

The Mustang Chronicles:

Scientific Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

“Hey, Duryea!”

Teeth grit, Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea halted amidst the throng of students and swiveled toward the cultured baritone. Most days, she avoided the science hall, taking the long way to her history class. This particular Monday, the school counselor had caught her after English with a change to her spring schedule, and she’d be late for the bell if she didn’t hurry.

So much for that idea.

White mane close-cropped, bushy mustache drooping over his upper lip, Boleslaw Kowalski had been nicknamed The Canyon Creek Einstein long before Mustang was born. He taught physics, forcing more teenagers into summer school to improve their failing grades than any other teacher in the junior-senior high school.

Reluctantly, the girl navigated the crush to where he monitored his next class arrive, propped against the wall beside a row of lockers in his signature mottled grey, bulky wool cardigan sweater.

“How do you expect to graduate and get into college if you don’t take the required science courses?” Kowalski rumbled.

Irritated that he’d been checking her records, she replied, “I took Earth Science and Chemistry.”

“Barely passing with a ‘D’ due to excessive absences.”

“It still covers the credits I need.”

“You’ve got... potential, kid. I’m doing some experiments with space, time and thought...”

Mustang bit her tongue to prevent an untoward expletive. She scrutinized the slightly-stooped figure’s clear blue eyes, his bulbous nose, sagging jowls and furrowed brow.

He knew something.

“I’ve no head for those crazy equations,” she stated. “They’re no more than gibberish to me.”

“Give me a chance to prove you wrong.”

“No, thanks.”

The passing bell reverberated along the now-deserted corridor. Her shoulders sagged. “Oh, hell...”

Kowalski nodded her across the threshold. “C’mon. I’ll give you a late slip.”

The preprinted blue rectangle he signed wasn't the only paper he presented. As she jogged to the stairs, Mustang noticed the scrap beneath it: "City Park, 7:00 pm Saturday."

She wadded the note into a ball and tossed it in the trash can as she passed the cafeteria.

No way she'd forget the contents. The rest of the day, and through a sleepless night, staring at the ceiling and toying with strands of her auburn hair, she puzzled at what Kowalski had unearthed about her, whether he'd gotten wind of her occasionally exposed secret, or was just fishing for a confession.

Not her fault, after all, that occultist and scientist Jack Parsons had bequeathed her his command of the natural elements during a bizarre ritual in Scotland. Nor was it her fault she failed to properly control the outbursts that wreaked havoc and confusion.

The cycle of questions and excuses kept returning to this founding member of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Might not a fellow scientist, like Kowalski, be aware of those bygone experiments at Cal Tech? Might the teacher have discovered the government cover-up after Parsons' supposed death in an explosion?

"Oh, hell..." she muttered aloud.

The remainder of that week, Mustang avoided the science hall, struggling to concentrate on a report due on post-World War II reintegration of concentration camp survivors into society, a book report for English and the chapters she'd procrastinated about reading for Government. She hoped Kowalski had rescinded his invitation; the sticky note taped to her backpack inside her locker Friday afternoon - how had he gained access? - deflated her spirit anew.

"You'll want to see what happens," he appended to the time and place.

She could have justified a refusal with the claim her parents wouldn't let her leave the ranch after dinner - not true, but convenient. All she need do is saddle her pinto, Heartbeat, and ride the ten miles to town in the twilight... though 17 years old, she didn't drive and had no wish to learn.

Curiosity had been her undoing in previous incidents where her power manifested on a whim. Something about Kowalski's mention of time, space and thought piqued her interest, she could not deny, and the mystery of what would be taking place at the park...

That Joe and Maggie Duryea never inquired where she was going when she finished washing the dishes Saturday evening, tramping to the barn in red flannel shirt, jeans and square-toed boots, had ceased to bother her. They'd been oblivious

to her existence for years, feigning responsibility only when school authorities threatened charges of truancy or a denial of her graduation.

Even her abrupt return from Scotland via lightning, or travels to Italy and Japan by the same means - the latter causing her absence from the ranch for four weeks - elicited no reprimands or interrogation.

Perhaps, for the best. Tying Heartbeat's reins to a low oak branch on the park's western edge, she strolled nonchalantly toward flames rising from a fire pit. In this light, she distinguished at least a dozen shadowy forms, garbed in flowing robes or capes.

She guessed, initially, they were preparing for some sort of renaissance festival - though she'd seen no posters or advertising for such an event. When Boleslaw Kowalski seized her bicep and yanked her behind a massive willow, cardigan sagging, her heart nearly stopped.

"What the hell?" she protested.

He hissed, "This is what I wanted you to see."

"Okay..."

"Do you know what they're doing?"

"Not a clue."

"They're a Wiccan coven. They're summoning air, water, fire and earth, creating a circle in which time is suspended and they can work their magick."

Mustang hid her face behind her hands, suppressing her laughter. "Oh, hell... You don't believe in that nonsense, do you?"

"If you're referring to the ridiculous spells published in books they sell at Monahan's shop, or crystals and tarot cards, of course not. But, the creation of the circle holds its own manner of fascination. I placed my pocket watch beside that stump in the center. Once they're gone, you'll see for yourself: while time has passed normally outside the circle, the watch will be at least 20 minutes behind when we retrieve it."

"We?" she gasped.

"Of course."

"No, sir." Mustang retreated toward Heartbeat. "I'm going home and to bed."

Kowalski caught a fold of her sleeve. "Don't move! You'll disrupt their energy!"

Hazel eyes rolling skyward, the teen complied, rejoining him near the tree. She whispered, "Just because you forgot to wind the watch, doesn't mean..."

"It's battery powered. I put a new one in just this afternoon..."

“It could be faulty, especially if the package sat on a store shelf for months, or in your junk drawer...”

“You’re a right cynic, eh?” he snarled.

“More than you know.”

