She had resources the Feds lacked, however. And the longer she stared at the two-page spread, the better a niggling idea solidified itself in her brain. Her voice barely a whisper, she uttered, “Show me the tire tracks of Lyndon Horatio Bixby’s car in purple on this map, from the time he left our ranch yesterday until now.”

A splotch appeared near Canyon Creek, and inched its way to the capital city, before continuing along Route 287 to Interstate 94. Mustang watched as the trail moved eastward toward North Dakota. If he’d left shortly after their confrontation in the woods, he had a 24-hour head start, and would be hundreds of miles away.

She didn’t want to reopen the wounds on her palms by riding the lightning just to catch him.

His progress, oddly, halted in Miles City, Montana, nearly 400 miles from Helena. The purple line diverted north on 59, west on 200, into Great Falls, then south to... Canyon Creek.

“Oh, hell...” she sighed. He came back for me, and he’s waiting at the school.

If Johnson and Richards, whoever they really were, believed keeping an eye on her might lead them to Bixby, they’d have the school under surveillance, too.

At a dead run, she fled the library, almost knocking the two security guards into the circulation counter.

The rain had ended; the sunshine didn’t help much. Her leg muscles were in spasm before she reached the nearest intersection. She knew she couldn’t run all the way to Canyon Creek. Her usual gait would require two days to cover the distance, unless...

“Wind, accelerate my pace so I reach Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School ten times as fast as if I ran.”

The microburst snatched her off the sidewalk and sustained her a foot above the pavement on its winding course through the Montana back roads. This phenomenon reminded Mustang of the one occasion she’d dared mount a truly wild stallion, except she had no ropes to hold her in this invisible saddle.

She'd decided on the school as her destination, based on the town's compact size. Bixby would be readily located from that point. Richards and Johnson, on the other hand, might not readily be avoided.

She had to take the risk.

The lawns were deserted - classes in session - when the girl unceremoniously crashed into the lowest branches of a pine tree. She swung herself onto the grass after taking a moment to dispel the effects of traveling 100 miles an hour, then scanned the faculty parking lot for one particular rusty car.

Nothing. She walked toward the town's main street, where shops struggled to stay profitable in the sagging economic climate. The deli's aroma tantalized her palate; she was more than hungry. Pausing to read the menu posted on a plate glass window near the entrance, she peered through her own reflection to see Lyndon Bixby, clad in black polo shirt and Dockers, smirking at her over his foot-long sandwich and soda.

### III

Sculpted hands raised the meatball sub to Bixby's mouth, and Mustang saw his index finger signal. Reluctantly - much preferring flight to conflict - she pushed open the deli's heavy door. A bell tinkled overhead, but none of the customers in the crowded dining room glanced up from their meals.

The queue to order at the meat counter ended beside Bixby's table; the girl slipped in at the end. He didn't acknowledge her directly, mumbling, "You really should do something about your hair. You must stick out like a sore thumb, wherever you go."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Why aren't you in school?"

"Why aren't you five states away by now?" quipped Mustang. "There are two government flunkies on your tail."

"Why shouldn't I hide somewhere they think I've already fled?"

"Except, they may be watching me - or the school - thinking you'll contact me again. If they see you stalking me..."

"I'm not stalking you. Why *aren't* you in school?"

"Why do you care?"

"Just answer the question."

"It's too dangerous."

"You piss off the class bully?"

"Not dangerous for me. For the other students."

The last bite swallowed, he dabbed his lips with a paper napkin. “What, you got some communicable disease?”

She glowered at him.

The line moved forward, and he rose, grabbing her arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Not wishing to cause a scene, she accompanied Bixby into the noontday heat. He steered her right past the storefronts, then into an alley.

“Where’s your car?” the teen queried.

“It died on the way to Minnesota. Been held together by spit and bailing wire so long, there wasn’t anything I could do to repair it.”

“Near Miles City?”

His eyes widened. “How’d you know?”

“Never mind.” She looked beyond him to the street, where pedestrians paid no attention to their presence. “I came to tell you about the jerks who stopped by the ranch yesterday. My mission complete, I’m going home.”

