

The Mustang Chronicles:

Weathered Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Stuck. That's how Elizabeth "Mustang" Duryea saw herself, seated in the interior classroom, no windows to provide distraction.

While technically a senior at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, the teachers had been advised of her unique status: one absence, and she'd be relegated to the ranks of underclassmen. She'd skipped too much school over the past three years, preferring to wander the acreage of her father's horse ranch. Her mere presence on campus was an exception, wrangled by that patriarch, embarrassed by his daughter's failures.

If he only knew, the teen sighed.

Second hour on her schedule had been specially geared toward those who, for whatever reason, didn't "make the grade". Not exactly an independent study course, Amelia Finch had designed it to motivate students out of step with traditional teaching methods.

That woman relished her position as an instructor, sensitive to her pupils' varied styles of absorbing knowledge.

The bell vibrated Mustang's seat, and twelve others confined to the space dropped behind their desks. A middle-aged man in sky blue shirt and khaki Dockers crossed the threshold, closing the door.

"Good morning, I'm Ray Clayburn," he announced in a crisp tenor. "Mrs. Finch is on maternity leave until Thanksgiving, so I will be teaching this course until she returns."

Mustang muttered, "Oh, hell..."

"Your main assignment will be writing a term paper, according to college standards. That includes research, notes, and so forth. I've selected a set of topics..."

Which proved to be a list of government agencies. "Raise your hand if you wish to report on the NSA," he droned, moving through the CIA, FBI, United States Postal Service, and some quite obscure entities.

Every topic selected, Mustang hadn't budged. "I guess that leaves the National Weather Service for you, Miss... um, Duryea."

She cringed, head lowered so auburn tresses hid her face.

"You object?" Clayburn pressed.

"Whatever."

Rather than debate the subject, the sub commenced outlining how these projects would be completed, providing due dates for each phase. "If you are late

on any part, your final grade will be lowered by ten percent,” he proclaimed, to a communal groan.

“It is not my intention to torture you pillars of the academic realm,” he continued, a facetious edge to his tone. “I’m hoping to prepare you for life in the real world where, whatever job you take, deadlines are key to retaining employment. You will find that doing something well is its own reward, even if it’s something you despise. And, far too often, your job will not be one you enjoy, but done only for the paycheck. The notion you will be able to ‘follow your heart’ or ‘do what you love’ is both absurd and impractical. When you walk out of this room at the end of the semester, you will understand what I mean.”

Mustang attempted to tune out his inane drone, to no avail. She watched the clock tick away the minutes until the bell reverberated through the building. Gathering her books, she rose, only to have her exit blocked by the solidly built Clayburn.

She gazed at intense Adriatic Sea-blue eyes, accented by his shirt. “Something you want?” she puzzled.

“Being new in the school, I’m not acquainted with most of the students, but I have heard of *you*.”

“Congratulations.”

“I spent 25 years with the CIA before retiring last summer.”

The implications of those words chilled Mustang’s blood. “And?”

“Montana seems the middle of nowhere, yet there’s been a lot of unusual activity in these parts over the past few months.”

She waited, her stomach in knots.

“The FBI, the NSA, and the Weather Service have all doubled their coverage in the district.”

“Not the CIA?”

“My former superiors are monitoring communications from the other agencies, until such time as they collect concrete evidence worthy of their attention.”

Leaning on the doorjamb, Mustang probed, “And you’re telling me this why?”

“I want you to focus your research efforts on periodic atmospheric anomalies recorded by the Weather Service.”

“Why?”

“You have a good head on your shoulders.”

“My transcript shows shit for grades and repeated truancy. The principal would like to see me in jail.”

“I’ve... had access to other information...”

“Oh, hell.”

Inhaling deeply, Mustang whispered a desperate plea, causing the chalkboard to wrench free of its wall brackets and crash to the floor. Clayburn thus distracted, she darted from the room.

The remainder of that day, the girl couldn’t muster the concentration to make it through her other classes. Her assignment book showed a blank page and, come tomorrow, she would be censured for not submitting her completed homework.

She blamed FBI agent Ben Espinoza for this latest dilemma. The competitive nature of law enforcement caused the Washington offices to, basically, spy on each other, pulling details from random conversations or fragments of shredded files.

When she did manage to fall asleep that night, her dreams were peppered with disjointed images of Clayburn and others she’d encountered since Jack Parsons had died by her hand in Scotland. The power this occultist and scientist passed to her had made her life a living hell ever since.

She boarded the bus reluctantly Tuesday, her brain scrambling to devise a way to escape Clayburn’s class. Appealing to her guidance counselor proved fruitless; the deal that she abide by her schedule and all pertinent rules would not be adjusted one jot.

The substitute spent that week detailing how he wished the initial research to be conducted. Books, magazines, encyclopaedia, no internet sources. He distributed a list of supplies each student would need, including a notebook, ring binder, and 3" x 5" cards.

Perfectly content with how he ignored her, Mustang went about her business in a methodical - if not bored - fashion. Not an underachiever, by any means, she scored high marks on quizzes and homework, while not seeing the need for the wasted effort.

She would’ve rather spent time with her horses.

Another futile pursuit: compiling statistics on freak weather trends. A phone call to the central Montana weather office scored her specifics on the winds, rains, lightning and spontaneous fires she herself had caused, emphasizing a lack of self-control during the previous year.

Ditching school had been a safety precaution. The slightest disruption could trigger her anger, and she did horrible things when her temper flared. People died. Better to isolate herself, protecting the general public.

Isolation would've been a decided plus the following Thursday, when two bully-jocks assaulted one of the science geeks in the gymnasium. Mustang thought spending the lunch hour perched on the bleachers, away from the cafeteria noise, would calm her frazzled nerves.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

The burly football players, wearing their multi-chevroned letter jackets, burst through the doors, a bespectacled, skinny geek in tow. Mustang overheard something about a "swirlie" as they marched toward the locker room.