Chanting within the circle grew louder, wands waving, as if the group were calling upon unseen entities. Mustang could barely make out they were invoking the power of the full moon - partially obscured by wispy clouds - to cleanse the earth, air and water of pollution.

Laudable, but ludicrous, the girl lamented.

Still, she couldn’t resist the temptation...

An almost inaudible directive brought shafts of moonlight from the sky into the circle, swirling around the participants like playful pixies. Their awe and shock brought a chuckle from her throat, and consternation from Kowalski.

“How unusual,” he muttered.

When the shimmers converged on the flames, exploding in a 30-foot fireball, he staggered backward, gripping the gnarled trunk for support.

The Wiccans hiked up their skirts and scurried in all directions.

Mustang marched to where Heartbeat munched weeds contentedly, swinging into the saddle and steering him east.

She spent Sunday grooming this favorite among the horses, and dreading Monday. She predicted Kowalski would find her, have her hauled into the principal’s office to demand justification for her behavior...

But, he couldn’t do that, she rationalized. For a teacher to be out with a student violated school policy - made stricter since the aftermath of the Wilfrid Bailey fiasco. Kowalski would have a lot of explaining to do if he admitted to witnessing the Wiccan ritual.

That, at least, allowed Mustang to get some undisturbed sleep. If she’d considered that some of the coven members occupied the same classrooms, she might not have closed an eye.

Her eyes popped wide before first hour, the tale of a “magical miracle” already rampant among the student body as buses deposited them near the entrance. The group’s self-described high priestess, enthroned at the center table in the cafeteria at lunch, was besieged by pleas to join in the new moon ritual two weeks hence.

Mustang observed the debacle from her preferred seat far from the crowd. “What a bunch of idiots!” she murmured. “If only they knew...”

“If they knew how frightened you were?” Kowalski opted from behind her.

She whipped toward him, framed in the doorway of the teachers' lounge, cardigan hanging askew over baggy black trousers.

"What makes you think so?" she challenged.

"You fled the scene like a jack rabbit chased by a coyote." He scanned her expression. "If not frightened, then guilty."

"Guilty? Of what?"

"Sabotage, perhaps."

Mustang's nose twitched. "Bullshit."

"You knew what time things were happening. You could have placed an explosive beneath the fire pit beforehand, set to go off at a predetermined interval."

"Other than the cryptic note you gave me, I had no idea what to expect."

Kowalski deliberated briefly as she resumed eating the cardboard textured pepperoni pizza. "That may be true. It doesn't explain the phenomena involving the lights."

"A manifestation of their... spells." She choked on the word, and coughed.

Kowalski moved toward her, ready to employ the Heimlich maneuver. She waved him off, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin.

Hailed by another teacher, Kowalski disappeared into the lounge. Mustang slumped against the block wall, discerning the scientist wouldn't rest until he had a complete, logical interpretation of the circumstances.

His almost unnatural fascination with the Wiccans and their rites, the supposed displacement of time within the circle... what was he trying to accomplish?

A diversion into the school library, typing a search into the computer, listed Boleslaw Kowalski as a member and past president of the Star Trek fan club Montana chapter, as well as a former physics professor at Helena State College. A quick scan of the capital's newspaper archives brought up an article about Kowalski's unorthodox teaching methods and research papers rejected for unsubstantiated speculation causing a revocation of his tenure at the institution.

Another loser, Mustang sighed, consigned to teaching in the sticks. Let him play with his preposterous theories. Even my limited experience far outstrips anything he'd ever discover.

The matter might never again have been mentioned, if she hadn't been intercepted on Thursday morning by the attendance office secretary outside the administration office.

"Are you heading for English?" the aging brunette asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

A business sized, unmarked envelope was thrust into Mustang's unwilling mitt. "This is for Mr. Kowalski."

"Right."

Doubling her pace, the girl ascended the stairs and scurried along the science hall. With luck, Kowalski would not yet be in his classroom. She whipped around the corner, eager to toss the missive on his desk, and collided with him as he searched for a new piece of chalk to finish an elaborate equation on the blackboard.

"Oh, hell..." she burbled.

He grunted, "You're the last person I expected to see."

"Here and gone," she huffed, dropping the envelope on the blotter and rushing out the door.

Her gaze had, nonetheless, absorbed the scrawl on the board. As she'd told him, it amounted to no more than gibberish - until her brain had time to digest the sequence of numbers, letters and symbols.

She jolted upright on the mattress at 2:00 a.m. Friday, scrambling from beneath the quilt to fetch Jack Parsons' journals from a hidden compartment at the back of her closet. Switching on the bedside lamp, she flipped pages frantically, going through two volumes until she found the identical series she'd seen Kowalski writing.

Swallowing hard, she doubted any of the seniors enrolled in physics would identify the formula for trans-dimensional travel, as Parsons noted in the margin.

Closing the faded cover, she felt herself grinning. She didn't need complex scientific notation to transcend space, time and thought. She merely had to utter the destination - sometimes accidentally - and lightning took her from point A to point B in seconds!

How had Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School's pseudo-Einstein discovered this equation?

Worse, still, why had he covered a chalkboard with it?

Worst of all: did he already suspect her of understanding the concept and want to harness the power she controlled?

II

Four hours lying awake, heart pounding in her ears, did nothing to improve Mustang's general attitude about attending school that morning. She ached to hang her backpack on a tree near the bus stop and flee to the barn, saddle Heartbeat and disappear into the forest beyond the horse pastures.

Her standing agreement with the principal made that impossible. One absence, and she would never graduate.

The pot of coffee steaming on the kitchen counter could have fortified her against the all-encompassing weariness but, while she loved the aroma, she despised the taste. A quick banana sliced over Cap'n Crunch would have to do.

Morning announcements blaring over the loudspeaker during homeroom aggravated Mustang's headache. The vice principal's familiar nasal voice also declared that any student attending the new moon ritual in City Park later that month would be either suspended or placed on a week's detention, augmenting her discomfort.