He prevented her escape with an iron grip, brown orbs boring into hers. “What did these jerks tell you about me?”

“They claim you murdered your wife, an undercover DEA agent.”

“She wasn’t my wife. Never in a million years would I marry, for one very good reason.”

“Which is?”

He chuckled. “I’ve seen your parents. What’s their favorite past time?”

“Arguing.”

“Exactly. Married couples fight, a lot. I grew up in that atmosphere; living together is much less stressful.”

“So, you weren’t married, but you *did* kill her?”

Bixby leaned against the dirty brick wall, removing his glasses with his free hand. “Yes, but it wasn’t premeditated murder. We’d been living together about a month when I overheard a phone conversation with her boss at the DEA. She was undercover - a plant in my own apartment.”

“What, you were dealing drugs on campus?”

“How’d you...” He squeezed her arm harder, then released the pressure.

“Never mind. You probably know my entire history.”

“No, just what I found on the web.”

That response relieved his tension. “I wasn’t a drug dealer, or even a user, but a couple grad students in the science department thought I was. They couldn’t figure out why I was doing research in their professors’ labs in the middle of the

night, rather than in my own office in the Econ Pavilion. They reported I was stealing chemicals used to make meth...”

“Were they lying?”

“Yes, and no. I was stealing chemicals, trying to find a remedy for...” His baritone faded.

“For what? Cancer? You’re no scientist. How would you begin to know what to mix together?”

A police officer passed the alley; Bixby dragged Mustang out the other end and across a small park, hiding behind the utility shed.

“I’ve done a lot of studying on my own over the past 25 years,” the former maintenance man related. “When the doctors first discovered the cause of my malady...”

“What malady? You don’t look sick.”

“What about yesterday morning? Did I look sick then?”

She considered. “In a way, I suppose.”

“I have an overactive hypothalamus, which aggravates the pituitary glands, causing a non-stop flow of adrenaline at certain times.”

Mustang hadn’t concentrated much on anatomy discussions in science class over the years. “Those times being?”

“When I get angry.”

“And you got angry at your girlfriend...”

“No hurricane could do more damage; I snapped her neck like a twig.”

“Which is why you resigned from the university and disappeared.”

“And have spent 15 years trying to control my emotions by wandering from place to place, working menial jobs to keep from starving.”

“What happened yesterday?”

“The *Helena Chronicle* happened.”

“The fall,” Mustang gasped, turning away. “I am so very sorry.”

“You said the same thing out there in the woods. I don’t want your pity.”

“I don’t pity you... Well, yes, in a way I do. I was only trying to take responsibility for my actions and apologize.”

“What, you sabotaged the ladder?”

He’d been honest with her; she couldn’t deceive him. “No, I saved you from breaking your leg, or worse.”

Slipping his glasses on his nose, Bixby slowly circled, positioning himself squarely in front of her once more. She didn’t shun his intense gaze, magnified strangely by the thick lenses. “You were on the mezzanine...”

She nodded.

“There’s no way...”

“Except to summon a freak wind to break the fall.”

“No. No. You can’t tell me my future has been spoiled by some insane hocus pocus...”

Seeing the veins in his neck begin to pulsate, Mustang kept her voice level. “Being able to control nature isn’t hocus pocus. It’s a marvelous experience. I just don’t always control my mouth, which stirs up trouble for those close by.”

“That’s the understatement of the year!” he roared with laughter, sinking to the ground.

The teen insisted, “I want to fix this for you...”

“How?” He glared up at her. “What you’ve done is no different than a hockey player purposely body-checking an opponent, paralyzing him for life. I will never again be able to show my face in public, never find peace...”

She knelt beside him, placed her hand on his chest. His heart was pounding like a jack-hammer. “Don’t upset yourself over this, Bix. I promise...”

He covered his face with his hands. “I mustn’t get angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

Had she not uttered those same words hours earlier? “I won’t let you.” She visualized his body working normally. “Slow, slow. Heart rate slow. Blood pressure low. Respiration slow.”

“What’s that, some witch’s incantation?”

