

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Irascible Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

The yellow school bus bounced along the gravel drive, a harbinger of doom. Mustang glanced up from cleaning the stalls and cringed as 50 youngsters scrambled toward the barn.

She'd forgotten what day it was.

She wished she'd stayed in bed.

Scarlet fever would have been vastly preferable to leading rowdy seven-year-olds around the ranch, to see how horses were raised and tended, first hand. Yet, Joe Duryea extended the invitation to local schools every spring, and many teachers enjoyed the chance to get their over-active students out of the classroom for a few hours.

One parent acted as chaperone for every four kids - two hands too few to keep the diminutive wanderers in check. As Mustang ushered the group toward the corral, where three new foals romped with their dams, a pair of curious boys veered toward the house.

The greying instructor, Miss Poulin, scurried over to retrieve them.

Mustang could tell why her naturally black hair had whitened at a relatively young age - under 45.

Yelling at the top of her lungs, the teen still couldn't be heard, because of three girls' constant chattering. Given the resemblance between them and their adult supervisor, Mustang figured she was their mother. The woman tried to hush them, unsuccessfully.

Each of the children had an opportunity to ride one of the tamer mounts, the more courageous ranch hands leading them by the reins. Mustang managed to get the others perched on the wood-slat corral fence - like in an old cowboy movie - while another parent shot photos from every angle.

Having the chance to pat a horse's nose, and stroke its mane, see how large its... piles were and what kind of food they ate, brought gasps of amazement from young lips. By noon, though, Mustang was glad to see them herded back onto the transport to town.

Except when the head-count came up one less than acceptable.

A formal roll-call commenced, with each name ticked off as the child raised his or her hand in acknowledgment. Mustang listened from outside the bus as more than forty names received a positive response. Only then did an ominous silence descend on the gathering.

"It's Bonnie Thompson," came the declaration.

A flurry of questions followed: where the first grader had last been seen, who'd been her chaperone, what color clothes she was wearing. Joe - finally - strolled over from the bunk house, where Mustang noticed he'd been hiding all morning.

"What's the ruckus, girl?" he asked his daughter.

"There's a stray."

"What're you going to do about it?"

She sucked air through her teeth, ashamed of the man's uncaring attitude. "I'm not the one whose liability insurance will go through the roof if the kid comes up hurt."

The point hit home. "Maybe I better send out the hands in search parties."

"Sounds like a great idea, Dad," she sniffed sarcastically.

Joe mounted the bus steps and drew aside the agitated teacher. He explained his plan and, given the adults in her charge were needed to maintain control of the fidgeting students, she agreed.

"Bring the young 'uns to the house. My wife will rustle up some lemonade and sandwiches," Joe concluded.

"We've got our own lunches, thank you," countered Miss Poulin. "We were going to picnic in the town park..."

"Bring 'em to the house, anyway. We'll find something to keep them occupied until..."

As the stream of bodies piled off the yellow behemoth, Mustang accompanied her father to the barn, where a few of the men were unsaddling exhausted horses. "Get on the radio, and tell the boys to start hunting for a little girl lost somewhere on the property," directed Joe. "Nobody eats until she's found."

"She's blonde, blue eyes, wearing a pink Strawberry Shortcake t-shirt, blue jean skirt and yellow shoes," supplied Mustang, based on the discussions she'd heard between the adults.

Five minutes later, she stood alone in the large structure. He might give the impression of a homeless tramp, but she could credit her father with one strength: he definitely hired dedicated men to work for him. Rather than search on foot, though, she decided to give her favorite horse, Heartbeat, a bit of exercise. That way, she could start in the north pasture, and work her way back toward the house, to prevent the child from wandering even further afield.

By 3:00, when no trace of the girl had been found, the bus departed to take the other first graders home for the day. Miss Poulin remained, with two county police officers, summoned in case the search ended up a recovery effort.

“Could she have fallen into a gully or ditch?” queried one deputy, when Mustang rode in to use the bathroom and refill her water bottle against the heat and sun.

“In the open pastures, no. In the woods... she could stand near one of the older trees, and we’d never see her, because they’re so huge, and she’s so small.”

Shouts of “Bonnie! Bonnie Thompson!” reverberated around the property until the sun descended in the west. Mustang’s stomach growled as Heartbeat moved gingerly off the beaten path he normally traversed when making the circuit between grazing land. Twenty yards distant, the ranch hands echoed her cries, themselves frustrated and hungry.

“It would be so much easier if the trees nearest the girl would all turn bright yellow,” she mumbled.

A stiff breeze swirled around her and blew straight up, bleaching all the leaves above her head. Mustang raised her eyes, and saw a pink shirt in the midst of the foliage.

“How’d you do that?” squeaked a terrified Bonnie.

“Oh, hell...”

Despite the best efforts to control her impulsiveness, Mustang had blundered once more. The mistake had benefits, surely, except the tiny child perched on a thick branch ten feet in the air would spread the story of her rescue far and wide. When the time came to explain her actions, Mustang knew of no way to truthfully conceal the origin of her power over the natural forces...

And she stunk at lying.

“I saw it, too,” came a youthful, masculine voice from behind her.

Double trouble! Apprentice cowboy - lacking a better title for this soon-to-graduate high school senior hired for the summer season - Eddie Daniels stood a short distance along the trail, crumpled-brim straw Stetson angled back on his dark head, stroking his beard, frowning quizzically. “You’ve got some serious explaining to do.”

The excessively skinny teen’s superior tone aggravated Mustang. “I don’t have to explain anything to you.”

“What about to your father?” he threatened.

She bit her tongue, every ounce of strength focused on not letting her anger have sway and exploding his head - something she always wanted to try on those who upset her, but had never attempted. “We need to get this kid back to her teacher and the cops,” she hissed. “Nothing else matters now.”

Hoisting herself into the tree, Mustang pried Bonnie's hands off the bark and lowered her into Daniels' arms. "Take Heartbeat and ride fast. I'll follow on foot."

"Don't think you can get out of it," he insisted. "I'll be around until I leave for college."

Bonnie resisted being lifted onto the pinto's back. "No, no!" she wept.

Mustang dropped to the ground and moved to comfort the girl. "What's wrong?"

"You take me. You made the tree go pretty. Do it again."

"We've got to get you home, little one. Your parents will be so worried..."