Technically, the school couldn't punish teens who attended events on public property, outside of regular class hours.

Except, as Mustang overheard during the passing period, a cadre of parents - learning of the rite - created a petition to censure the "Satanists" for trying to corrupt their offspring with pagan practices.

A book burning would be held that afternoon on the front lawn, destroying volumes from the school's library and the town's public library branch on the topics of witchcraft, Wicca, spells, potions, gods and goddesses.

Innovative schemes plagued Mustang through the day: she could provide an education for these ignorant fools...

Near the English department office, Boleslaw Kowalski and Jenna Visel were locked in a heated argument, clearly audible due to an abnormal hush in the corridor. Kowalski objected to the destruction of books, regardless of their subject matter. Visel, while essentially agreeing, had to comply with the school board's mandate.

As the warning bell chimed, Kowalski threw up his hands and withdrew. Mustang noticed three eager freshmen, clutching issues of the latest Sunday news magazine, chasing after him.

She crept closer when they pinned Kowalski against the lockers, gesticulating wildly at the image on the periodical's cover.

"Is he really your nephew?" squealed a perky blonde.

Wearily, Kowalski affirmed, "Yes."

In the rush to reach their respective classes, one of the girls dropped her copy. Mustang scooped it up and perused the layout.

"Hollywood actor Johnny Rosemont photographed visiting relatives in Helena," the headline read. The grainy image could have been any man with dark shaggy hair and a similar physique. A caption indicated Rosemont had joined the Kowalski clan at a private country club for a family reunion the previous weekend.

Text in the article speculated he would be in the area for a few weeks, scouting locations for a forthcoming film.

Another source of agitation for Mustang, hearing smitten females gossiping about this heart throb's romantic exploits every free moment, along with the chance of seeing him in person while shopping in Helena.

The rancher's daughter skipped the bus ride home at 3:00, her plans for the conflagration ready. As devout believers tried to toss paperbacks in a burn barrel, many ricocheted into their faces. Frustrated, an evangelical minister doused the lot with gasoline, unable to ignite it, matches snuffed by mysterious breezes.

After 30 minutes, the assembly gave up and dispersed.

Leaving a trio lingering on the fringes: Mustang, Kowalski and Rosemont.

Not that Mustang recognized the latter. Approximately 35 years old, he wore a battered grey fedora pulled low over his forehead, holes in the felt as if moth-eaten. Aviator-style sunglasses shielded his eyes. A black leather jacket reminded her of a motorcycle gang, tattered jeans and tooled boots completing the disguise. He sported a scraggly mustache, soul patch and stubble, lips full beneath a straight nose.

He greeted his uncle with a hug but, as the girl inched toward the road, they approached with resolute strides.

She could've - she should've - stopped them in their tracks, making good her escape. Such a tactic proved unnecessary, as Rosemont was suddenly sighted and besieged by his rabid fans.

His turn to run, into Kowalski's rusty brown Ford Fairlane station wagon, movement from the faculty parking lot inhibited by screaming masses pressed against the quarter panels.

Mustang had hiked two miles toward home before the vehicle cruised up beside her. Rosemont cranked down the passenger window. Kowalski called, "Get in."

"No, thanks," she refused.

"We need to talk."

Rosemont reached back and opened the rear door; Mustang perceived they'd hound her until she answered their questions.

Ensnared on the worn fabric seat, she waited until Kowalski accelerated along the country lane and attained the speed limit.

"All right, what?" she prompted.

Rosemont's pleasant bass lessened the bite of his query. "How'd you do that back there?"

"Do what?" she retorted, simulating innocence.

“You know damned well what.” Kowalski. “Those books should’ve gone up like a torch.”

“Wet matches.”

“Not bloody likely.”

“Water in the cans, instead of gasoline.”

Their silence spoke volumes.

“What makes you think I had anything to do with it, at all?”

“Because, you were present when the fire exploded during the Wiccan shindig, then this.”

Mustang snorted, “That makes no sense, scientifically. Create an explosion, then prevent one?”

“Someone capable of one could easily do the other,” responded Rosemont.

“Why put the finger on me, to begin with? Why invite me to the park, then make these accusations when something bizarre happens?”

“Because of the lightning.”

She echoed, “Lightning?”

“Lightning.”

Kowalski confirmed, “Lightning.”

The word rang in Mustang’s head like a gong.

Caught, she had to devise a way out of this mess...

Nerves a-tingle, she also had to determine how the pair unveiled her secret.

“Lightning is pretty common around here,” she remarked.

Kowalski countered, “Not without clouds.”

“Before you stick your foot in it,” advised Rosemont, “Uncle Ben is on the meteorological service’s advisory board.”

“Uncle Ben?”

“The kids could never pronounce Boleslaw, so my brother decided they could call me Ben,” Kowalski supplied.

“Ah!”

“The lightning strikes all seemed to happen ten miles east of Canyon Creek,” he continued.

Rosemont added, “Corresponding, mysterious strikes triggered alerts in other parts of the world within a five minute window.”

“How’d you get in on this?” Mustang probed.

“My plane was nearly struck by a random bolt while flying over Scotland a couple years ago.”

“And, having a scientist in the family...”

“Right.”

The Fairlane braked on the roadside near the ranch's gravel drive. Both men shifted to glare at her.

"Fess up," insisted Kowalski. "You've mastered trans-dimensional travel, and I want to see your equipment."

Whether Mustang successfully adopted a guileless mien, she couldn't guess, though that was her intent. "I'm practically a high school drop-out, Professor. How would you expect me to construct a contraption that could do... whatever it is you think it does?"

"You had help. Your father..."

"Is a horse rancher, plain and simple."

Rosemont purported, "Then, the FBI..."

"What about the FBI?" she growled.

"They have a field office in Helena. Some of the... agents are fans of mine. They resent being posted on the Canyon Creek detail while I'm in town..."