“No. Usually, I don’t make rhymes - which is half my problem, I guess. All I have to do is say what I want done... and it happens.”

His breaths came more steadily; the sclera cleared of the odd redness. “You told the wind to save me at the library?”

“No. The wind acted upon my command that you land safely.”

He grabbed her hand, turning her palm skyward. “And this?”

“I... have a unique method of traveling.”

“These are burns, for Christ’s sake! What do you do, grab a live electrical wire?”

“No. A lightning bolt.”

Like a crab, he scurried away from her on all fours, stopping only when he slammed his back into a tree trunk. “You’re crazy, y’know?”

Mustang didn’t move. “Haven’t you been told the same thing, with your... condition?”

Defeated, he collapsed against the bark. “Yes. But, can you show me... what it is...”

To torch a bush would cause panic in the town, so the teen settled for making a cluster of daylilies bordering the playground spontaneously bloom.

Bixby frowned skeptically.

She changed the color of the yellow blossoms to pink, red, purple and white.

“Okay, I’m convinced.”

Both got to their feet, meeting half-way. Bixby gave her shoulders an affectionate nudge, flashing his playful smirk, creating a total transformation of his features courtesy of the deep lines at the corners of his eyes and on his tanned cheeks. The full brown hair stirred in the breeze, while that distinct, volatile, primal aura lit him from within.

“Tell me what I can do to make amends,” Mustang pleaded.

His face changed instantly. “Run!”

She followed his sight line. Richards and Johnson in the black Chevy Impala - flanked by two local police cruisers, sirens blaring - tore along Main Street. Bixby’s muscles flexed in preparation for a mad dash; Mustang restrained him with a firm hand.

“Do you trust me?”

“I...”

“How’d you get the name Horatio?”

“There’s no time...”

“We have all the time we need. Tell me.”

“My grandfather was big into Horatio Alger. Made a fortune out west, which he lost in the Crash of ‘29. Committed suicide, but my dad loved him.”

“And Lyndon?”

“Mom wanted to name me Charles, after her father. Dad wanted Richard, after his. L.B.J. was in the White House, so they compromised.”

She drew Bixby toward the oncoming vehicles, their gait leisurely. “Take off your glasses.”

He complied.

“All they’ll see is a man about 20 years younger, shaved head and blue eyes, and his Goth companion, with short black hair, brown eyes and...” she added under her breath, “more cleavage.”

“Are you positive?”

“Absolutely. Act as if we’re newlyweds, and they’ll be completely fooled.”

“If I was 20 years younger, we just might be.”

“Shut up.”

He slipped his arm around her waist, and she could feel his pulse through her t-shirt. The three cars kept driving, did a complete lap of the park, then sped down a side street toward Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High.

Bixby halted near the deli. "How long can you maintain these... disguises?"

"I don't know, to be frank. I've only had to do it for short periods in the past."

"Might want to make it permanent, given we're both fugitives from the law."

"What do you mean, fugitives?"

"In the view of law enforcement, you've aided and abetted a first degree murderer, and obstructed justice. We could be sentenced to adjoining cells on death row."

"Thing is, they'd never be able to arrest me," Mustang assured him.

"Then, they'd kill you."

"Not likely."

"Why not?"

She pulled up the left sleeve and pointed to a spot on her bicep. "See this?"

"I don't see anything."

"Exactly. I was shot there two months ago, and there's not even a scar."

"Who shot you?"

"An irate Franciscan in Assisi."

Bixby's expression betrayed his confusion. "What were you doing..."

"Put two and two together. I told you how I don't always control my mouth, and that I travel on bolts of lightning. Well..."

"Ah." Pieces of this puzzle were falling into place. "But, why did he shoot you?"

"Because I didn't think St. Francis should stick around to fulfill the guy's twisted dreams."

"St. Francis? You mean, the yard statues with the birds and the wolves?"

"Not plaster. The real deal."

"But, but..."

"I know, I know. He died eight hundred years ago. One idle remark in a shrine and - bam! - there he was."

"You raised the dead."

"I... rendered a spirit visible would be more accurate."

"Consisting of blood and sinew?"

"Yes."