Being different herself, she despised those who felt themselves superior - whether physically, intellectually, or socially. From the second tier, she bellowed, "Pick on someone your own size!"

What manifested frightened her, as well as the three youths. A microburst of wind assembled a heavy weight bag for the torso, rowing oars for arms and legs, and a water bucket for the head. As this creature lumbered toward the offenders, they released their captive, shrieked choice expletives and fled. Their victim fainted in a heap on the polished wood floor.

Stunned immobile by her own impulsiveness, Mustang witnessed the athletic director, basketball coach and nurse converge on the scene, assisting the unconscious student in his recovery. The various components had collapsed, inert, beside him.

She slid toward the aisle, intent on a furtive escape, abruptly nose-to-nose with Ray Clayburn.

"Did you see what happened?" he queried.

She didn't approve of lying, but she would not play into this man's suspicions. "I... was asleep."

"It didn't look that way from the press box."

Her brain spinning at high speed, she wondered, "What were you doing in the press box?"

"I'm announcing tomorrow night's football game, but they needed a copy of the roster for the pep rally..."

Caught red handed, Mustang shuddered. "Oh, hell."

"You can't tell me you didn't hear the voice."

"What voice?"

"Deep and loud, like what came out of the burning bush in the old *Ten Commandments* movie. And, then... and, then..."

In that instant, the teen sensed Clayburn's fear. She took his arm and steered him toward the nearest bench, relieved he didn't connect her to the incident. "Would you like some water?"

“What was that thing?” he mumbled. “It might’ve killed those boys...”

Yes, Mustang grasped as much.

“Have you heard of this school being haunted?”

“It’s a possibility. I’m surprised you weren’t told about the murders.”

“Murders?”

“A year ago. A guy posing as a teacher...” Oh, to forget her involvement with Jonas Fairchild, alias Wilfrid Bailey.

“That might explain the phenomenon...”

Mustang guffawed, a sound which echoed eerily around the now empty gym.

“What’s so funny?”

“Does the CIA put stock in paranormal activity?”

“Of course not!”

“Then, why...”

“What other explanation is there?” rumbled Clayburn.

“Let me ask you a question.”

“Go ahead.”

Mustang settled beside him. “What are your current connections to the CIA?”

“Odd question from a kid.”

“Will you answer?”

Hands clasped, dangling between his legs, he stared at the concrete. “I botched a major assignment, and they gave me the choice of taking early retirement, or being fired.”

“So, your credibility is nil?”

“Pretty much.”

“You trying to reestablish your rep with these reports you have our class writing?”

“Why the third degree?” he protested.

“If you can be honest with me, I may be honest with you.”

“Why wouldn’t you be honest?”

“Long story.”

“What, your dad an alcoholic who beats you or, God forbid, has...”

“Nothing like that.” Considering, she chuckled. “Maybe a lot worse.”

Clayburn straightened, pale blue orbs scrutinizing her. “The school counselors are always available.”

In reply, the creature’s parts reformed, crossing the basketball court with a slow, trundling gait.

“How do you think the school counselor would respond to that?” Mustang grimaced.

His jaw gaped. “That’s... that’s... you?”

“Last couple people I trusted are dead.”

He edged away from her.

She rose. “That’s what I thought. Just remember: if you tell anyone, they’ll think you’re crazy.”

Bouncing down the steps, Mustang directed the oars to their rack, and the bag to its hook. The bucket settled beside the water cooler. The bell sounded, signaling her afternoon classes.

Dismissal meant a rush for the busses, which Mustang despised. She envied the seniors who parked their cars in the student lot, but she’d never learned to drive. When Ray Clayburn braked his Volkswagen Jetta at the curb, she leaned toward the open passenger window.

“Let me give you a ride,” he invited.

“Why?”

“So we can be honest with each other.”

She hesitated, then reached for the handle.

Giving him directions, it didn’t startle her that he veered onto a side road not far from the ranch, and shut off the engine.

“All right, what do you want?” she inquired.

“I told you I botched a job for the company, but I didn’t tell you why. See, I was married, and had a son. Not really a good arrangement for someone in my position. Risky. We moved to Baltimore after my heart surgery ten years ago, but I still wasn’t home much, and my wife resented it. My son got in with a bad crowd. He... committed suicide summer before last, the day before his sixteenth birthday. The gravity of my assignment prevented me from attending the funeral. I... I... cracked under the strain.”

Mustang glimpsed his wet cheeks, and he tugged a linen handkerchief from his trouser pocket to blow his prominent nose.

“I’m... sorry,” he sniffed, fighting to regain his composure.

“It’s me who should be sorry. My situation makes me wary of everyone...”

“You possess a very unusual gift.”

“You ever hear of Jack Parsons?”

Clayburn pondered briefly. “Co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory?”

Mustang launched into her tale, hazel eyes monitoring her companion’s expressions, which varied from curiosity to disbelief to astonishment. “My parents

don't even know," she concluded. "If the principal was aware of the potential for disaster, he wouldn't want me in the building."

"You poor kid," breathed Clayburn. "Amazing you haven't gone over the edge."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm real close."

"Me, too."

Tears streaming, they embraced and wept for a long, long time.

II

"Come to the football game with me tomorrow," Ray Clayburn suggested, the red Jetta idling at the base of the Duryea drive.

"I don't like sports," retorted his passenger. "Not a good idea, anyway. There are rules about teachers and students fraternizing."

"My sister-in-law is the team trainer. She's how I got this job. I want her to look at your hands. Maybe she can do something to heal those burns."