The seven-year-old shrieked, "Do it *again!*"

"Yes, do it again," mocked Daniels.

"Okay, okay!" Mustang conceded. "What's your favorite color?"

Bonnie replied, "Blue."

"Okay. If you ride with me quietly, every third tree will turn blue as we pass."

Small hands clapped with joy. Bonnie allowed Daniels to position her near the pommel, then Mustang swung into the saddle, wrapping one arm around the narrow waist. A flick of the reins, and Heartbeat was padding softly toward the trail. Annoyingly, Eddie Daniels kept pace with them.

"Now, I want you to count how many trees change colors," instructed Mustang. "If you have the number right when we reach the barn, I'll give you something special."

"Are you a magician?" wondered the girl.

"You could say I get along really well with nature." Mustang scowled at Daniels, to dissuade him from making further comments.

"Even bugs 'n spiders 'n snakes?"

"The best thing to do with bugs 'n spiders 'n snakes is leave them alone. I'm friends more with the wind, the rain and the earth... and fire."

"Fire?" Bonnie chirped in awe. "Can you *burn* things?"

A reluctant, "Yes," issued forth.

"I burned some ants once, with a magnifying glass."

Difficult not to laugh at the mispronunciation. "You mean 'magnifying glass'."

"No, I fried them."

"That wasn't very nice."

"My brother showed me how. Mom didn't scold us..."

“Ah, but if you could’ve heard them, do you think those ants would have been begging you to stop?” Mustang reasoned.

Bonnie’s blonde head drooped. “I s’pose so.”

Time to shift subjects. “Are you keeping count?”

“Six, so far.”

“Good.” She halted Heartbeat, leaning to Bonnie’s ear. “Look over there.”

From among the underbrush, a doe and a fawn were watching the humans’ progress. Daniels, distracted lighting a cigarette, slammed into Heartbeat’s rump, causing the horse to shift sideways - and the deer vanished like the wind.

“Those were the deer I followed into the woods,” stated Bonnie.

“They’re beautiful animals,” Mustang admitted. “But you shouldn’t have gone off alone.”

“Nobody else would come with me.”

“How’d you end up in the tree?”

“I got lost, and I figured I’d be able to see the way back from the top.”

The particular tree in which Mustang had found the child was fifty feet tall. The teen imagined what might’ve happened if a weaker branch had broken...

“We were all very worried, and we’re glad you’re safe.”

The golden curls bounced defiantly. “I can take care of myself.”

“Just like a woman,” scoffed Daniels.

Mustang turned in the saddle. “What’s your beef, anyway?”

“I’m tired, I’m starving, and my feet hurt.”

“Poor baby. Don’t you know the old saying, ‘Cowboys don’t whine.’”

“Nope, never heard it before.”

“Well, remember it from now on, because your voice can be really annoying after awhile.”

His left eyebrow arched. “*You* remember what’ll happen if I tell your father what I saw.”

“I know, from experience, he won’t do anything. He already thinks I’m nuts.”

Bonnie tugged Mustang’s t-shirt, pointing toward a family of rabbits on the edge of the trail. Mustang steered Heartbeat from their path.

Emerging from the wooded acreage near the bunk house, Miss Poulin recognized her lost sheep and rushed toward the horse. Joe and Maggie were close behind, with the deputies.

“Where’d you find her?” sobbed the woman, clutching the child to her bosom when she was lowered from the saddle.

“Up a tree,” Daniels replied.

One word would’ve incinerated him, but Mustang held her tongue.

“The tree was yellow,” gushed Bonnie. “And I counted 34 blue trees on the ride back.”

The teacher’s eyes widened, but credited the tale to the girl’s vivid imagination, as Mustang anticipated.

“As long as you’re safe, we need to get you home,” one deputy said. “How ‘bout a ride in a patrol car?”

Bonnie beamed and clapped her hands. “Will the pretty blue and red lights be flashing?”

“If you want.” The burly corporal scooped up the child, and signaled the teacher to crawl into the police cruiser’s rear seat.

“Thank you for all your help,” stammered Miss Poulin, hugging Maggie. “This has been a day I’ll never forget.”

“For all of us,” Mustang’s mother agreed.

As the vehicles departed, Joe and Maggie disappeared indoors; Daniels joined the other ranch hands, who’d been observing the scene - as they waited anxiously for their dinner - from the bunk house porch. Mustang led Heartbeat toward the barn, to groom and feed him.

The evening news broadcast updates regarding Bonnie’s status; news crews must’ve visited the ranch through the afternoon, though Mustang hadn’t seen any vans or cars bearing the distinctive logos. When Eddie Daniels was credited with the rescue, she slammed her fist on the kitchen counter, splattering soap suds on her clothes and the floor.

A couple deep breaths relaxed her, enabling her to realize the stolen glory might be for the best. To have reporters jamming microphones in her face would be both frustrating and dangerous - for all. The powers bequeathed to her by occultist and rocket scientist Jack Parsons responded to the most innocent command, including an inadvertent, “Go jump in the lake.” The last thing she needed was to have such a feat caught on video and made public.

She ignored the ringing phone, immersing her hands in the dish water to finish her chore.

## II

Maggie Duryea hung up the receiver, twirling a sandy lock of hair around one finger, a perplexed expression darkening her brow. Joe detected his wife’s confusion and set aside the newspaper. “What’s wrong?”

“That was Mrs. Thompson, Bonnie’s mother. She wanted to thank us for finding her daughter.”

“Nice of her to call, but not upsetting.”

“That’s not what upset me. She accused Mustang of filling Bonnie’s head with nonsense about trees changing colors and animals talking to people...”

“I never told her that!” objected Mustang, gingerly patting her scarred palms on a terry towel, the dishes done.

“Whether or not you did, Bonnie insists she’s telling the truth, and Mrs. Thompson wants to you come to their house on Saturday and straighten out the mess.”

“How? It’s normal for little kids to believe in magic and fairy tales. There’s nothing I can say to change that.”

“Mrs. Thompson wants her daughter to grow up in the real world, not one concocted from fantasy. She doesn’t let either of her children watch cartoons, play video games or read story books. They watch the History Channel most of the time, and read only carefully selected non-fiction. The poor child’s been grounded for a month because of what you did...”

“I didn’t *do* anything, except find her!”

“Don’t use that tone with your mother, girl!” warned Joe. “You’ll do as you’re told.”