“Then you *raised the dead*.”

“Okay, okay.”

The idea was ludicrous, but Bixby suggested it regardless. “I was going to drive back to the hotel in Great Falls tonight. Come with me.”

Mustang burst out laughing. Had she become so attractive to older men in the past year? First, Thomas Burton, now Lyndon Bixby, wanting her to run away with him.

“I’m serious. You asked me how you could make amends...”

“You want me to spend the night with you?”

“And add a statutory rape charge to everything else? Of course not!” he scoffed. “I think you can heal my hypothalamus, and bring an end to... my problem.”

“Our problems may be just beginning,” she countered.

“Huh?”

She wagged her thumb toward the intersection of Main and First Streets. A county K-9 unit was on foot patrol, and there could be little doubt they were searching for Bixby.

“Can’t you...” he hinted.

“Now they’ve got the scent, and made visual contact, only a pouring rain would do the trick.”

“Well?”

“Manipulating the weather is the one thing I won’t do with my power. Too hazardous.”

“Being incarcerated can be hazardous, too.”

“Then we better make ourselves scarce.”

## IV

“You’re more familiar with this town than I am,” spouted Bixby. “Which way?”

The LED clock on the First National Bank sign overhead flashed 2:55. “To the school. If all the kids headed for the busses don’t disorient the dog, there’s a creek past the tennis courts where we can lose them before doubling back to your car.” She hesitated. “You do have a car?”

“When the Camaro died, I rented a silver Mustang GT. It’s parked in the lot at town hall.”

Mustang opened her mouth, then closed it.

“What?”

“All these years, I’ve been called Mustang, and I’ve never ridden in one.”

“You’re named after a *car*? The library records list your name as Elizabeth.”

“I earned my nickname taming horses. Never really thought much about the car.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. Come on.”

“Hold on. If we’re lucky, the dog will lead the cop to the park, since we crossed our own tracks a couple times. Once we’re out of sight, then we can take off.”

And, rounding the corner, they did. The German Shepherd, however, didn’t waste any time going the wrong direction. Before the couple had reached the crush of students eager to board their homeward transportation, their pursuers were less than half a block behind.

It wasn’t that Bixby’s age hampered their speed. Mustang didn’t have the stamina to run long distances full-tilt. Her assumption the dog would lose their trail weaving between hundreds of tired bodies had been correct, partially. The ruckus created when Bixby slammed into a petite brunette freshman - knocking her books under the bus, and offending her over-protective boyfriend - drew the officer’s attention.

Bixby was restrained by two burly seniors, while the athletically-built defender of feminine honor pummeled his torso with rock-like fists. Jostled to the fringe of the circle which formed to watch the fight, Mustang barely glimpsed the man’s eyes redden as his temper erupted.

The boyfriend went airborne, yelling obscenities, landing on the approaching deputy sheriff. His leash dropped, the dog bounded ahead, frightening a clique of girls, who unsettled him with their screams.

Mustang shoved through the vertical bodies to find ten young men piled, unconscious, on the asphalt. Bixby towered over them, drenched in sweat. They’d gotten off easy, in her book. Some days, she wanted to decimate the entire student body.

The teen yanked Bixby’s polo shirt as she whisked past. He accompanied her docilely, soon outdistancing her with his vastly increased momentum.

They splashed into the rapid current of Canyon Creek, dodging rocks and ruts for 200 yards before ascending the sandy east bank. They collapsed side by side, held their breath simultaneously, and listened. No dog barking, no sound of footsteps...

“I think we did it,” panted Mustang.

Bixby was already standing. “I can’t stop now.”

“For a minute, at least.”

“No. If I stop, I... I...”

“You mean, the adrenaline...”

“Yes,” he gulped. “I’ve got to keep running until... until...”

“That’s what you were doing in the woods yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“And how all those dents got in your Camaro?”

He nodded.

“Then, go. I’ll wait here, to be sure we’re in the clear.”

“I’ll meet you at the car in an hour.”

Amazed, she watched him tear between the trees at an alarming rate. If his outbursts required him to run like that for long... She wondered why he wasn’t dead from the exertion.