The substitute teacher had been appalled when Mustang displayed her palms, scarred black from traveling on bolts of lightning - most recently a month ago. When she revealed how the wounds hampered holding a pencil, or doing basic chores, his features had darkened.

"If nothing else, you can sit in the press box and keep me organized."

"Sorry, no."

She alighted from the vehicle and trudged up the gravel lane, backpack slung over her shoulder. The sun setting, she could see her mother through the living room window, preparing the table for dinner.

Always a tense hour, to Mustang's chagrin. Joe Duryea tended to gripe about trivialities, and Maggie pretended to listen. Neither questioned their daughter about her activities, except on rare occasions.

This being one, evidently.

"Where've you been, girl?" barked Joe from the recliner opposite the television.

"I... stayed in town to do research at the library."

"For that project you mentioned?" ventured her mother.

"Right."

Joe persisted, "You should've phoned. I needed your help with the horses."

"Sorry, Dad. I'll remember next time."

The meal consisted of roast pork, boiled potatoes and green beans. Mustang skipped the apple pie for dessert, retiring to her bedroom for the night. Switching on a small TV, she found an old movie to drown out thoughts about Clayburn, hoping beyond hope that he wouldn't betray her.

Friday morning's pep rally gathered the entire student body in the gym to cheer on the Canyon Creek varsity team. They hadn't had a winning season in years, but that didn't stop the teens from enjoying a respite from regular classes.

Mustang loafed in the nose-bleed seats, preferring to be anywhere but in the midst of the cacophony. When the two bullies were introduced, they displayed their trademark cockiness, and she ached to reinforced her lesson...

A hirsute hand on her arm restrained her. She glanced at Clayburn, grinning wisely - an unusual expression, with a slight gap between his front incisors, and his upper lip almost invisible. "Leave them be," he advised, inches from her ear.

"How'd you..."

"Your fists were clenched. I noticed that yesterday just before..."

She relaxed her fingers. "I never paid attention..."

"It's not obvious, unless you're looking. At least, you don't thrash around like in those Harry Potter movies, or that old *Bewitched* series."

"For me, it's the thought, and the words. The wrong phrase, and I could bring the roof down, killing us all."

Clayburn recoiled. "Please, don't."

"It'd improve my mood if I could get the hell out of here."

"Get moving, then." Waving her off the bench and down the rear stairs, he accompanied her to his classroom. Much quieter, they stared at each other for a prolonged moment.

"I want to apologize again for yesterday," said the teacher.

"No need. I think we both... have trust issues, and it felt good to be able to speak freely."

He sank on his desk chair. "I laid awake last night, worrying about you. Compared to me losing my son, then my job and my wife divorcing me, your road is a damned sight more onerous."

"The difference between us is that you've hit rock bottom and can rebuild your life. I'm trapped with no means to rid myself of this curse."

"If you ever feel... tempted to release your anger in such a way that might..."

"Cause the roof to cave in?" she supplied.

“Sure. My door is always open. I’d rather you destroy the chalkboards than inflict physical harm on your fellow students.”

She toyed with a pen on his blotter. “Even if they deserve it?”

“You can’t set yourself up as judge, jury and executioner.”

“Consciously, I’m aware of that. It’s the random impulse that does the damage.”

“Then, you must reign in those impulses.”

“I try, every hour of every day.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” The bell sounded. “You sure about the game? It might do you good to get out and enjoy yourself.”

“My idea of enjoying myself is saddling my pinto, Heartbeat, and riding around the ranch.”

Clayburn grew pensive. “Sounds peaceful.”

“Swing by tomorrow, and I’ll show you the place.”

“What about the rules?”

Mustang smirked in parting. “Since when do I follow the rules?”

Saturday dawned bright and pleasant, and Joe Duryea had a list of chores for his daughter, tucked beside her breakfast plate. She didn’t mind cleaning the stalls in the barn; she carried on a dialogue with the horses as she filled their oat buckets and water troughs, and changed the straw.

Cleaning saddles and repairing a broken bridle were right up her alley; rearranging the tack room involved toting equipment back and forth, so her flannel shirt dripped with perspiration when she emerged into the noonday sun.

To see Clayburn chatting with her father.

Of the same age, probably, the two men couldn’t have been more different in appearance. Joe towered over the guest with a rugged, casual country posture, whereas Ray Clayburn’s demeanor declared him the consummate professional.

A profession which had cost him dearly.

His short, salt-and-pepper mop neatly combed, a grey polo shirt tight around his shoulders and biceps, jeans and boots suited to this excursion, his countenance beamed insights Joe would never grasp.

Mustang brought out Heartbeat, and selected a mellow roan gelding for Clayburn. “Unless you want to try your hand at breaking one of the stallions,” she quipped.

“No, thanks,” he stated. “I’ve not ridden in ages, so this will be a true adventure.”

“Where?”

“Sixty miles north. My brother’s wedding. They did the entire ceremony on horseback. The bridesmaids had to ride side-saddle...”

“You couldn’t pay me to ride side-saddle.” She waited until Clayburn mounted, then adjusted his stirrups. “You know to keep your heels down?”

“I do now.”

“It’s not like we’ll be racing cross country, but in case you slip...”

They set off at a walk, Joe squinting after them in disdain.

“Your father doesn’t like me,” commented Clayburn as they navigated a curve on the packed dirt path between the trees.

“He doesn’t like me, either.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can’t recall the last occasion he called me by name, when he talks to me at all.”

“He thinks I’m a city slicker out to rob him of his best stock.”

“That’s my fault. I told him you might be interested in buying a couple horses.”

“Why?”

“Less friction than admitting you’re my teacher. There’ve been too many scandals in the news...”

“True.” They rode in silence for 200 yards. “You don’t think I...”

She snorted, “Has anyone ever threatened to explode your skull?”

He tightened the reins. “Are you kidding me?”