"Oh, hell..."

That bastard, Ben Espinoza, was keeping tabs on her, despite his promises...

If she'd been able to control her anger, cognizant of how she did horrible things when angry, she could've prevented the car from falling to pieces around them. When the vibrations ceased, they sat beneath the open sky on crooked bench seats, metal scattered in every direction.

"What the fuck!" Rosemont bellowed.

Mustang stepped from the wreckage and strolled toward the house, aware neither man would dare pursue her.

Not that they wouldn't soon renew their harassment. The phone calls began at dawn on Saturday, thanks to Joe Duryea's listing in the local phone book. Maggie snatched up the receiver, summoning Mustang from her bedroom. Hearing the voice, she slammed the handset onto the cradle.

After the second attempt, she pried the cord from its fitting, deactivating the phone's ringer.

When Joe hailed her from the barn, she emerged to see a ballcap topped Rosemont and bare-headed Kowalski idling near the corral, where ranch hands were breaking a stallion. She could've set their pants ablaze, except her father expected her to be courteous with prospective customers.

"Show them the stock in the north pasture," the elder Duryea instructed, as two bay mares were saddled.

"Sure, Dad." She led Heartbeat from his stall and joined the men, grimacing.

Once mounted, stirrups adjusted, she set off at a trot. At the first bend in the trail, however, she lit out at a gallop, snickering.

Kowalski wasn't as sure in the saddle as his nephew. Mustang suspected the actor had participated in some western films or had specialized training. When she reined Heartbeat in a distant clearing, he leapt to the ground and yanked her from her perch.

"Don't ever do that again!" he raged, slender digits encircling her wrist.

She barked, "I wouldn't have to, if you'd leave me alone!"

"We just want the truth!"

"I can understand ol' Einstein, but why you?"

"Einstein?" His befuddled grin disarmed her.

"That's what the kids call him at school."

"Hmm. It fits." He released her, sinking on a mossy tree stump. "Like I said, my plane was almost struck by lightning a couple years back. When I mentioned it to Uncle Ben, he asked for time and coordinates. His records showed the Helena radar station had recorded a strike that same day not far from here."

"So, an odd one-off."

"Not so odd, and not a one-off, as we came to learn. On at least three distinct occasions..."

Mustang clenched her fists. Scotland, Italy, Japan.

"In addition to microbursts of wind, spontaneous rain showers, earthquakes that top eight on the Richter scale..."

"So?"

"You're manipulating the weather, and we want to know how."

"Not why?"

"Sure, why." Kowalski finally joined them, sliding painfully from the saddle. "But, how is more important."

"So you can duplicate the technology?"

The teacher flashed a toothy smile. "Then, there is technology?"

"I didn't say that."

"You can't just do it like..." Rosemont waved his arms like a magician. "Alakazam."

In that moment, Mustang decided wiping their memories would be the only way to salvage this fiasco. Why not, then, satisfy them, albeit temporarily?

"Can't I?"

A chasm opened between her and the pair; terrified, they recoiled. From the depths, flames roared 20 feet in the air, doused in short order by a drenching downpour.

“You’re an illusionist!” bellowed Kowalski, when the rain ceased.

“If I was, your clothes wouldn’t really be wet.”

Every stitch dripped copiously.

“You need coffee,” she hinted, and steaming ceramic mugs appeared in their hands.

Rosemont, utterly stunned, dropped the cup on a boulder. It shattered, one shard tearing into his thigh.

Yowling, he hopped about like a wounded dog. Blood gushed from the gash, coating his jeans, sneakers and the soil.

Kowalski squatted to examine the injury. “He struck an artery. He’ll need an ambulance...”

“What a couple of alarmists!” Mustang chided. “If I can do this” - the earth rumbled beneath their feet - “can’t I heal a scratch?”

Righting himself, Kowalski drawled, “That’s no paper cut, kiddo!”

“Bullshit.”

She knelt beside the trembling Rosemont, who seemed to be hyperventilating and going into shock. Deft fingers grabbed the triangular wedge jammed into his flesh and wrenched it free. She allowed him to feel the full effects of the deed; he fainted in his uncle’s arms.

“He’ll die, unless...”

“Shut up!” she ordered.

“Why, you ignorant, heartless...”

Her harsh scowl chilled Kowalski’s blood. “You’re the ones who came after me, remember? You wanted me to show you the extent of my... power, so zip it and watch!”

Together, they eased Rosemont to the ground, propping him against the stump. After a few seconds, he spasmed violently, then brown eyes shot open.

Upon examination, neither Kowalski nor his nephew could find so much as a scar where the skin had been ruptured. Yet, drying blood colored his attire.

“Judas Priest!” exhaled Rosemont.

Kowalski backed tentatively along the trail. “I think we’d better be going, John.”

Avoiding contact with Mustang, Rosemont straightened and slunk toward his companion. “Good idea.”

“You can leave, on one condition,” the girl admonished, asserting her advantage.

They paused, petrified at what she might require.

“An apology for being such imbeciles.”

Rosemont's hands assumed a prayerful position; he bowed repeatedly, a supplicant before an omniscient deity. "Every apology, Miss," he stammered.

Kowalski did not offer such obeisance, but his even tone confirmed his sincerity. "I'm sorry we... violated your privacy."

"I want your promise to keep your nose out of other people's business in future," she added.

"You have it," agreed Kowalski.

Rosemont echoed, "With all my heart."

Mustang swung easily onto Heartbeat. "Get on your horses, then. I wouldn't make you walk all those miles back to the house."

They meekly complied, riding behind her at a trot, neither risking to utter a sound.

III

"Mr. Rosemont," Mustang breathed after a few minutes.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Why do the girls treat you like some type of god?"

She heard him suck air. "I suppose, for the same reason people would treat you likewise, if they knew..."

"If they knew what I could do, they would indeed worship me as a god. But, that's not what I want. I want to be a normal human being."