Throwing the towel on the counter, Mustang strode to her bedroom, slamming the door. When would her parents get it through their thick skulls: she wasn’t good with people? They’d sent her to Massachusetts the previous year to live with her maternal grandmother, because she wasn’t attending school and spent far too much time roaming the property’s woods. When that elderly woman died unexpectedly, leaving a passport and ticket to Scotland, Mustang had her tranquil existence spoiled by the bizarre encounter with Jack Parsons.

To live in isolation, as he had for decades, would have been a joy, but she’d ridden a rogue lightning bolt back to Montana when FBI cadets invaded her privacy. Everyone she’d met since had fallen victim to her uncontrolled use of the unique powers - her cousin Rachel, Thomas Burton, Jonas Fairchild, Francis of Assisi, Lyndon Bixby... and little Bonnie Thompson.

Bixby had died weeks before, due to her negligence; his one-sided smirk periodically haunted her waking hours. Fairchild, who’d used the alias Wilfrid Bailey while teaching biology at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, was serving a life sentence for murder, with no hope of parole. Mustang herself had been wounded in the midst of restoring Francis of Assisi to his eternal rest by a fanatical friar wielding a pistol.

If Bonnie Thompson suffered unnecessarily because of her stupidity, Mustang swore she'd never forgive herself.

She slid between the sheets, resigned to visit the Thompsons over the weekend, and try to undo whatever damage she'd done to an impressionable young mind.

A shower of pebbles on her window roused her. The pane raised to circulate the pleasant spring air, she heard, "Hey, witch, come out here."

Daniels' voice, confirmed by the odor of his cigarette.

"Call me that again, and see what happens," she pledged, not stirring from the bed.

"There's a full moon, and it's gorgeous out here."

"I'm tired."

"All that mumbo jumbo takes a lot out of you, huh?"

"You watch too much TV."

"The longer you take to come out, the louder I'll get, until your father hears..."

"Blackmail!"

"No, that's what you can call it when I ask for five hundred grand not to tell your story to the newspapers."

Mustang felt her heart pounding in her ears. "Three seconds, Eddie, until you're bear chow."

The faint echo of his retreating footsteps blended with other nocturnal noises.

Convolved images - an agricultural granary, a football team, a passenger train, and litter of puppies - in unconnected vignettes preceded Mustang waking at 6:00 AM. She never placed much stock in dreams, and by the time she towed dry her red hair after showering, they'd vanished from her memory.

Everyone at the Duryea ranch knew the owner's sole offspring had stopped attending high school on any sort of a regular basis, even though, some mornings, she slung her backpack over one shoulder on her way out to "catch the bus". Today, she didn't bother with the ruse, wandering instead toward the west pasture, where the hands were helping county veterinarian Frank Griffith perform his yearly check on the stock to ensure no contagious diseases were present to threaten the region's livelihood.

Mustang sat on a shaded rock near the property's border, watching the aging professional inspect each horse brought, in turn. The prospect of working so closely with animals appealed to her, but she knew she wouldn't have the patience to undertake eight years of specialized study to earn the required degrees.

Besides, she'd discovered her powers could heal wounded humans without the need to train as a physician, so why not other species?

"Playing hooky, witch?"

She didn't bother to glance in Daniels' direction. "Don't you have work to do?"

"As a matter of fact, I did yours. Heartbeat was glad for the oats and water..."

"He gets fed later in the day, not first thing."

Daniels smirk faded within his beard. "I didn't know."

"Now you do. Next time, ask before you stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Once you cough up that half a mil, you won't have to worry about me anymore."

The young man's audacity amused Mustang. "If you think I can produce that much out of thin air, why not a full million, or two, or three?"

"Whatever you feel is fair."

"As much as you feel like picking off the ground..."

"Huh?"

She merely smiled, nodding toward the trees behind her. A shower of leaves rained on the mossy earth, only Daniels saw hundred dollar bills.

"Holy cow!" he gasped, diving in and stuffing the greenery into his jean pockets.

When his co-workers gravitated toward the scene and burst out in derisive laughter, he stopped and spun to face them. Mustang stood in their midst, hazel eyes twinkling mischievously..

"Greed gets you nowhere, Eddie," she chided, before hiking toward the house.

Straw Stetson pulled low over his eyes, he caught up with her on a bareback mare. "Humiliate me again, and the *Helena Chronicle* will get a very interesting phone call."

"Talk to me again, and you'll regret it for the rest of your short life," she retorted.

"You're a brat, just like my little brother. Everything has to be your own way."

"You'd be surprised how much doesn't go my way. Like having people leave me alone."

She accelerated to a jog; Daniels' horse broke into a canter.

“You could do so much for people, based on what I’ve seen. Find lost children, feed the hungry...”

“You don’t understand!”

The mare veered directly in her path, forcing her to stop short. “Then, enlighten me.”

“No. You’d just use what I tell you to blackmail me.”

“The half-mil idea was a joke, Mustang. Like your little trick with the tree.”

“Fine. We’re even. Go away.”

Expertly, he guided his mount backward, allowing her to pass. She walked a good distance before pausing. He sat silently, watching.

“You’ve got a little brother?” she queried.

“He’s eight. Spoiled rotten. A royal pain.”

“How do you explain things to him?”

“What kind of things?”

“Life.”

“We don’t talk much,” admitted Daniels.

“You’re no help.”

She strode on, the horse galloped to her side. “What’s going on?”

The words were dragged from her lips. “That girl we found... her mother’s really ticked about the colored tree business, and wants me to sit down with her daughter and tell her none of it really happened.”

“Huh?”

Mustang related the previous evening’s phone call between Mrs. Thompson and Maggie. “I have no idea how to talk with a little kid...”

“You did pretty well yesterday.”

“That’s because I was telling the truth... sort of. To outright lie... I’m no good at it. I usually hide, or keep my mouth shut.”

“I don’t know about that,” Daniels chuckled.

“Shut up.”

“Look, it sounds like the mother is the one who needs a good talking-to. My aunt is that no-nonsense, extreme-realism type. A really ugly divorce disillusioned her about men, career and life as a whole. She’s the most unhappy person I’ve ever met, because she has no imagination, and refuses to accept what her eyes can’t see.”

“What the eyes see, the brain can twist beyond recognition,” commented Mustang, another recent lesson.