She halted, as well. “The report you’ll be grading for me in the coming weeks will contain details of every sort of freak weather, radar and other data verified by an extremely reliable witness.”

“So, you can kill. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“I won’t consciously alter the weather. If we were facing a severe drought, say, I wouldn’t make it rain.”

“Why not?”

“Nature has her patterns. The elements respond to my commands in very tangible ways, but it’s not a display of my making.”

“So, everything you do is accidental?”

“Thursday was no accident.”

Clayburn pulled ahead of her as they emerged in a clearing filled with the finest stock in Montana. “Incredible!”

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” agreed Mustang. “You see why I’d rather be here than at a football game?”

“Oh, yes!”

Two hours later, Clayburn dismounted in great anguish. Mustang bit her tongue to stifle a laugh at his bow-legged stance.

“You going to be okay?” she asked.

He shrugged, hobbling to his Jetta. “Thanks.”

“You’re always welcome.”

Over steak, french fries and salads, Joe demanded, “Well? Did he pick out any he wants to buy?”

“He... has to think about it. He’s still getting moved...”

“How’d you meet this gentleman?” wondered Maggie.

“He’s... the football team trainer’s brother-in-law.” No lie.

“Glad you’re making new friends.”

Mustang muttered between bites of spinach.

A deluge commenced that evening, pounding the earth for 36 straight hours. By Monday, the excessive rains had churned many country roads into mud, some busses stranded at washed out bridges. Mustang suspected her regular ride had encountered difficulty when she remained on the asphalt twenty minutes after its appointed time.

The red Volkswagen she hadn’t expected, gratefully climbing onto the passenger seat and dripping on the cloth upholstery.

“Don’t you have an umbrella?” inquired Clayburn.

“Nope.”

“You remind me of a wet rat.”

“Thanks.” She squeezed a stream of water from her windbreaker onto the floor mat. “How are your saddle sores?”

“Painful.” The vehicle performed a neat U-turn. “They’ve canceled school, you know.”

“Then, why...”

“Might as well enjoy the day.”

“Doing what?”

“I was driving into Helena to buy a couple suits.”

“I should really...”

“What? Your father won’t approve?”

Mustang grunted. “Damn straight.”

“How will he find out?”

“He won’t, if I’m home by 3:30.”

“Good enough.”

Comfortable in each other’s presence, the pair roamed the mall, amazed at the strange fashions and expensive prices. A few classic DVDs appealed to her

taste, but Mustang carried little cash, and wouldn't allow Clayburn to make her a present of anything.

Except a pretzel dog at the food court.

"You... have a simple philosophy," observed Clayburn, sitting opposite her at a scratched laminate table.

"I see life simply, yes. I take my example from the horses."

"A wisdom beyond your years."

"Don't start that."

"Why not? It's true."

Mustang sipped her soda. "If I was so wise, I wouldn't be in this mess."

"You wouldn't have killed Jack Parsons..."

"I wouldn't have annoyed my parents so much that they foisted me off on my grandmother, who manipulated me into the Scotland trip."

Clayburn nibbled his cheeseburger thoughtfully. When Mustang stiffened, he raised those Adriatic Sea-blue eyes. "What is it?"

"Just a few of my classmates."

"You think they saw us?"

"With this hair, everybody sees me, even when I'd rather blend into the scenery."

The substitute's turn to flinch.

"What?" prompted Mustang.

"Your esteemed principal."

"Oh, hell..."

Clayburn dabbed his mouth with a paper napkin. "This may not have been such a good idea."

Fortunately, the administrator didn't seem to notice them, though the teenaged girls did, continuing on their route giggling and pointing.

"What now?"

"We'll be top item on the gossip grapevine tomorrow," stated Mustang. "Might as well finish shopping."

"You sure?"

"No sense fretting about it."

Their enthusiasm for the outing had evaporated, however, and they accomplished little more than browsing through department store clearance racks before meandering out to Clayburn's car.

"I can't afford to lose this job," he asserted on the drive west.

"You won't."

"How can you be so certain?"

“It may work out those bitches don’t remember who they saw, or where they were.”

“You... can alter a person’s mental processes?”

“I can erase memories. I don’t think I could make anyone fall in love, or that nonsense.”

“Reassuring, I suppose.”

Mustang shifted on the bucket seat. “You afraid of me?”

“A bit.”

“Even after...”

“I wouldn’t want to say or do anything to piss you off.”

“Meaning?”

“If you expected me to... be more than just your friend, or even a surrogate father figure... I don’t quite know how I’d...”

“Stop blathering. I wouldn’t put you in danger by even considering you a friend, much less...”

“Danger? In an ordinary friendship?”

“Anyone who gets close to me gets hurt. You may have already placed yourself in greater peril than on any of your CIA missions.”

“You can’t honestly believe that.”

“I appreciate your faith in me,” Mustang sighed. “May it be justified.”

Requesting he brake 100 yards from the drive, she climbed out and grabbed her still soggy backpack, striding through the underbrush toward the house.

III

Flooded creeks and rivers, coupled with mud and rock slides, canceled school the remainder of that week. Crews labored overtime to clear the roads, stabilize bridges and ensure the safety of busses and cars.

Students enjoyed this unplanned vacation, their parents not so much, scrambling to find day care for younger children, while the older kids wandered the streets with few activities to occupy them.

Mustang took Heartbeat on lengthy rides over the acreage, informing her father of any issues with erosion or sinkholes in the pastures. If there’d been a way she could forego returning to Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, she would have seized it with both hands and held on for dear life.

No such luck, and when classes resumed the following Monday, the schedule passed without incident. The gossips must've discovered juicier tidbits to spread, allowing Mustang and Ray Clayburn to chat without interference.