"So do I."

This frank response startled Mustang. "Then, you don't like being mobbed, or hounded by paparazzi?"

"Not one bit."

"Good for you."

Rosemont hastened his mount's gait, coming abreast of her. "There is one thing I'd like."

"Need I guess?"

"To take you out for a quiet dinner and talk like ordinary people."

The girl squinted at him to gauge his motive. Then, she glanced past him to Kowalski. "What about you?"

"I want to go home and crawl in bed. Maybe, when I wake up, I'll be able to convince myself this was just a bad dream."

"That can be arranged."

Reaching the corral, the men relinquished their reins, trying their hardest to appear nonchalant as they crossed to the rented silver Cadillac.

The last thing Rosemont said: "I'll pick you up in an hour."

Joe watched their departure, disappointed. "No sale?"

"They'll be back." No lie.

Most high school seniors, going on a date, would have spent the better part of 60 minutes in the bathroom, primping. Mustang, however, defied that stereotype. She despised dresses, and never managed to do anything more with her long auburn tresses than tie them in a pony tail. She changed from flannel shirt to a mauve striped blouse - worn on rare occasions when she attended church with her parents - and tugged on clean jeans. Spatters of blood on her boots precipitated a switch to black loafers.

Rosemont must've dropped his uncle in town; the Cadillac reappeared on the drive. Clad in a white silk shirt - collar open to reveal heavy silver chains - a pinstripe vest and suit, blond-streaked brown mop dangling over his forehead, he alighted and circled the vehicle, holding open the passenger door. She dropped on the red leather bucket seat without pretense.

"Thanks," he said, sliding behind the wheel and turning the key in the ignition.

"For what?"

"Being yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Steering onto the road, they weren't headed for Canyon Creek. For the best, Mustang mused.

"I've already seen you at your worst. If you'd walked out that door done up like a New York socialite, I would've left you there."

"I never look like a New York socialite."

"Good for you." He patted her hand in the fashion of a big brother praising an immature sibling.

"What's this all about, anyway?"

"What, the date?"

"Uh-huh."

Rosemont switched on the radio, a CD of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* playing softly through eight speakers. "The... tension between us with Uncle Ben there wasn't... natural. You felt threatened, and reacted accordingly. I want to prove I pose no danger to you. In fact, I'm on your side."

"My side of what?"

He braked at an intersection, scanning for traffic. "How much do you know about my uncle?"

"Nothing, really."

“You haven’t taken his class?”

“Hell, no.”

“For him, physics is more than... science. It’s the core of all existence.”

“Oh, hell...”

“I’d put it in stronger terms,” he chuckled. “I grew up with it, every visit to my grandparents’ for holidays or vacation...”

“What’s this obsession with time, space and thought?”

“He spent a summer in Kathmandu after he graduated college. Sitting with the Buddhist monks for days on end, he had some type of mystical experience. He described it as time standing still, yet he saw the entire world in an instant...”

Mustang smiled. “And he’s been trying to recapture it ever since?”

“Exactly.”

“Like a drug addict aching to recreate his first high.”

Startled, Rosemont glared at her. “How would you know...”

Her ponytail bobbed side to side. “Could you imagine the devastation if I would get near any kind of drugs?”

“Annihilation?”

The Cadillac continued north.

“Where are we going for dinner?”

“There’s a little diner north of Helena. The kids avoid it like the plague.”

“So, you can eat undisturbed?”

“Yup.”

“It’s called Grandma’s?”

Stupefied, his jaw gaped.

“Good food.” She gazed at passing fields, dormant. “Good idea.”

A lone waitress escorted them to a corner booth in the mostly deserted dining room a half-hour later. They accepted plastic coated menus, perusing the entrees.

“I’m in the mood for a thick, juicy steak,” Rosemont ventured.

“I feel like a bacon cheeseburger, fries and a large chocolate shake.”

“So, you’re one of those?”

She bristled, “One of those what?”

“On top of everything else, you’ve got a sweet tooth.”

“Oh, hell, yes.”

“Think one would go with steak?”

“Sure.”

The order placed, they settled on well-padded green benches. Mustang took the opportunity to conduct her own interrogation.

“So, Einstein’s your maternal uncle?”

“Paternal, actually.” Rosemont smirked at her perplexity. “Rosemont is my mother’s maiden name. Kowalski would’ve been too... awkward on the big screen.”

“You’re really John Kowalski, then?”

He nodded.

“I don’t like my name, either.”

“Which is?”

“Einstein didn’t tell you?”

“That’s a funny story, actually.”

“Do tell.”

Their shakes delivered, Rosemont paused to sip the mixture, grinning his approval. “My mom had just cooked me bacon and eggs - just the way I like them, and can’t ever get anywhere else - when Uncle Ben called. All he’d say is that I’d better be at the school around three, if I wanted to see a spectacle.”

“And, you came running.”

“With Uncle Ben, it takes patience and a huge chunk of understanding his eccentricities. Seeing for myself, I could, at least, balance his theories with evidentiary logic, rather than rely on his... subjective viewpoint.”

“I get it. He left his explanation open-ended, so you could judge for yourself.”

“Right.”

“And, what was your conclusion?”

Pensively stirring his shake with the clear straw, he soon fastened brown orbs on her face. “You like to fuck with the idiots.”

The few other patrons turned from their tables when she guffawed loudly, before stifling the eruption with a linen napkin.

Rosemont reached across the board and scooped up her right hand. As he raised it to his lips, he flipped the palm upward... and froze.

“What the fuck?”

Mustang retracted her arm self-consciously.

“Did your father do that to you because... because...”

“No, John. He and my mom don’t even know...”

“You didn’t do it to yourself?” he gagged.

“In the strictest sense...”

The waitress lowered the large silver tray she’d carried to table level, depositing platters of tantalizing food before the couple. “Anything else?” she asked.