“As you proved with me.”

“But I don’t want to have to use my power to get through to her...”

Daniels drew rein. “What ‘power’?”

“Poor choice of phrase,” sputtered the girl. “Forget it.”

The wiry teen leapt off the horse and seized her shoulders. “I won’t forget it. *Are you some kind of witch?*”

“Too much TV, remember?”

“I know what I saw, Mustang. ‘Fess up.”

“There’s nothing to confess. Let me go.”

Her smoldering orbs prompted him to retreat, hands raised in submission.

“Fine. You’re on your own with Mrs. Thompson, then.”

When Joe Duryea dropped Mustang off at the Thompson’s modest Cape Cod dwelling eight miles the other side of Canyon Creek on Saturday morning, that’s exactly how the girl felt.

Startlingly younger than Mustang expected, Irina Thompson had a modelesque figure, with long, golden waves cascading down her spine. A hard edge soured an otherwise pleasant countenance, however, and the visitor soon learned the reason.

“Bonnie will not be allowed to grow up in a world of make-believe,” remarked the woman from the posh living room sofa. “Having fantasies... opens one to very real pain.”

The pain clouded her features when Steve Thompson appeared on the threshold. Slovenly and overweight, he reminded Mustang of a fertile cornfield gone to seed.

“My husband,” Irina introduced, visibly embarrassed.

Steve didn’t shake hands, just crossed the room to fetch his pipe off the carved fireplace mantle, then disappeared.

Without meeting Mustang’s gaze, Irina spoke. “He was a high school football star who lost his college scholarship for excessive drinking and poor grades. He had a job in his father’s factory, before it went bankrupt... Hasn’t worked since.”

“Who plows all this land?” asked the teen, having noticed vast stretches planted with soybeans and wheat.

“We rent the acreage to neighboring farmers. This was my grandparents’ house, my one inheritance. They loved the land, and I didn’t have the heart to sell what they’d worked so many years with their own hands.”

Mustang grasped Irina’s shattered fantasy - prom queen and football player living happily ever after - but still couldn’t stomach the idea of lying to Bonnie. If she could show the mother how beautiful life could be, despite the disappointments

- and Mustang had suffered a few, herself - perhaps the daughter would benefit, too.

The past few months had shown her how one person's reality could be another's fantasy, and vice versa. How an individual viewed life depended entirely on their own personal thought processes and experiences. A sour soul rarely acknowledged positive input, while an optimist seldom put stock in the negative.

Either way, it could be compared to someone color blind not identifying the correct shades of the spectrum on an eye test. Or a non-art-lover seeing lines and squiggles in an abstract rendering, and a true aficionado finding horse and rider on the same canvas.

She crossed to the bay window providing a magnificent view of rolling hills to the north. Overcast skies cast a bluish tinge on the landscape. "Irina, look at this."

The woman joined her guest. "What?"

"Would you agree trees can give the impression of different colors, depending on how much light there is?"

"What do you mean?"

"At night, the trees look black. In the morning sun, they sparkle with dew and the leaves glisten like silver. Now, they look..."

Irina sighed. "Blue."

"Bonnie wasn't having a fantasy the other day. She wasn't lying."

"But, she did run away."

"No, she didn't. She was on a field trip to see animals. She wanted a closer peek at a doe and her fawn, that's all. Not being familiar with the territory, she got lost. She didn't get hurt..."

"She inconvenienced a lot of people."

"As a kid, didn't you ever stop, say, at the mall to admire a dress or a ring in a jeweler's window, and your parents kept going, then had to double back to find you, or even call security?"

Irina lowered her eyes. "Yes."

"It's part of growing up. Adults realize how serious the consequences can be, but to punish the child for being naturally curious..."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Curiosity also has solved a lot of the world's health problems, created great music and..." Mustang fell silent, not wishing to reveal the fruits of her own curiosity, harvested during her trip to Scotland. "A child whose curiosity is stifled, who isn't permitted to dream, will have hefty psychologist bills as an adult."

“Dreams unfulfilled are painful, and I won’t have my children knowing that pain.”

“There’s pain, and there’s pain.” The girl held up her scarred palms.

Irina’s jaw dropped. “Who did this to you?”

“I did it to myself, on accident. I will say this, though, no pain the heart endures is worse than this. And, the heart recovers in time - if allowed to heal. These will be a constant reminder of my own... foolishness. You must let your heart heal, and let Bonnie give her heart a chance to experience joy and risk the pain.”

“You still need to tell her you can’t talk to animals, and didn’t turn the trees colors - that it was her imagination,” Irina demanded.

“It’s not impossible to talk to animals. Haven’t you heard of these ‘horse whisperers’ and ‘dog psychics’?”

“They’re con artists, bilking people out of their hard-earned money.”

Mustang was getting a headache from Mrs. Thompson’s narrow-mindedness. “All right, all right. Where is Bonnie?”

“Upstairs, doing her homework.”

On a gorgeous spring Saturday? Mustang cried silently. She should be out playing in the yard... Instead, “May I go up?”

“I’ll come with you.”

To be sure I don’t put my foot any deeper in it, no doubt, mused the teen.

Steve Thompson sat in the kitchen, puffing his pipe, sipping coffee and watching the national morning news. Mustang heard Irina dejectedly mutter something, but couldn’t distinguish the exact words.

The sad thing about human beings, the girl had known for years, was those who lacked motivation could not be spurred to action by others. Underachievers in school remained far behind their classmates, no matter how strenuously the teachers pushed them. Until their own internal spark was ignited, no one else could help. Those afflicted with substance abuse had the same problem. Others might wish them to seek treatment - for their own good, and the good of those closest to them - but unless they made up their own minds to take the step, rehabilitation always failed.

Irina Thompson could not motivate her husband, and would have to motivate herself to take appropriate action if her life had become so intolerable. In this, Mustang would not interfere.

She had no choice, though, in Bonnie’s case. When Irina opened the bedroom door, the room was empty. A note printed in large, childish scrawl lay

on the pillow, “Mommy, I’ve gone to see the pretty trees, and bring you back the colored leaves, so you’ll believe me.”

Blue eyes burned hotly when Irina faced Mustang. “See what you’ve done?”

“If you hadn’t accused her of lying, she would’ve have felt it necessary to prove she was telling the truth.”