"I've done a lot of thinking," announced the teacher after the bell sent a dozen pupils toward the corridor. "I'm willing to risk being your friend, if you're willing to be mine."

The girl exhaled loudly. "You a glutton for punishment?"

"What you need is someone who'll stand by you, support you, make you laugh, like normal people."

"I'm... not normal, by any stretch of the imagination."

"You could be."

"That's like saying to the god Zeus he could be one of the boys at the bar, if he chose."

"I suppose so."

Regret tingling her contralto, Mustang lamented, "I'd like to laugh. To have five minutes where I wasn't... haunted by this..."

"Saturday night, my brother's friend is performing at a club in Helena. I'll take you."

"You have to be 21 to get into those joints."

"I'll have backstage passes, so no one will check ID."

Mustang hesitated. "You don't drink, do you?"

"Not very often."

"Because, if you get drunk, I can't drive you home."

They clasped hands. "Deal."

Before noon, the rumor mill had circulated the latest scandal through the halls. Ceramics instructor Jenn Weasley had been caught in a compromising position in her kiln room with a junior honors student. Mustang felt a weight lifted from her heart, her association with Ray Clayburn unworthy of note by these... airheads.

As days passed, however, she ensured he neither picked her up in the morning, nor drove her home after school. They would converse during passing periods and, Friday, finalized details for their outing.

"I'll eat dinner with the folks," the teen remarked. "They're used to me watching old movies. They won't even know I'm gone."

Clayburn objected, "You won't tell them?"

"No."

"It is because of... the age difference?"

"No, Ray. It's because of their *indifference*."

His blue eyes reflected comprehension. "Meet you by the road, then, at 8:30."

To Mustang's consternation, Joe Duryea left early Saturday morning with three of the ranch hands, not expected back until late Sunday. That meant Maggie would try to get chummy with her daughter, her intentions unchallenged by the family patriarch.

"We can drive into town for lunch," the woman suggested while washing the breakfast dishes.

"No thanks, Mom. Dad left me chores to do."

"Oh, skip the chores. I'll buy you some new school clothes..."

Mustang gulped. Her mother's taste in clothes horrified her, also, the disregard for care of the horses. "Sorry, Mom. I've also got homework..."

Initially dejected, an idea struck Maggie. "I'll call Bess Tarlton. Haven't seen her since Christmas."

"You do that, and have a good time."

That meant Mustang would be alone, a true advantage. She nearly ruined her jeans freeing a rope from a rusted block and tackle in the barn's loft, and ripped her t-shirt, grimy gloves protecting scarred palms, but she completed every task before jumping in the shower mid-afternoon.

"All my precautions for nothing," she declared, dropping onto the Jetta's front seat.

"You got caught?"

"Nothing so dramatic. My parents aren't home."

"You poor kid."

"Why?"

"I know what me being gone so much did to my son."

Mustang detected the angst in his tenor, and reached across the stick shift to pat the leather sleeve covering his arm. "It's not that. Mine aren't gone near enough. Even though we don't talk much, they still... irritate me."

Clayburn's chest heaved beneath the plaid shirt. "Well, let's not dwell on life's harsh realities tonight. We're going for laughs."

The club was a converted theatre in downtown Helena. Rows of seats had been removed, replaced by round tables and chairs, just far enough apart for the wait staff to fit through when serving drinks and fried snacks.

Displaying their passes, the pair arrived during the opening act's introduction. Known to the locals, the rotund comic received a warm round of applause, greeting some familiar faces prior to launching into a series of interesting - though not humorous, in Mustang's opinion - tales.

“Your brother’s friend makes his living doing this?” she whispered from their vantage point in the wings.

“No. He’s a welder, by trade. Does this to blow off steam.”

The amateur wrapped up his set in fifteen minutes, which allowed the stage manager to point Mustang and Clayburn to their seats near the front of the house. They ordered sodas, which were delivered just as the club’s owner walked into the harsh spotlight.

“We have an extra special treat for you tonight,” he drawled into the microphone. “Filming a new movie upstate, one of the world’s greatest comedians has graced us with his presence. Please welcome Rob Wilson.”

Rarely viewing new releases, and not partial to stand-up comedy, Mustang didn’t recognize the name which drew a standing ovation, cheers and whistles from others in attendance. The athletic figure who jogged across the boards in a black short-sleeved shirt, baggy trousers and red sneakers bowed and shook hands with many who’d abandoned their chairs to rush the stage, unsuccessfully urging them to resume their places.

His approach, once he could finally speak, elicited roars from the crowd. Mustang had, admittedly, heard the ranch hands use such language, and didn’t consider herself sheltered by any means. He spoke truths hedged in sarcasm and, soon, the girl joined in the merriment.

To her detriment.

Nearly an hour of exerting her diaphragm and other muscles, to the point of doubling over and hyperventilating, the unthinkable occurred.

“Hic!”

The structure’s foundation shifted slightly beneath her feet.

“Oh, hell…” she hissed.

One bartender at the theatre’s rear noticed the tremor, when the glass in which he was mixing a margarita splintered.

“Hic!”

The motion increased in intensity.

Clayburn glanced at Mustang. “Are you okay?”

Holding her breath to subdue the hiccups, she shook her auburn head.

The levity continued unabated, until the next “Hic!”

That’s when a visible fissure decimated the stage. Laughter died in the audience’s collective throats.

Mustang grabbed a water glass, guzzling the contents.

To no avail.

“Hic!”

The screaming commenced.

Panic ensued, with terrified patrons rushing the exits. Those who moved too slowly were trampled, then dragged by friends into the night chill.

When the commotion eased after ten minutes, two crystal chandeliers lay in pieces on the ground, furniture toppled, walls tilted. Mustang remained motionless at their upended table, Clayburn frozen in horror. The comedian's entourage had escorted him to a rented limousine; he rushed back to retrieve his hat, which the third tremor had jarred from his shaggy head. Snatching the porkpie from the debris, he spun on the lone couple.