“No, thanks,” grumbled Rosemont. As the woman moved out of earshot, his indignation returned. “Did you, or didn’t you?”

“Look, John, you were curious about trans-dimensional travel...”

“Using some manner of electrical generator fueled by lightning.”

“Not... exactly.”

“Then, what?”

“Lightning.”

A repetition of the earlier scenario. “Lightning?”

“Lightning. Alone.”

His jaw dropped at the concept. “No... generator.”

“No equipment whatsoever.”

“My God!” As she reached for her fork, he pinned the utensil on the laminate. “And this is the result?”

She bluffed, “It’s only scar tissue.”

“How far...”

Extricating the cheap metal and stabbing at the mound of fries, she stated flatly, “The time your plane almost got struck would’ve been Scotland or Italy. There’s also Japan...”

“That’s thousands of miles!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uncle Ben would be out of his mind if he were here.”

Mustang pondered the implications. Warning him against informing his relation would do little good. At the end of the night, both would forget even knowing her, or recall the phenomena that sparked their excitement...

They ate in silence after that, Rosemont solemnly guiding her to the car after paying the check. As he shifted into reverse, she murmured, “I’m sorry I ruined your evening.”

The knob paused in place. “It’s not your fault that you’re... an incredible individual. You were correct when you designated yourself a god... I’m... just... an actor, unworthy to stand in your presence.”

“Oh, hell! Stop with that bullshit!”

“Is it not fact?”

“I’m a kid who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and... got stuck with power I never wanted. I’m still learning to handle it, and not doing very well, at that. And, since we were interrupted, my name is Elizabeth Duryea, but people call me Mustang, because I hate being called anything else.”

Rosemont chortled. “It fits.”

“Where to now?” she prodded.

“Do you dance?”

“God, no.”

“Neither do I.”

“There’s a lake not far from here. We could take a quiet walk on the beach.”

“It’s a beautiful night for it.”

Midnight passed and they remained chatting on the pier extending over gently lapping waves. Rosemont reminisced about his childhood, decidedly typical of Midwestern America. His acting career had taken off due to some low budget science fiction films, popularity more a burden than boon.

“My agent pairs me up with young lovelies for premieres and award ceremonies, but we never get a second’s peace to talk. There’ve been times I thought I’d go blind from all the flashbulbs.”

“An evening like this is a rarity for me, too,” Mustang acknowledged.

“I’d think every boy in that school would be phoning you, day and night. There’s a certain transcendent beauty about you...”

“Most days, I smell like horses, and dress like the hired hands.”

“Contrary to popular belief, clothes do *not* make the man, or woman.”

“Tell that to ninety-nine percent of the population.”

“I’ve tried. Dressing like I do is meant to shock them into realizing I’m not what I wear.”

She leaned against his shoulder. “Amen, brother.”

“Tired?”

“Exhausted.”

“Let’s get you home.”

He rose and assisted her to her feet.

“Then, what?” she queried.

“Whatever you want, given...”

She slipped her arm through his, wary of the uneven terrain leading to where the Cadillac was parked. “If I wanted you to stay with me?”

“You wouldn’t need any extraordinary power to make that happen.”

She halted, gazing at his smooth features in the moonlight. The embrace occurred unbidden, as did the wind, driving rain, thunder and tremors.

For a scant instant, Mustang didn’t care about nature’s reaction to her emotional upheaval. The flapping of bird wings overhead jarred her back to reality, though.

Her mouth tingled from his kiss; she shoved him away, sinking to her knees in despair. Rosemont raised his countenance skyward, letting the elements assault his skin.

Both soaked as they trudged to the car, Rosemont supported her around the waist, fearing she would collapse again. He rummaged in the trunk for towels, allowing them to dry a bit of moisture from their bodies before spreading the terry cloth on the leather.

He gripped the steering wheel before starting the engine. "May I ask one question?" he whispered.

"Sure."

"If that's what happens when we kiss... what would happen if we... we..."

"Had sex?" she completed the sentence. "I honestly don't know. I've only been kissed once before, and nearly brought the house down on our heads."

"Good thing we were outdoors!"

"It's not funny!" she moaned.

He sobered quickly. "I know, it's not. It gives dying for love a whole new definition!"

The sob tore at his heart. He slipped his hand around her shoulders and drew her close. Their lips met in a tender kiss for a split-second, with no untoward manifestation.

"There, that wasn't so bad," he opined.

"It was... very nice."

"If I... did stay with you, do you think we could work things up to a point where... that would be the norm?"

"John, I can't sanction you abandoning your career." The unspoken addendum: especially since you won't remember this in the morning.

She fell asleep resting against his chest on the journey to the ranch. He woke her by caressing her hair and cheeks; the dashboard clock read 3:18.

"Oh, hell..."

"Will you be okay?" wondered Rosemont.

"Sure. I can get in through my window. Mom and Dad will be none the wiser."

He exited the Cadillac and opened the passenger door, offering his hand to lift her off the damp seat. "You're very special," he pledged.

"Don't think you're not, John. Were circumstances different..."

"They could be. Very easily, if you say the word."

"I... can't, but I'm grateful to you. I always will be."

Clutching her hands against his chest, she could feel his heart racing. She let him kiss her one last time, struggling not to give way to the longing stirred inside her.

“Good night,” she said, brushing his cheek in parting.

She sensed his eyes on her as she moved toward the side of the house. The trip to Helena would wipe all recollection of her from his mind. Boleslaw Kowalski would wake at dawn, focused on piles of ungraded homework.

Mustang wept herself to sleep, concocting a tenuous deal: she would forget Johnny Rosemont for now but, someday, would meet him again.

IV

Ministers of various denominations in Canyon Creek incited their congregations to righteous fury on Sunday morning, resulting in a volatile convergence on City Park that afternoon.

Mustang found herself taken in tow by Maggie and Joe, on the premise she should see what happens when heathens flaunt their sins.