Ten minutes’ rest alleviated the tightness in Mustang’s lungs but, when she pulled herself upright, her legs refused to support her. A severed branch serving as cane, she hobbled toward a picturesque foot-bridge and town hall. To confound passersby, she altered her appearance, mirroring how she felt: a stooped old woman.

Resting on a park bench, admiring the classically re-styled Ford muscle car, no one gave her a second glance. As the hands on the tower clock ticked beyond their deadline, she hoped Bixby hadn’t been apprehended during his frantic jog through the countryside.

Limping and bloodied, he eventually passed her. Her transformed features meant nothing to him.

“You’re not leaving without me, are you, Bix?” she drawled.

His head jerked around so hard, she thought it might pop off his neck.

“Where are you?”

“Here.” She straightened and smiled.

“My God! Is that... what you did to us... before?”

“We looked a lot better, I promise you,” she snickered.

“I didn’t know what happened to you. I’ve been hiding in the alley for almost an hour, knowing I couldn’t sit in the car, waiting...”

“I’m sorry. You said I should do something about my red hair...”

The door locks clicked, and the pair dropped onto black leather bucket seats. Mustang liked what she saw, and wished she’d be able to sit behind the steering wheel. Without a license, though, and this being a rental, the risk would be too great.

Before placing the key in the ignition, Bixby extracted his glasses from his trousers. He plucked a small pair of needle-nose pliers from the cup holder, and gingerly reshaped the wire-rimmed frames, manipulating the lenses into the ridged silver metal.

“Did you take your anger out on those?” Mustang ventured.

“No, they never left my pocket the entire five miles, but when I tripped on a tree root and fell against a rock...”

“They might’ve been safer on your face.”

He positioned the spectacles on his nose. “Nothing’s safe around me.”

Rumbling under the hood silenced Mustang’s reply.

She again experienced the thrill of riding a wild horse as the car raced up Interstate 15 toward Great Falls. Bixby cupped her left hand around the shift knob, covering it with his own, so she could feel the vibration of the V-8 engine.

“Aren’t your parents worried about you wandering around, unsupervised, so often?” the driver asked as the sun descended in the west.

“I think they gave up on me when I was a sophomore. I quit going to school on a regular basis, and none of their arguments could convince me spending my days at a rickety wooden desk had any practical benefits. Then, this happened...”

“You mean, you discovered the power you have over nature?”

“It was... given to me without my consent. I’m stuck with it, and I’m still trying to learn how to control it.”

“Do you know how many times I’ve expressed that very sentiment over the past two decades?” Bixby chuckled wryly. “The knowledge there’s at least one person on the planet who shares inner turmoil equal to my own, even though the source is different... It’s humbling.”

“Same here.”

She felt his fingers abruptly tighten atop hers, and glanced at him. His muscles were twitching violently; the car swerved across lanes and skidded onto the grassy median, stopping only when Mustang yelled the directive.

“What’s wrong?” she cried, the color drained from his face, lips quivering.

“I... haven’t eaten,” he heaved. “Once I work the adrenaline out of my system during an episode, if I don’t get some protein and sugar, I black out.”

“Then, let’s grab a bite. There’s a truck stop not far ahead, if that last billboard was correct. I’m famished, myself, especially since I didn’t get a chance to eat at the deli.”

“Can you drive? I don’t want to cause an accident.”

“Then, you don’t want me to drive.” She placed his hand on the shifter, and loaned him some of her energy. A few deep breaths helped restore his equilibrium, and he threw the car into reverse, easing the tires onto the highway before accelerating toward the next off-ramp.

Semis hauling single and double trailers filled the parking lot; one entire row of spaces displayed an impressive collection of Harley Davidson motorcycles. A young family had vacated a booth near the front windows as Mustang and Bixby entered the dining room, the only empty seats.

A harried waitress lugging a warped plastic bin cleared the used plates, glasses and silverware, wiping the table top with a disinfected cloth. She spoke not a word, and the pair waited for service.

“When was the last time you had a physical examination?” the girl inquired.