"I didn't know you had quakes in this part of the world."

Clayburn replied, "I didn't, either."

Through grit teeth, Mustang muffled the next "Hic!"

A rain of plaster from the ceiling coated the trio with white dust.

"Come on, Rob!" hollered a body guard from the wings.

With a cursory salute - thumb to his nose - the performer made a hasty retreat.

"Mustang, what have you done?" grumbled her companion.

"I... haven't had the... hiccups... since I was little. I never... thought..."

"Look at this wreckage!"

She scanned the chamber. "Once... I get rid of these... I can fix it."

"What?"

"Get me out of here."

Gingerly, Clayburn grasped her arm and maneuvered her to the nearest door, leading to an alley. Sirens could be heard in the distance, emergency vehicles with flashing red lights already clustered on the street.

The gas main had ruptured, and police were forcing curious bystanders to evacuate the area. Mustang realized the threat, and her heart wrenched in her chest. "No!" she cried, convulsing in a heap near a twisted metal trash can.

Clayburn hovered over her, astounded by the instantaneous reaction to this single syllable. Fragments of brick and mortar, shards of window glass, ascended as if guided by unseen hands, resuming their original, intact positions. The breach in the concrete street patched itself, pipes spewing flammable gas resealed.

A collective gasp of awe filled the air, and Clayburn pondered how the media would report this miracle.

In the meantime, he squatted beside a limp Mustang, lifting her gently upright. "Can you walk?"

"Give me a sec," she replied.

"Your hiccups are gone."

“The best cure: a good scare.”

“Amazing.”

“Pathetic.” She propped herself atop a crate. “Who’d have suspected a stupid case of hiccups could...”

“Live and learn.”

“And lock myself in my bedroom for the rest of my life!”

“No, Mustang, no. You *can* enjoy a normal existence...”

“Bullshit!” Her exhausted frame shook with sobs, and Clayburn wrapped his arms around her trembling shoulders. “Take me home, Ray.”

“I... don’t think we can get to the car at the moment.”

A mellow baritone chimed in, “May I be of service?”

Teacher and student gazed at the intruder, comedian Rob Wilson. “How...” stammered Clayburn.

“My limo’s windshield was shattered by falling bricks, so the driver refused to move it. Now, though, everything is in perfect working order. I can take you as far as your car...”

Wiping moisture from her cheeks with her sleeve, Mustang challenged, “Why?”

“Compensation for the ruined show.”

“There are hundreds of others you can compensate...”

Clayburn chided her, “Mustang, don’t be so suspicious.”

“Sorry, Ray. Force of habit.”

Wilson extended his hand; Mustang reluctantly accepted the gesture. An odd quartet - the three plus Wilson’s manager - ended up at a wayside inn, the men sipping coffee, the teen replenishing her energy with a large chocolate shake.

“I’ve spent most of my life in Frisco,” rambled Wilson. “I’ve never experienced a quake like that.”

“Or what transpired after?” Clayburn speculated.

“You ain’t kidding.”

Somehow, both turned toward Mustang, sucking eagerly through a straw. “What?” she sputtered.

“You don’t mean, she...” Wilson said.

“Ray, don’t go there. For your own good.”

The substitute slumped on the booth cushion. “Fine. When the camera footage is broadcast on the late news...”

“And the papers print their photos,” added the comedian.

“Photos? What photos?” Mustang choked.

“A recurring problem I have when I perform: people snapping away, even though they shouldn’t. You didn’t see the strobing flashes when the tremors started and, then, when the... whatever that was...”

“Oh, hell...” Hazel eyes scanned the restaurant dining room. “Ray, take me home.”

“Mustang, I...”

“Now!” She bolted toward the exit.

Wilson grabbed Clayburn’s shirt sleeve. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s... the nervous type,” bluffed the older man. “A bit of anxiety in public places.” He reached for his wallet.

“I’ve got this.” the manager grinned knowingly, nudging his employer. “Rob, you’d better head for the limo while I pay the check.”

The comedian complied.

“You could make a fortune off her,” the lean figure told Clayburn, with a touch of foreign accent.

“How so?”

“Turn her in.”

The teacher studied his pinched features closely. “You’re...”

He nodded.

“Shit! How’d you find me?”

“The agency never truly retires anyone. You should’ve remembered that.”

Clayburn stormed from the establishment, albeit impressed by the cleverness of the ruse. He joined Mustang near a street light, and they hiked to the Jetta, alone on a lane devoid of life, the excitement ended. “I’m sorry about that,” he apologized.

“It’s okay. I’m... just jittery after...”

During the drive to the ranch, Clayburn explained the manager’s role in the situation. “You’re in no danger, though, since he didn’t catch your name.”

“That’s true,” she concurred. “We never did introduce ourselves. He seemed to know us without...”

“Me, he knew. You, he disregarded until...”

“Then, he put together two and two...”

“Which equals you.”

“Oh, hell.”

“Too bad you have such glorious red hair.”

In a split second, her long tresses darkened to black. Clayburn blinked, and nearly lost control of the car. “Really? That, too?”

“Sure.”

His jaw dropped.

IV

Oddly, no reports of unusual activity in Helena were carried by any news outlet the next day. Neither Ray Clayburn nor Rob Wilson realized all recordings of the incident had been eradicated, thanks to an unspoken directive from Mustang, which nature obeyed. Without such verification, no one would go to press with the outlandish babblings of supposed witnesses.

A structural engineer inspected the theatre's premises, finding no clue anything untoward had occurred. Mustang learned of this via Clayburn, who'd made a few judicious phone calls between classes at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High.