“I don’t tolerate lying, from anyone.”

“Just because people don’t meet your expectations, or share your warped perspective on life, doesn’t mean they’re lying.”

“How dare you!”

“Somebody should. If anyone’s to blame for Bonnie hiking 20 miles back to my dad’s ranch, it’s you.”

Steve had heard the shouting, and stood framed in the doorway. “You’ve got two hours to find her, before I call the cops and report you for kidnaping.”

Another coherent specimen of humanity, Mustang contemplated. Blame others, not yourself for your problems.

“I’ll have her back in five minutes, and I’ll never leave your front porch.”

### III

The lower branches of every tree along a two mile stretch of road toward Canyon Creek turned brilliant shades of blue, purple, yellow and red. As Mustang suspected, Bonnie’s diminutive legs hadn’t taken her far, and she skipped into view in short order, arms filled with a rainbow of leaves.

“How’d you do that?” grumbled Steve Thompson.

The visitor countered, “Ask yourself why I had to, then start paying more attention to your family obligations, and worry less about your wounded ego.”

Taken aback, both parents stood silent as their daughter approached. Her brother, Andrew, emerged on the porch, having been studying in his bedroom through the morning. A fine boy of ten, he needed to be out kicking around a soccer ball, or playing catch with friends. Mustang clumped down the porch steps, struggling to control her anger, and headed home.

Her dad had never offered to pick her up, leaving her to her own devices.

Eddie Daniels must’ve suspected as much, though Mustang didn’t request details when his shiny green VW Beetle slowed beside her.

“What the hell is this?” was her question.

“My car. Early graduation present, since I’ll be commuting to college in the fall.”

“Not living on campus?”

“Too expensive, and too close to home.”

“And I thought we’d be well rid of you.”

“No such luck.” He leaned across the passenger seat and popped open the door.

Mustang plopped onto the black vinyl. “Have you picked a major?”

“I’m going to be a vet.” The shifter wobbled into first gear, and the vehicle jolted forward.

“The best school for that, from what I’ve heard, is Purdue, in Indiana.”

“Like I said, too expensive.”

“What if you had a scholarship?”

“My grades weren’t good enough.”

“Sometimes it helps to know somebody... with influence.”

“Who do you know who could influence where I go to college?”

“What about Doc Griffith, the county vet? He’s a Purdue grad. He’s coming back to finish the certification, right?”

Daniels downshifted for the lone traffic signal in Canyon Creek. “Y’know, for a witch, you’re pretty smart.”

“A guy whose beard is already going grey should have the sense to know when to shut up.”

“I can’t help it. Runs in the family. My dad’s hair was completely white by the time he was 30.” The light turned green. “At least it’s better than going bald.”

His passenger didn’t respond.

“It didn’t go well, did it?” he prodded.

“Proof of why I like to be alone.”

“Will Bonnie be okay?”

“I don’t know. That house is filled with unhappiness, and Bonnie is the one bright spot. Unless something changes, she’ll lose her sunny outlook before long.”

“Too bad.”

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

Depressed as she felt, Mustang saddled Heartbeat and rode toward the northern pasture. Of the many mistakes she’d made since Parsons transferred his power to her, being unable to remedy this situation irked her.

Then again, it wasn’t a situation of her own making, in the strictest sense. She hadn’t made Irina Thompson unhappy. Irina Thompson *allowed* herself to be unhappy. That unhappiness permeated a dwelling which had once known

contentment and love, and no effort was being made by the current occupants to cast off the pall of angst.

Identical conditions existed within her own house, the teen had to admit. Joe Duryea had never been happy having one daughter and no sons; Maggie played the role of obedient housewife far too well - including acquiring the traditional middle-age spread - her disappointment at the marriage's lack of vitality a closely guarded secret. The arguments over the dinner table or at random moments proved the fact.

And Mustang had never once seen her parents kiss, even in passing.

She could cause rain to fall from clear skies and microbursts of wind to save a man's life, but she couldn't ignite a spark of love in the human heart where none existed, or the embers had already died.

Her own heart included. She valued the truth, respecting a person's right to tell their side of the story, because she'd been falsely accused of causing trouble numerous times in her young life - like today, with Steve Thompson blathering about kidnaping charges. She couldn't empathize with other's emotional turmoil, however, as with the old aunts weeping at her cousin's funeral. Something was missing inside her, and no amount of control over nature would compensate for that lack.

Nothing was missing when it came to her hearing, though. Yelling and cursing from the pasture ahead meant spurring Heartbeat to a gallop, and flying from the saddle when she saw the chaos in progress.

Except for one horse being restrained by two men holding a taut rope, the rest of the herd raced back and forth within the barbed wire fencing, obviously spooked. Frank Griffith lay in the mud, unconscious.

"Oh, hell..."

It didn't take much to figure out what had transpired, given the large syringe jutting from the grass. Ol' Bastard - yes, that was his name, thanks to his many years as the most ornery stallion on the ranch - had rebelled against his annual rabies inoculation, and kicked the doctor full-force.

"Anybody call an ambulance?" shouted Eddie, riding up himself at that moment.

Mustang scoffed, "They'd need four-wheel drive to make it out here." Bending over the elderly official, she guessed from the bone piercing his left forearm it was a serious fracture. A huge bump on the back of his skull was a concern, also.

"The vet's truck is a 4 x 4," shouted the foreman.

“Eddie, get it up here, load him in and drive out to the road. The ambulance can meet you there, and take him the rest of the way to the hospital.”

“So much for asking him about Purdue,” the young man lamented.

“Doing him this service may make it easier to ask when the time comes.”

She tossed Daniels the vet’s keys - jostled loose in the fall - and he sprinted across the pasture to the county vehicle.

Once the injured man was comfortably arranged on the bed of the Dodge pickup, a saddle blanket for a pillow, and two men holding him steady, Mustang took charge of the agitated roan. “I’ll take him up to the corral, and Dad can decide what he wants to do. You guys get the others calmed down.”

“Right,” said the foreman.

The girl led Ol’ Bastard to the fence, where Heartbeat waited patiently. She whispered in the tall horse’s ear, “You silly fool. Why couldn’t you take the jab and grit your teeth like the others?”

He whinnied and thumped her shoulder with his powerful nose, driving her backward.

“I know you don’t like getting shots. Who does? But you’ve been around long enough to know it’s important.”