“The day before... Janet died. I actually made an appointment with a specialist in Boston last summer, but they wanted a complete medical history, and copies of records from my last doctor. That would have been...”

“An invitation to arrest.”

Despite his exhaustion, Bixby managed a trademark smirk. “I’ve studied every medical text I could find, and scoured the internet for similar cases, coming up empty. There are days I feel fantastic, and weeks following an outburst where I can hardly stand straight.”

“Like now.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where is the hypothalamus in the body?”

Bixby tapped the left front of his skull as a buxom waitress delivered menus, tumblers of water, clean silverware and place mats.

“I’ll be back in a couple minutes for your order,” she said.

“We’re ready now,” Bixby stated, not opening the laminated list of selections. “Steak and eggs, pancakes, hash browns, toast and a large orange juice.”

The woman pulled a notepad from her frilly apron. “How do you want the steak cooked?”

“Rare.”

Mustang cracked a smile.

“What’s yours, Miss?” pressed the waitress.

“Club sandwich, no tomatoes, and a chocolate shake.”

“Got it.”

Before she’d reached the kitchen to post the ticket on the rack, Bixby had drained his water glass, and Mustang’s. He signaled the hostess, who had

deposited an elderly couple across the aisle. "Bring a pitcher of water, please," he requested.

"We don't usually..."

"Please," Mustang interspersed.

The perky blond agreed, and Mustang fully expected Bixby to drink every drop with no regard for the niceties.

"You think I would embarrass you that way?" he chided.

"Oh, hell..."

His fourth portion of liquid moistening his lips, he realized she was looking beyond him at the group of bikers pigging out at the counter.

"You recognize somebody?" prodded Bixby.

"No, but a few of them keep looking this way."

"Why wouldn't they, when I'm sitting with the prettiest girl in the place?"

"Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true."

"I've never considered myself pretty."

"Maybe that's because you don't see yourself the way others do. You radiate beauty like a candle in a dark room."

"It's not me, it's my power, bringing with it grief of a different sort." She focused on Bixby anew. "You've lived with your problem so long, are you sure you want to be cured of it?"

"Do dogs have fleas?"

A platter heaped with edibles was set before him, and the conversation lagged. Mustang munched her sandwich of turkey, bacon and lettuce, sipping her drink through a straw, while he devoured the beef and assortment of carbs without stopping to chew.

Mustang didn't notice the bikers approach until they were clustered around the booth. Two of them had commandeered the adjacent space, kneeling on the bench behind Bixby's head. A greasy sort with fingerless leather gloves reached over and stole a slice of toast.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Bixby warned, staring straight ahead.

"Are you more interested in stuffing your face or protecting your lady?" challenged a multi-tattooed colossus wearing a too-small leather jacket.

The teen snorted, "Back off, idiots."

"Ah, a feisty one!" cackled a punk-rock wannabe.

Wearing desert camouflage and a German helmet, another grunted, "Who's going to make us back off?"

“Do you really want all these nice people to toss their cookies when your head explodes?” she asserted.

“Mustang!” hissed her companion.

“I’m not good with people, Bix, and stupidity doesn’t sit well on top of a chocolate shake.”

“I think we need to teach this bitch a lesson,” Tattoo declared, reaching for her arm.

He recoiled instantly, skin blackened by unseen flames.

Bixby’s face blanched.

“You feeling better?” Mustang asked.

“I... guess.”

“Let’s go, then.”

“I don’t think...”

“They aren’t going anywhere.”

Indeed, the two rose and left the table, while the bikers argued among themselves about why their boots were stuck to the floor.

Handing the hostess \$20 at the cash register, Bixby bent to Mustang’s ear. “How long will they be like that?”

“Forever, if I had my way.” Detecting a glint of terror in his eyes, she patted his hand. “Ten minutes, so we’ll have a decent head start.”

“Will they...”

“Their status has been maligned. Of course, they will.” She backed through the door, caressing his cheek tenderly. “Which is why I’ll cure you now, not later at the hotel.”

The Mustang hit 120 mph seconds after jolting onto the Interstate. Fortunately, few other cars populated the northbound roadway.