"Why let it bother you? I may not be able to prevent disasters, but I take responsibility for them."

"Leaving hundreds doubting their sanity?"

"Sanity is an illusion, Ray."

He couldn't restrain his chuckle. "I think you're right."

The next fifty minutes, he led the students in critiques of citation format for their papers, shining overhead slides on a screen. Mustang dozed in the rear corner, bored.

Most of her days on the campus were plagued by this boredom. Having Clayburn as a friend helped, but she rarely spoke to anyone else.

She listened - eavesdropped unintentionally, in a way - to a myriad of conversations, acquiring snippets about upcoming dances, parties and romantic liaisons which confirmed the immaturity of teenagers. The weekly school paper, distributed in homeroom on Fridays, proved another source of levity.

Except when her photo, in the arms of Ray Clayburn, was printed on the front page.

"Oh, hell..."

Though the features were blurred due to the darkness, the caption revealed: "What substitute teacher recently lent himself to comforting one of our most notorious red haired students?"

Against her better judgment, every copy of the periodical evaporated in a puff of smoke.

Hurrying to second hour, an urge to slip out through the swimming pool overwhelmed her. Her fists involuntarily clenched and unclenched, sharp pains from her scars contorting her face.

Clayburn's pale blue orbs revealed his anguish as she entered the room. He deduced, from the image's angle, one of Rob Wilson's flunkies - or that damned manager - had been holding the camera.

A camera not affected by Mustang's blanket command, since the photo had nothing to do with damage to the theatre.

Specifics, specifics, specifics! she moaned silently.

Nonetheless, collusion with the editorial staff violated unspoken ethics.

Networks interrupted regular programming that evening to recount the tragic, untimely death of actor/comedian Rob Wilson, his manager and two lighting technicians, who'd been caught in a freak avalanche while filming on a snowy slope at Glacier National Park.

Mustang's lower lip bled, her teeth clenched so hard upon hearing this over dinner. She'd only wanted to teach the men a lesson about poking their noses where they didn't belong...

Maggie answered the ringing phone, summoning her daughter into the kitchen. "You know your father doesn't like interruptions at meal time."

"Sorry, Mom." She raised the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

Clayburn demanded an explanation, his tenor a growling bass.

"It was an accident."

"Bullshit!"

"I swear, Ray." Joe glaring at her through the doorway, she shuddered. "I'll see you Monday."

"No, you won't."

"What?"

"It wasn't widely publicized, but Amelia Finch lost her baby. She's resuming her post. I'm done."

"Oh, hell..."

Replacing the instrument on its wall-mounted cradle, Mustang shuffled to the table. She couldn't eat a bite of the chicken pot pie, mashed potatoes or corn on the cob.

Anger and remorse churned in her stomach, a combination which did not bode well for anyone in the vicinity. She excused herself before Maggie brought out bowls of homemade peach sherbet, huddling on her double bed in the gloom, knees tucked beneath her chin.

A saucepan boiling over could not have had a more devastating effect. Mustang's sensitivity to the ramifications had improved, so she eventually moved to the open window, raised the screen, and focused her attention on the trees beyond the corral.

Her agonized wail commingled with the night air, uprooting ancient pines, oaks and maples, creating a two-mile long swath of destruction, 100 yards wide. Clenching the sill with white knuckles, she recalled the previous winter's visit from the hellish Jude Griffin. How she wished he'd rid her of these infernal powers, how she yearned for the normalcy Ray Clayburn asserted she could achieve.

After that, she roamed the school corridors on auto-pilot, not conducive to excelling in the academic realm. She merely went through the motions of completing assignments, and her grades plummeted.

Amelia Finch, herself depressed on the heels of her infant's death from fetal complications, had scrapped Ray Clayburn's plan for college level papers, replacing it with a series of basic book reports. The students could choose their own titles, which gave some of the slackers an out.

Mustang missed the engaging ex-CIA agent. Once again, she could confide her inner turmoil to no one. The National Weather Service attributed her burst of rage to a freak tornado, though none of the meteorologists could elucidate on its spontaneous formation or dissipation that clear autumn night.

The teen managed a wry smile at this development. Had she been required to continue her research into this peculiar phenomena, she could have clarified every bit of the experts' confusion.

Had that been why Clayburn gave her the topic? Those erstwhile misgivings - that he somehow had a connection to Ben Espinoza - resurrected. A hint of paranoia took root in her soul, along with a certitude government officials had her under surveillance.

Again.

Nerves constantly tingling, she didn't pass an hour without some mishap. Whether mangling a row of desks, or contents of glass display cases crashing to the floor - instantly restored, to the bewilderment of her fellow students - she'd lost control over her negative emotions.

The local media crew she encountered in the stairwell one Thursday afternoon flustered her further. "They say the haunts are most active upstairs near the science wing," stated the Steadicam operator, hauling his load onto the landing.

"We going to stay here all night?" whined the blonde segment producer.

"To get the scoop, hell, yes!"

Mustang fled the scene, a ripple effect blowing every sheet of paper from lockers near the English Department. The girl wondered if she was in the throes of a mental breakdown.

She wanted to run, to scream, to hide. Equalizing her respiration, she continued to her last class, hearing nothing the teacher said.

A compressed spring could not have been wound tighter than Mustang on the bus, homebound. Idle chatter and pranks of the other teens annoyed her; the owners of cars parked along the route later discovered their windows cracked.

Better cracked glass than cracked skulls, Mustang rationalized. Safe in her bedroom, she numbed her brain with a marathon of John Wayne westerns, ignoring calls for dinner.

“You haven’t eaten in days,” complained Maggie, opening the door without knocking. “Are you ill?”

Why didn’t the woman notice dark rings under the girl’s hazel eyes, drawn cheeks, pale complexion? Absolutely oblivious, this one, Mustang surmised. Lost in a universe far from reality.