He snorted, and she stroked his mane. “I just hope Doc Griffith isn’t so ticked he orders you put down.”

Riding her pinto, she led the cantankerous stallion toward the house. Beyond the trees, she saw the ambulance approach, and the truck slowly bounce toward it. She might have healed the vet’s injuries on the spot, except for the ranch hands’ close proximity. Multiply Eddie Daniel’s threats by two dozen, and it would make for an unpleasant summer. Best to keep her power secret, as Jack Parsons had once advised.

The foreman had radioed from the pasture to Joe Duryea, who awaited his daughter’s arrival at the corral gate. He didn’t look happy. A shot gun was propped on the fence post beside him.

“Dad, you can’t!” Mustang objected, stopping out of range.

“That ol’ bastard won’t cause any more trouble. I can’t afford to have my insurance canceled - or the premiums doubled - because of one nasty-tempered stud.”

Her mouth opened; her father raised his hand.

“I let you talk me out of it last time, when he crippled that brood mare. You said it was an accident. Said he’d been startled by a raccoon. This was no accident.”

“Yes, it was.”

Daniels had parked Griffith's truck along the gravel drive and was walking to the bunk house when he heard the heated exchange.

Joe whirled on him. "How do you know, boy? Did you see what happened?"

"No, but Doc revived while the paramedics were strapping him to the gurney. Said he never should've tried to pick up the syringe after it fell under Ol' Bastard's hind legs."

"Idiot!" snarled Joe. He snatched the shot gun and marched to the barn.

The two teens glanced at each other, unsure whether the man had been referring to either of them, the county vet, or himself. Daniels unlatched the gate and pulled it open; Mustang led Ol' Bastard inside.

"You got lucky," she stated, freeing his neck from the rope. "Next time, behave yourself."

"We all got lucky," Daniels concurred. "Your dad could've lost the ranch if..."

"You don't have to tell me. I hear it every night at the dinner table."

"Then, come to the bunk house to eat. There's always good conversation."

"My folks think you guys are bad influence enough, without me hanging around there for meals. Besides, I can't stand the smell of cigarette smoke."

"Your loss." With a tap on the crumpled straw brim of his Stetson, he ambled toward the north pasture, to retrieve his own horse.

"What loss?" Mustang snickered to herself, returning Heartbeat to his stall for a thorough grooming and bucket of oats. "Listening to a bunch of overgrown children lie about themselves and tell dirty jokes for an hour?"

Maggie was cooking beef stew and preparing a salad when Mustang trudged through the kitchen door. "Mrs. Thompson called," she greeted.

Her daughter swallowed an expletive. "Why?"

"They asked if you'd be willing to babysit Bonnie next week, while they visit family in San Francisco."

"Why wouldn't they take Bonnie and her brother along?"

"They're taking Andrew. It seems Bonnie has chicken pox."

"And they didn't know this when I was there earlier?" queried Mustang, suspicious.

"They noticed some spots, but thought it was poison ivy, from wandering around the woods picking up leaves. They took her to the emergency room, and the doctor broke the news."

"She could stay in the guest room, if it's okay with you..."

“Your father’s never had chicken pox, and it wouldn’t be fair to expose him.”

“So, I’d stay at the Thompsons’?”

“Be for the best, hon.”

Mustang went to her room, skipping dinner entirely. Did the Thompsons think she’d given their daughter chicken pox, and wanted to make her suffer for it? Why not delay the trip until the girl recovered from the illness or, at least, was no longer contagious? Having no siblings, she had no idea how to care for a sick child - and she remembered having chicken pox as a youngster, and how badly her arms and legs itched. Being drenched in calamine lotion didn’t help, nor did the prescribed medicines. She’d felt horrible, and knew Bonnie wouldn’t be receptive to playing games as a distraction, or wearing gloves.

It was shaping up to be a miserable week.

The teen sat on her bed, head resting in her hands... and remembered her palms. She’d shown Irina Thompson the scars which would never vanish, yet there were other injuries which had healed so well, thanks to her power, no trace of them existed.

The bottom of her feet, for instance, after she’d ridden the lightning to Italy without any shoes.

She *could* heal Bonnie of her rash, and they could spend the time together exploring the world beyond reality, one way to help the child nurture her imagination and enjoy her dreams - temporarily.

Hearing raucous laughter drift on the breeze from the bunk house, she saw another advantage to being gone from the ranch: not having to deal with Eddie Daniels.

She’d met his like before, during her infrequent ventures to Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. Nine chances out of ten, he’d grown his beard to appear older, so sneaking into the neighborhood bar or buying a six-pack of beer would be easier. He behaved like a hot-shot know-it-all, trying to impress the girls, but his insecurity showed through a transparent cloak of bravado. He thought, if he sufficiently antagonized Mustang, she’d give in to his feeble charm.

He was wrong, she smirked. Bear food, or bait in a wolf trap, maybe...

She needed the attention of no man to make her whole - she’d known that even before acquiring these powers. The idea of romance paled beside the old movies she loved to watch, except for the night of her cousin’s funeral, when Thomas Burton, drunk as a skunk, had kissed her...

And the earthquake caused by her uncontrolled emotions had nearly destroyed the house.

She didn't need those kinds of side-effects, either.

Independent, aloof, safe. Nothing could touch her, and she would use greater care in future to impact as few people as possible.

Or, so she hoped.

A knock on the bedroom door preceded her mother's voice. "I phoned Mrs. Thompson to tell her you'd be glad to stay with Bonnie for the week. They'd like you there by 8:00 tomorrow morning."

"They're not picking me up?"

"Doesn't make sense for them to drive so far in the opposite direction from where they're going. I told her you'd find a ride."

"Meaning, Dad can't take me?"

"It's his one day to sleep in, hon. Maybe one of the hands will drive you."

"Not unless we offer to pay for gas." The image of her on the bunk house threshold, asking the assembled assortment of misfits who'd like to haul her twenty miles across the county amused her. Of the younger crew, most had tried to get her alone at one point or another. The older hands considered her a surrogate daughter, trying to boss her around or show her how to handle horses, when she'd been doing it for years. She wouldn't enjoy the company, no matter who volunteered.

Swinging over the window sill into the cool evening air, Mustang nearly knocked over Eddie Daniels, who'd been leaning against the house's brick facade, cigarette lit, directly below her room.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

"Waiting for you."