The bikers still managed to catch up, but it took them an hour. The roar of the Harley engines deafened their prey, even with the windows closed. Forming a ring around the vehicle, the Hogs tried to maneuver it into a ditch below the gravel shoulder.

Bixby’s knuckles white on the steering wheel, perspiration beaded on his forehead. Both frightened and angry, none of the symptoms triggered by these emotions manifested.

“What do you suggest?” he prompted his passenger.

“Flight or fight.”

He eyed the gas gauge. “Looks like fight. I should’ve tanked up at the truck stop.”

The Mustang braked hard; the bikes riding their tail veered off, with three losing control and tumbling down a steep incline.

Tossing his glasses on the dashboard, Bixby and Mustang leapt from the vehicle, rather than have their assailants shatter the glass and forcibly extricate them. A quick headcount confirmed the odds were 13 to 1, definitely not fair.

Not that the bikers wanted to fight Mustang. Hers would be another fate, after they had their fun with Lyndon Bixby.

Except, they couldn't touch him. Their hardest punches, kicks and jabs were deflected by invisible forces. Mustang sat on the car's trunk, observing the gang attack, retreat, and attack again, in vain.

"What's up with this guy?" shouted one. "He a ninja with lightning-fast hands?"

The former researcher grinned. "Nothing so mundane."

The German helmet tired of the impasse. If fists weren't getting the job done, then maybe weapons would.

Mustang had shielded Bixby from bodily contact with the thugs, but cold steel was a separate issue, not addressed in her edict to the natural elements. When the switchblade flicked open, she saw pink sunlight reflected, and cursed herself for over-confidence.

"Bix, watch out!"

He spun, and took the thrust in the abdomen.

The girl's anger peaked as Bixby slammed to his knees. The fuel line on each Harley burst, spraying gasoline in all directions. Tires flattened and mirrors bent into pretzels through the force of her will.

Seeing their precious toys damaged, the bikers fled through unplowed corn fields. One of them dropped a cigarette butt...

Flames consumed the motorcycles and, nearly, Mustang and Bixby. Using every ounce of strength, she pulled him beyond the gas spill, stretching him on the grass.

Lifting the blood-soaked polo shirt, the gaping wound to the left of his navel nauseated Mustang. After everything he'd endured, he had minutes to live, because of her negligence.

She opened her mouth to speak the healing words; he raised a finger to silence her. "Leave it," he wheezed. "Being perfectly healthy, I'd still be a fugitive. At least, I felt normal for awhile..."

"Bix, I..."

He groped for her hand. "No regrets. If you'd let me fall on Friday, that broken leg would've been far... more painful, and I'm... no good... on... crutches."

His grip slackened, the eyes slowly closed. The half-smile she would never forget was frozen in place.

Sirens pierced the evening chill. Mustang couldn't recall if any cars had passed during the stand-off with the bikers, and a concerned driver had phoned the police. Whoever had summoned them, she realized her presence at the site would raise all sorts of unpleasant issues - including with her parents.

She bolted across the highway, leaping through the underbrush as the first emergency vehicle arrived on scene.

The convergence of state, county and local police cruisers, paramedics, fire engines and tanker trucks, a coroner's van and media satellite trucks slowed both north and south bound lanes to a crawl. Viewing the commotion from a clump of tall weeds, Mustang silently cheered the pickup hauling a brand new travel-trailer which braked in front of her. She crept from her concealment, opened the door and slipped inside.

A dangling, dew soaked backpack was plucked from a sagging tree branch around midnight. Hoisting herself through the unlocked bedroom window, the girl kicked off her sneakers and flopped on the bed.

Daylight brought repeated news stories on both the fight at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, and mysterious I-15 murder. Mustang stumbled groggily into the kitchen, where her mother was cooking scrambled eggs and bacon.

"Mornin', Mom."

Maggie turned to kiss her daughter's cheek, shrieked and fainted.

Quickly, Mustang removed the skillet from the burner, then grasped the cause of the woman's dismay.

Splatters of Lyndon Bixby's blood covered her hands, face and the Greenpeace t-shirt.

"Oh, hell..."

She headed for the shower and another agonizing day.