“I’m fine, Mom. Just... a load of homework.”

“All right, dear. There’s pie in the fridge, if you get hungry.”

“Thanks.”

Hungry? Yes, she hungered, for a sympathetic ear.

“Ray, I wish you were here...”

The phrase spoken, she could not retract it. Lightning split the sky, thunder cracked...

“Oh, hell...”

The same hillock on which she’d returned from Scotland nearly a year before, displayed Ray Clayburn’s charred remains. Mustang, panting from the exertion of sprinting from the house, knelt beside him, repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m so damned sorry...”

Those incredible blue eyes gazed at her, pleading, confused. Sinking on her heels, she shouted, “Fix it, damn you! Let him be healed and live!”

She didn’t anticipate the misery he would endure while his flesh repaired itself, and his yowls tore through her. Ten minutes elapsed before a calming breeze enveloped them, and Clayburn raised himself off the grass.

“That’s... something no one should have to experience,” he croaked.

“You’re the only human who has.”

“And survived?”

“I guess so.”

“You bring death, and give life. You *are* a god.”

Mustang coughed. “The god of chaos, who screws up everything she touches.”

He embraced her, letting her soak the front of his dress shirt with her tears.

“I’ve heard what’s been happening at the school,” he remarked as her tension eased.

“News travels fast.”

“I was at a dinner with two friends, discussing your predicament, when...”

Clayburn slammed against the nearest tree trunk, forcefully thrust backward in Mustang’s fury. “You told others about me, after I... I trusted you?”

“Hear me out.”

“Who were they? Buddies from the CIA? Cops?”

He tried to grab her shoulders; she dodged, glancing around in preparation to flee.

“They run a school in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains. They could help you...”

“Why?” Betrayed once more, she groaned from the depths of her soul, sinking to the earth. “Why?”

Caught in the midst of hell, Clayburn could only stand beside the girl and marvel at the spectacle.

The sky morphed into a kaleidoscope of blues, purples, yellows and a sickly red, at which point fire rained down, mixed with particles of ice. Trees split, boulders thrust up from the soil. Violent winds stripped the landscape bare like sandpaper.

“Is this how nature behaves when you’re pissed?” he puzzled.

Mustang raised her head, auburn locks whipped across her face. “It’s nature’s reaction to my... lack of self-control.”

Clayburn bent and encompassed her in his arms. “You’re safe, don’t you know that? I didn’t tell them your name, or where you live, or... how powerful you are. I just presented a hypothetical situation about a special young lady with... issues.”

“Truly?” she gasped. “On your honor?”

“I swear upon all I hold sacred.”

She slumped on the wet ground, lungs heaving. “I’m tired of being alone. I’m tired of bringing others pain. I’m... tired.”

Cradling her hand between his, he soothed, “I know, I know. And, I’m sorry for adding to your burden.”

“You?”

“Hard for me to be someone’s friend, with what I’ve been through.”

The statement elicited a chuckle, at any rate. “You? What about me?”

Clayburn’s snicker transformed into a hacking cough, and he dropped beside her, pale blue orbs smoldering.

“What it is?” Mustang prodded.

“My... heart. It feels like my heart...”

Immediately, the teen realized this latest mistake. Clayburn’s heart surgery had installed a mechanical valve to repair a leak. When she’d called upon the elements to heal him, she didn’t differentiate...

Specifics, specifics, specifics! she wanted to curse.

The original atrial defect had been healed, along with his burns, a foreign object left to impede the blood flow...

As she reached for him, he expired of a massive heart attack.

“Oh, hell! Another death on my head?” Her fist beat the scorched dirt.

“Erase the last three hours! Erase me from Ray Clayburn’s memory! Restore him to his normal life! Free me of this torture...”

Her strength depleted, she blacked out, roused by a wolf’s plaintive howl close to midnight. She scrambled to her feet, alone and cold, orienting herself to the dark surroundings. Tramping back to the house, she promised herself a hot shower and flannel pajamas.

The scene floated before her mind’s eye like a disjointed dream; Clayburn might not remember, but she would - how near he’d come to being a victim of her careless stupidity. The sensation of his gentle embrace brought fresh moisture trickling down her cheeks - unconditional friendship rare in the best of circumstances, she would ne’er find his like again if she lived to be 100.

Nature forbid! At 17, she would be shed of this yoke, the sole means to that end her own death.

One more hug... if only...

Resolved to pay closer attention in class, and dismiss the shortcomings of shallow teens lingering in the corridors, Mustang caught the morning bus. Rumors of hauntings at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High faded into the ether, other titillating scandals taking precedence. Jenn Weasley was arrested and arraigned on child seduction charges, followed by a livid group of parents protesting lax campus security when a freshman brought a cap pistol into the building.

At least, these distractions prevented the principal from harassing Mustang. Not so much in words, his nasty expression irked her every time she passed the main office.

She paid him little mind, except the Friday she glimpsed him shaking hands with Ray Clayburn through the ceiling-high glass. Fetching his final paycheck, probably, and being thanked for his weeks subbing for Mrs. Finch, she presumed.

She halted in mid-stride, succumbing to temptation.

“Two minutes, and one last hug,” she murmured.

The retired CIA professional crossed the threshold and met her gaze. Delight twinkled in his eyes. To prevent undue gossip, he led her around the corner into the deserted yearbook office.

Words would not form on his tongue. She imagined his brain contending with a gap in sequential events...

The warmth of his embrace alleviated her dread; joy at saving him from a horrendous death flooded her soul.

Two minutes too brief, she released him and he mingled with the crowds, pausing once to glance back, a bemused grin lighting his unique countenance.

He might not remember; she would never forget the single person who thought she could be normal, though she still felt stuck in a mire of futility.