If nothing else, businesses along Main Street and adjacent areas scored some extra income, charging for parking spaces as vehicles from as far as Wyoming, Utah and Idaho joined the locals with hand-painted protest signs.

The teen would've rather caught up on much-needed slumber, but knew she needed to be present to prevent any potential casualties or property damage from the confrontation between those who considered themselves good Christians defending their faith and a bunch of gullible kids playing with agencies they didn't comprehend.

Not that anyone was listening to what was being said. Mustang gave kudos to the youngsters, who retained their dignity, surrounded by hollering adults. Tuning her ears to the high priestess' trembling soprano, she heard, “We are no different than you. Our spells are variations of what you call prayer. We draw on the energy of the universe, the sun, the moon... We seek to do no harm...”

That last, Mustang doubted, given so many books favored by that sort were dedicated to love spells and potions. How could bending someone else to a purpose against their natural inclinations be considered doing no harm?

She checked herself, hastily reviewing her interactions since receiving Jack Parsons' command over nature. While she may have consciously - and unconsciously - manipulated inanimate objects, and even human flesh in the process of healing wounds, she hadn't caused anyone to act against their own will.

Except, to forget her.

As she ruminated, she glimpsed a column of men and women in native garb splitting the throng. Quietly, they formed a protective barrier around the Wiccans, forcing the protesters toward the park's perimeter.

The tribal elders went nose-to-nose with five evangelical ministers. "Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution," declared the Salish tribal chief. "If you don't agree with their beliefs, you don't need to participate in their rituals. Nor do they have to join you in yours."

Impressed, Mustang watched the cowed preachers withdraw. Their adherents, however, remained, including a number of uniformed deputies, who should have been enforcing the law, not breaking it.

The chief consulted with the high priestess, who then directed the coven to form the circle. As the teens summoned air, water, fire and earth at the four points of the compass, the Salish chanted similar tributes to the elements in their own language.

When no demons sprouted from the ground - a sight Mustang predicted would have prompted more than one medical emergency among the lot - and no animals were subjected to bloody sacrifice, the protesters gradually departed, disappointed their zeal merited no conversions. The Duryeas accepted an invitation for coffee with some acquaintances from the church; their daughter declined.

"We'll meet you at the car in an hour," Maggie advised.

"Right, Mom."

The diner across the street jammed, the girl knew it would be longer.

At the opposite end of the park, Boleslaw Kowalski lingered until the dozen robed figures dismissed the elements and dispersed. Having shed their ritual attire, and accompanied by the Native American contingent, they migrated to a different establishment for dinner and a discussion.

Mustang monitored Kowalski's surreptitious meanderings until he approached the tree stump that had served as an altar in the midst of the Wiccan circle and bent to retrieve his pocket watch. His comparison with the time piece strapped to his left wrist evidently pleased him, and he strolled toward the junior-senior high school at a leisurely pace.

A hushed drive home preceded dinner of leftovers, equally tense. Mustang washed and dried the dishes while her parents flipped channels to find evening news coverage suited to their tastes.

Joe's snide, "I just don't know what's wrong with kids today," struck the girl as typical. His, "If I'd have defied my parents that way, I'd have been taken out to the wood shed and beaten within an inch of my life," spoke volumes about the lack of affection, tolerance and comprehension between generations.

A subdued atmosphere enveloped Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School Monday morning, as if the student body suffered from a mass hangover, drained of the vitality common to that venue. Mustang soon grasped the cause. A note from the vice principal, taped to her locker, summoned her for disciplinary proceedings.

The queue outside the administrative offices extended past the gymnasium. Mustang recognized a handful of the Wiccans, jostled viciously by those who'd accompanied their parents to the protest.

The lean, bleach-haired, bespectacled vice principal didn't care if the students had parental permission to be at the park. His dictate held sway, repeated every day the previous week, and punishments ran harsh.

Especially for those who made excuses. Security officers escorted them to their lockers, where they gathered their personal possessions and exited the building for a five day suspension.

Well into what should have been her second hour class, she settled on a stiff metal chair, reading diplomas from multiple universities displayed on the wall above Andrew Randolph's desk. He delayed the interview, preoccupied signing a stack of documents.

A test, perhaps, waiting for the student to speak first and feel the weight of his wrath.

Mustang didn't bite. She had all the time in the world.

"You are aware of your infraction?" he demanded, peering at her.

"I suggest you phone my mother. She will confirm I didn't want to go, and did so under obedience to her and my father."

Randolph mocked, "You weren't 'inspired by the Holy Spirit' to convert the pagans?"

"They were. I wasn't."

"Are you saying, you sat in the very same pew, at the very same service, and came away without the hysterical fervor ignited by your pastor?"

"I'm saying nothing, sir. I don't attend services, as a rule."

"You weren't in church yesterday?"

"Nope."

"Then, you side with the.. the..."

"I take no sides. As the chief told the crowd, there's freedom of religion in this country. Or, for a great number, freedom *from* religion."

"You fall in the latter category?" he challenged.

She smirked. "Attribute it to the thoroughness of the freshman comparative religion class. While I'd long suspected as much, those lessons reinforced how the various tales justifying given beliefs are carefully concocted myths."

Doubt evident in his blue eyes, he persisted, "So, what would you have been doing if you hadn't been forced to attend the protest?"

"Sleeping, or riding my horse."

Her bluntness convinced him. His verdict was scribbled on a slip and thrust at her. "Two days detention."

Mustang sensed he expected an objection to this unjust sentence, in order to double it. She tucked the paper in her jeans and made a decorous exit.

Not that she didn't want to shatter every fixture in his office.

In a rush to catch what she could of the current class, she cut through the science hall, nearly colliding with the physics lab door as it burst open. A dejected senior stumbled into the corridor, as if he'd been shoved. As the boy looked daggers at his assailant, Mustang followed his gaze. Boleslaw Kowalski showed no remorse, cardigan askew, bushy mustache twitching in anger.