"Huh?"

"It's too gorgeous a night to stay inside. I knew you'd come out eventually."

"Get lost!"

"Be nice to me, or I won't drive you to the Thompsons' tomorrow."

"Who said I..." He'd been eavesdropping, the sneak. "Next thing you'll be telling me is what color underwear I have on."

"I prefer none at all."

Her hand hit his face so hard, the slap echoed through the trees.

## IV

Daniels' hat bounced on the gravel; he staggered from the force of the blow and tromped it with his boot, shredding the straw into fragments. Mustang

herself reacted when stinging pain from her not-quite-healed scars coursed up her right arm. She cradled the bleeding wound in her uninjured hand, grimacing.

No apology for his rudeness, Daniels strode away, leaving the ruined Stetson to disintegrate in the rain which had started falling.

Eighteen pairs of eyes focused on Mustang through the smoky haze when the bunk house's screen door creaked inward. Every one of the ranch hands wore satisfied grins - through not much else, having discarded their t-shirts and jeans for bare chests, gym shorts or boxers - and she felt instantly uncomfortable.

The foreman rose from the recliner and welcomed their boss' daughter. "Eddie got what he deserved," he whispered. "You did right, and we respect you for it."

"Fine, then tap one of these nudists to drive me to the Thompsons' place tomorrow."

She spun on her heels and left. She never saw Eddie Daniels peering through a crack in the bathroom door, his face bloodied and bruised.

She did, however, notice his sporty green VW Beetle when it tried to force the Honda Pilot off the road en route to her destination the next morning. Whether he was retaliating against her, or the middle-aged cowboy grasping the steering wheel with swollen knuckles from pounding the younger man's skull would remain unknown. Daniels had tendered a one-finger resignation and was headed home.

He was the least of her worries. Uncertainty created knots in her stomach; she'd never done much in the way of babysitting. She'd never had much of a childhood herself - or what others might consider "normal", since she'd spent all her time around the horses - and hadn't the faintest idea how little kids occupied their time.

Unfortunately, Bonnie Thompson didn't enjoy a "normal" life, either. No dolls, stuffed animals, or Disney videos. After Irina, Steve and Andrew departed for San Francisco, Mustang settled on the edge of the first-grader's mattress, admiring the bright red splotches on her otherwise pale cheeks.

"Would you like some juice, or water?" Mustang asked.

Her high-pitched voice was barely audible. "No."

"Would you like to feel better?"

"Yes."

"Close your eyes and sleep for a bit, then. When you wake up, we'll think of something fun to do."

Trusting her caretaker, Bonnie's eyelids fluttered shut. Mustang scanned the stark chamber, no pictures of ballerinas on the wall, or flowers ornamenting the egg-shell white paint - just a desk, chair, bed and dresser.

The rest of the house was equally devoid of personal touches. The grandparents who had previously resided there must've divided mementoes among their children, leaving only the furniture - sturdy and in good repair - to Irina. She hadn't added any photos or potted plants, nothing. By the time the young family had taken possession of the dwelling, her dreams of the ideal marriage must've already been shattered.

A glass of grape juice from the well-stocked side-by-side refrigerator soothed her stomach, after rejecting breakfast. The assortment of DVDs on the living room bookshelves didn't appeal to her - all non-fiction or biographies of historic personages. So she sat near the bay window, watching birds and wildlife in the pristine green yard.

Until a pair of tiny feet crept up behind her, and she glimpsed a cherubic smile reflected in the glass.

"You look like you're ready to play."

"I'm hungry."

Mustang led Bonnie to the kitchen, and let her pick what she wanted to eat - a big bowl of cereal. Figuring the child's appetite had been adversely affected by her illness, the babysitter started off pouring a small portion, with the possibility of seconds.

Delicate hands washed and a milk mustache erased, Bonnie bounded into the living room, fully energized. Mustang feared she wouldn't be able to keep up with the miniature dynamo, now her health had been restored.

"What would you like to play? Checkers, Old Maid?"

"Nope."

"Hide and seek, or tag?"

"Nope."

"We can go for a walk outside. It's a beautiful day."

Another negative response.

"If I remember correctly, you like climbing trees."

A glimmer of interest, but Bonnie shook her golden curls yet again.

"Then, what do you have in mind?"

Hesitantly, the girl slipped her hand in Mustang's. "Promise you won't tell Mommy and Daddy?"

Nothing like being put on the spot. "Sure, I promise."

Fortunately, the secret Bonnie revealed was nothing more serious than the contents of a shoe box hidden beneath her bed. Inside, a Barbie doll dressed like a fairy godmother waited for attention.

“This is yours?” Mustang inquired.

“I won it at school. We all got tickets for good behavior, and our teacher drew for the prizes...”

“You mean, a raffle?”

Bonnie was puzzled by the term, and chose to ignore it. “She’s pretty, isn’t she? Like you.”

“But, I have red hair, and hers is blonde.”

“She can do magic, like you.”

Mustang kept her “Oh, hell,” to herself. She didn’t want to get in the habit of relying on her power on a day-to-day basis, as it was, and now this wee sprite expected her to use it as a source of entertainment.

“Bonnie, I can’t. You know your mom wouldn’t like it.”

“Mommy doesn’t like anything.”

What to say?

“I hear her crying sometimes at night, after Daddy comes home late.”

Poor kid.

“In the morning, her eyes are all red, and she can’t even smile at me.”

Bonnie embraced Mustang’s waist. “Can’t you use your magic to fix what’s making Mommy sad all the time?”

“Like I told you the other day: I’m friends with the wind, the rain, and the earth.”

“And fire,” she chirped.

“Yes, that, too. I leave animals alone” - for the most part, except for starting dairy cattle stampedes across the Idaho countryside - “and can’t make people think or feel differently than they do on their own.” Raise them from the dead, send them flying into Loch Ness, yes, but not change their minds.

“Can you make flowers bloom?”

“That, I can do.”

“I like roses.”

An untended vine of wild roses was tangled around a trellis on the south side of the Thompson abode, so Mustang ushered Bonnie out the front door. Within seconds, a hundred deep red blossoms burst open.

“Make them different colors!” the girl cried in delight.

“How ‘bout this?” challenged Mustang. “You name the colors, and the roses will change as you say the words.”

“Really?”