"I'll not have you speak to me in that tone!" he spat. "Get yourself to the principal's office."

"I was only trying to show that your equation was missing an integer."

"And, who are you to make such a determination? Punk brat! I've studied and taught for decades..."

Hollow wood slammed. Kowalski continued his instruction, while the students stared at each other.

"He's wrong," muttered the boy. "He's going to wind up in a world of hurt..."

Sooner than expected, Mustang discovered.

As she assessed piles of damaged books - drenched with gasoline a week ago yet unburned - that she would be required to restore to readable condition during these hours of detention in the supply room, she saw Kowalski toting a crate of items toward the teacher's entrance, followed by police officers.

His outburst had earned him termination.

In the parking lot beyond tall panes, she watched the former teacher pack his belongings in the trunk of a stylish silver Cadillac. The fedora-topped driver, thin cigar dangling from his lips, assisted with rearranging the load so the lid would close, until a pack of girls rushed the vehicle, shrieking.

Nothing he could do would quiet them. He grasped one of the pens wriggling beneath his nose and began signing photos and magazines, even a bared shoulder.

Mustang resumed her task, repulsed by the scene.

Rifling book pages, she read inane passages and “recipes” crafted by authors eager to earn easy money off a naive public. All the titles came from the same publisher, with a similar motive for profit, no doubt.

She held censorship of reading material as wrong, when it forbade access to knowledge that could expand horizons and better the world in the long run. This... trash... held no intrinsic value.

“How’s it going?” the buxom brunette principal’s secretary asked, poking her head through the gap.

“Fine, just fine.”

“If we can get them to where they can be returned to the distributor, or even offered to a second-hand dealer, we’ll be able to recoup some of the losses, so be careful.”

Oh, hell... Mustang swore inwardly. Money, again.

She was tempted to disintegrate the mound when a window shattered behind her. Uprising the table and ducking behind it to protect herself from flying shards, she peeked over the top to see a body writhing amidst fragmented glass and metal. His clothing shredded, blood spurted from his mouth and nose.

Outside, a mass exodus of females coincided with the arrival of multiple sheriff’s cruisers.

“Oh, hell...”

The girls’ excessive enthusiasm - to put it mildly - had propelled the object of their affection through the casement.

Whatever their reasons for admiring this individual, Mustang surmised that sentiment would be vastly diminished by the jagged scar he’d bear across his chin and cheek if subjected to standard medical treatment.

Delicately massaging the stubbly cheek, skin meshed without leaving a mark. Eyelashes fluttered and brown orbs scanned his surroundings as uniformed paramedics pulling a gurney burst into the storeroom.

They loaded his still weakened frame onto the mattress, puzzled by the copious blood stains yet no visible wounds.

Excitement concluded, Mustang restored the table to its original position and began collecting scattered paperbacks. She noticed the smoldering cigar beneath a mangled screen; an idea swirled inside her skull.

Seconds later, smoke alarms resounded through the building. The sprinkler system failed to activate, allowing the books to burn in a matter of minutes. The flames had been extinguished by the time fire trucks roared onto the scene.

“What happened?” Andrew Randolph raged at Mustang, evacuated through the teachers’ entrance with other faculty and staff.

“When that... man fell through the window,” she pretended to weep, “he must’ve dropped his lit cigar. With the books soaked in gasoline...”

News coverage that evening clarified some of the events, as Mustang scrubbed the dinner dishes. The injured man’s name was Johnny Rosemont, an actor visiting family in the area. The mob who assaulted him, if found, would be brought up on charges and required to pay for the breakage, the principal stated during a press conference outside the school.

“I won’t hold my breath anyone rats them out,” snorted the teen.

The fire marshal reported the cause of the “minor blaze” as accidental exposure to flame. Books reduced to ash, the school’s insurance carrier would cover their cost, along with smoke damage to the store room.

Students didn’t even have the luxury of missing a day’s classes.

She scoffed, “The big shots should be happy they’ll get their money, anyway.”

Mustang found herself in the vice principal’s office again Tuesday morning, his view askance.

“I’m wondering if you can explain why there’s a gap in the security camera footage from the moment the window broke to when the firefighters responded,” he drawled.

He really expected her to offer a viable explanation. “Perhaps a piece of glass got jammed in the controls.”

“Conveniently falling out later?”

“The paramedics had closed the door when they removed Mister... what’s his name, and the firemen broke down the door with an axe. It might have shaken something loose.”

“All the while, you’re standing there, watching the flames.”

“Everything happened so fast, I guess I was in a state of shock.”

His pen tapped the blotter methodically. “You still have another day of detention.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can wash the blackboards in the second floor classrooms. Maybe you won’t cause any trouble that way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Chatter among the teens fluctuated between Johnny Rosemont's "accident", the fire and Kowalski's removal. Mustang ignored most of it, knowing if she offered her insights, she'd only spark further arguments.

After the final bell, she met the janitor, securing a bucket of water and bundle of rags, trudging upstairs to begin her final hour of punishment. Many of the teachers had transitioned to using computer projectors for their lessons, so their boards remained free of chalk residue and required only a light wash. Others continued to scratch out homework assignments and math problems, with the process mostly leaving a film that needed to be redone two and three times.

Her auburn tresses were dusted with white flecks when she reached the physics lab. The formula that had been disputed by the student remained untouched, as it had for more than a week. Mustang scrutinized the gibberish, a nagging inclination she'd previously encountered the configuration, before attacking it with a soaked chamois.

Waiting for the surface to dry, she wandered the chamber, ill at ease. But, then, she felt discomfort every time she stepped on the campus, afraid what harm a chance comment might inflict.

Living this way, a constant nervous wreck, would make her old beyond her years.

Another wipe of the board eliminated the streaks; she gathered the supplies and descended to ground level. She didn't hope for a ride home; the walk would offer a refreshing silence.