The teen nodded.

“Pink!”

Simple enough.

“Yellow!”

She progressed through the basic spectrum to “Gold!” and “Purple!”

Calling for polka-dots presented a problem.

“Roses can’t do that, Bonnie.”

“Why not?”

“There are rules in nature which are dangerous to break. We can make stripes around the edges of the petals, if you like.”

She’d become bored with the game, and moved toward the wheat fields.

“Can you make things grow bigger?”

“Why don’t we do something else for awhile, like have a treasure hunt in the woods.”

“For real treasure?” squealed the child.

Mustang knew she’d put her foot in it. “If you find the pretend treasure, you’ll get a real gold coin. How’s that?”

“Okay.”

So passed five days - playing, eating, sleeping - and watching a little girl blossom just like the roses. Mustang dreaded the thought her parents’ return would lower the somber pall over the house once more.

Not surprisingly, the babysitter’s own parents didn’t call to check on their daughter and her young charge. Mustang realized very quickly, though, she didn’t have the personality to be a mother. Bonnie was a sweet and well-behaved child, so it didn’t take much to get her to go to bed at 9:00, or eat her vegetables. What if she’d thrown a tantrum, or refused to cooperate?

As it was, the teen slept like one of the dead when she crashed on the family room hide-a-bed each night. This was a different type of exertion from working with the horses, and she wasn’t accustomed to it.

For the first time in her life, she admitted she’d be glad to get home.

Irina Thompson must’ve shared the sentiment. She returned to the Cape Cod dwelling late Friday with her son in tow, but not her husband.

Her smile betrayed exhaustion, but it was definitely a smile.

It aroused Mustang’s curiosity.

Once the children were in bed, the pair settled at the kitchen table, drinking sodas. The babysitter knew she had no right to ask; that didn’t stop Irina from volunteering information.

“Steve realized he wasn’t cut out to be a family man. He decided to stay with his parents in Frisco, and maybe get a job. That ‘maybe’ convinced me it was time to let him go. There can’t be any maybes in marriage.”

“Very wise insight.”

“Shocking, isn’t it? Driving home, I decided I don’t want any maybes hanging over the rest of my life, either. I’d always procrastinated about going back to school and finishing my nursing degree - first thing Monday, I’m enrolling for summer classes. I’ll have to get a better job than working at the diner in town, but it’ll be worth it to give my kids the best of everything.”

“Including their dreams?” ventured Mustang.

“Including their dreams. That part’s thanks to you.”

The girl bristled.

“I mean it. When I saw Bonnie carrying all those colored leaves last Saturday, my heart stopped. I realized I’d been denying my kids their childhood, and their chance at happiness.” Irina sipped from the icy glass. “I still want to know how you did it, though.”

The lie was regrettable, but necessary. “You ever put food coloring in a vase of white carnations?”

“Sure, back in third grade science class...”

“Same principle.”

“Only on a much grander scale.”

Mustang shrugged.

“So, what shenanigans did the two of you get into while we were gone?”

Brief highlights of a relaxed week made Irina laugh. “Bonnie must’ve been feeling much better.”

“All the pox are gone, and she’s fine.”

“I think you had something to do with lifting her spirits. I used to be like you - wild, carefree...”

If you only knew, echoed inside Mustang’s head. Impulsive and careless would be more appropriate.

The woman yawned. “You can crash on the sofa, and I’ll drive you home in the morning.”

“No need. I’ll catch a ride.”

“At this time of night?”

“No problem.”

Her clothes and toothbrush stuffed into the sports duffel she’d borrowed from her dad’s closet, Mustang embarked on the 20 mile journey to the ranch,

against Irina's stringent objections. She enjoyed nothing more than walking through the crisp, cool air, listening to the owls and the wolves.

She had to wonder if the power worked through her - even when her lips uttered no directives - or if some events were truly coincidence. Half-mile along the road to Canyon Creek, she saw a vaguely familiar pickup truck outlined by the three-quarter moon. A shadow moved near it, wielding an unidentified instrument. Nothing threatening, she learned upon nearing the scene: a jack to raise the vehicle in order to change a flat tire.

Hard to do with one arm in a cast, as Frank Griffith was attempting.

"Need help, Doc?" hailed the teen.

He acknowledged her approach, still a bit wobbly from his head injury.

"What are you doing out so late?" she asked.

"On my way home from fetching more serum in Butte. What's worse: my cell phone's dead, so I couldn't get in touch with anyone..."

"We'll have this done in no time." Mustang commandeered the tire iron and set to work. A bit of added strength from nature, and the lug nuts spun free on the left front rim with little strain.

"That boy, Eddie Daniels, came to see me in the hospital," the vet stated, rolling the spare off the truck bed to where Mustang squatted. "He worked at your dad's place, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"Told me he wants to be a vet."

"I think he's better suited to working with animals than humans."

"He accepted my offer of an internship for the summer."

"And you'll write him a reference letter to get into Purdue?" Mustang speculated.

"If he does well."

She wiped a bit of sweat off her forehead with a greasy forearm. "He'll appreciate that a lot."

"He helped me after... Your dad needs to warn people about Ol' Bastard. He's a real terror."

"You should know better than to bend down near any horse's hind end, Doc."

"If the beast hadn't flinched, I wouldn't have dropped the syringe. I wasn't thinking."

Another five minutes, and the donut was safely tightened in place. Mustang hoisted the flat into the bed, and watched Griffith climb behind the wheel.

“G’night, Doc.”

He leaned out the window. “Where are you going at this hour, alone?”

“Home.”

“Get in. I’ll give you a ride.”

“Thanks.”

Buckled in the passenger seat, the girl reached over and tapped the plaster molded around the vet’s forearm. “How’s it feel?”

“Hurts like hell.”

“When do you get the cast off?”

“This one, next week. They’ll put on a fresh one, now the swelling’s down, for another month or so.”

“I don’t think they’ll need to do that.”

“At my age, it may take until Labor Day for this to heal.”

“If I’m wrong, I’ll buy you lunch next time I come to town.”

A favor for a favor. What more positive way to use her power?

She alighted from the vehicle at the end of the Duryea drive, and pulled herself up through the unlocked bedroom window. No cigarette smoke to waft through the screen, no pebbles to hit the glass. Nice to have a peaceful few hours’ sleep before the new day brought fresh challenges.